

**Keith M. Botelho.** *Renaissance Earwitnesses: Rumor and Early Modern Masculinity.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. xvi + 199.  
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KEITH M. BOTELHO'S *Renaissance Earwitnesses* offers readers a focused and convincing analysis of rumor's gendered import on the early modern British stage. In a Renaissance version of the classical or medieval House of Rumor or Fame, the playhouse became a venue for the dramatization of auditory reception as well as a milieu where information was dispersed to news-hungry audiences. The book's title implies a wider cultural study than its chapters provide, for the theatrical works of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Cary constitute the meat of the author's detailed analysis. Even so, Botelho effectively grounds his argument within a wider cultural frame, weaving relevant contemporary texts (and an entertaining profile of Elizabeth I) into his readings of the playwrights' and their audiences' awareness of rumor's potential to authorize or destroy, and—for that reason—the early modern appreciation for shrewd hearing or “earwitnessing.”

The Introduction, “Buzz, Buzz: Rumor in Early Modern England,” opens with Francis Bacon's reminder that “Rumor speaks both fact *and* fiction, truth *and* falsehood” (1). Noting that *discernment* and *discerning* date from the early modern period, Botelho claims those words as signifiers for the “earwitnessing” valued in reality and depicted on the stage. Because earwitnessing entails “engaging the ear in the pursuit of truth and carefully adjudicating ambiguous information” (2) it becomes a way to distinguish truth from the “buzz” of early modern society and, ultimately, to confirm or challenge power.

Few connections are made in *Renaissance Earwitnessing* to earlier attitudes towards female speech or silence, yet Botelho's study offers scholars of medieval women a lucid and accessible account of the historical shift in focus from disobedient female tongues to disorderly masculine exchanges. Until the sixteenth century, *gossip* generally referred to a woman who engaged in idle talk or tattling; the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not register the word as a verb until the early seventeenth century (9). While gossip tends to be intimate and local, rumor has large-scale political or social implications. Thus while female gossip and newsmongering provoked concern among early-modern men, male-generated half-truths and rumors constituted a greater threat. The works of the playwrights examined here overturn gender stereotypes to reveal the danger male rumormongering poses to masculine authority.

Chapter 1, “Marlowe's Mouthy Men,” opens with a biographical sketch of

Marlowe and his loose mouth within the context of a humanist education. In Marlowe's plays the stereotype of unruly female tongues remains prevalent and active, yet historical documents suggest that male transgressive speech generated more anxiety: "table talk" or idle discussion posed an acknowledged threat to university secrets and authoritative information. Botelho analyzes the effects of seductive, threatening, and disorderly speech in *Dido, Queen of Carthage* and *The Massacre at Paris* to show how rumor and free talk destabilize authority, while his study of Edward II reveals how the king's failed earwitnessing leads to rebellion and his own murder.

Chapter 2, "Bruits and Britons: Rumor, Counsel, and the Henriad," presents readers with a reprint and analysis of a 1626 broadside along with the reminder that listening is the "hallmark of good government in the Renaissance" (51). Botelho's claim here is that "the auditory world is the focus of the history play, one of hearing fearless speech for what it is worth and determining its credibility" (52). A perceptive reading of earwitnessing in Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc*, the 1562 play chronicling a king's failure to distinguish between flattery and good advice, underpins Botelho's analyses of *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*. In his discussion of Hotspur, Botelho observes that Hotspur's failure to attend to counsel and tendency to run off at the mouth parallel the female gossip/scold stereotype; in contrast to both Hotspur and Richard II, the future King Henry is portrayed as an astute listener.

The relevance of Botelho's research to medieval women occurs chiefly in its consideration of female associations with (and manipulations of) rumor and silence to subvert male authority. These issues rise to the surface in the third chapter, "I heard a bustling rumour': Shakespeare's Aural Insurgents," where we are reminded that female silence and the mere act of listening may also qualify as transgressions: "earwitnessing" in this context may represent an active form of female dissent. The author draws no connections to earlier historical or fictional female models and sources of social insurgence, yet gives sensitive readings of subversive female silence and powerful earwitnessing in *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*. In reading Isabella's rhetorical prowess and rebellious silence, Botelho references Philip McGuire's book on *Speechless Dialect* to qualify a textual focus that pushes performance-related issues to the margin. More recognition of what may "unfold in performance" (86) through directorial interpretation would strengthen this otherwise thorough analysis.

Chapter 4, "Nothing but the truth': Ben Jonson's Comedy of Rumors" examines how *Epicoene* and *Bartholomew Fair* expose the corruption of male

informational authority: in these plays, men rather than women generate harmful lies and rumors. Stables, fairs, inns, and even homes serve as hubs of gossip and rumor where information is exchanged but ever vulnerable to corruption by noise and untruth. Jonson's role as playwright and master of revels renders him especially alert to this issue; fortunately, the printed page offers him a fixed environment where he can correct the public overemphasis on visual and auditory stimulus. As Botelho observes, Jonson's later masques, "The Stable of News," "The New Inn," "The Magnetic Lady," and "A Tale of a Tub," all include the motto "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" (124). The stability of print enables Jonson to locate a reading audience more discerning than the auditor-spectators (potential failed earwitnesses) of commercial theater. Ultimately the playwright privileges reading over visual/auditory spectacle. This appears the case with Elizabeth Cary, too, with whose closet drama *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) Botelho closes out his analysis in chapter 5.

Botelho's insightful and accessible study of rumor and masculinity in early modern English theater uncovers an early modern trajectory of thematic engagement with the power of rumor and the need for careful listening. His research may serve medievalists who wish to examine later representations of female speech and silence or scholars seeking to better understand the shift in focus from female gossip to masculine rumor and the recognized power of a silent female witness.

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