
Gina Bloom. *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 277p.

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In *Voice in Motion* Gina Bloom attempts to bring together materialist, feminist, and linguistic theory to examine the materiality of voice in early modern texts. Bloom draws from a variety of classical and early modern scientific texts to argue the early modern understanding of voice as a material substance, “not synonymous with, but rather a technology of, communication” (4), endowing speech with an agency independent of the speaker. This approach to voice, she claims, intervenes in three threads of contemporary criticism: materialist studies, by expanding and questioning definitions of the material that focus entirely on tangible or commodified objects; historical performance studies, by reintegrating voice into study of the material conditions of performance; and finally, feminist studies, by examining the construction of gender difference and hierarchy through voice in early modern texts and the impact of this gendering on women’s vocal agency. Bloom argues that voice, exactly by virtue of its ephemeral and changeable nature, possesses a subversive capacity. Indeed, her study pursues this capacity as its central thread, to argue “that the farther from a speaker’s body the voice is imagined to be located, the less the voice can be counted on to perform a speaker’s will and the more the voice undermines male investments in vocal control” (17). Bloom’s text challenges models of female agency that argue for embodied female speech as its base component, and presents in early modern texts an alternate model for female agency possible through disrupted, disembodied or absent voices.

Fittingly enough for a materialist study of voice, Bloom self-consciously orders her book to reflect the process of vocal production to “underscor[e] its arguments about the relation between gender agency, and vocal performance” (17). She moves from the unstable voices of boy actors, to the “fragile materiality” of breath itself, to the listener as “acoustic subject,” to an examination of auditory agency transformed into vocal agency in representations of the mythic figure of Echo. Pursuing her study through a wide array of texts, from the dramatic (plays by Shakespeare, Marston, and Webster, among others), to the poetic (George Sandys’ 1623 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*), and beyond to scientific, religious, and musical treatises, Bloom convincingly demonstrates the cultural pervasiveness of material models of voice.

This is a well articulated and intriguing study of gendered voice in early modern England that covers a great deal of theoretical and textual territory. Bloom’s approach is primarily materialist, although she uses both linguistic and feminist theorists to telling effect. Her study demonstrates a very fine and detailed attention

to language, including a well-articulated expansion of the *OED*'s definition of the Elizabethan slang "crack" that works convincingly to support her arguments about the destabilizing effect of boy actors' pubescent voices on Galenic models of masculine stability. Her chapters build well both internally and on each other to support her claims, and her wide-ranging examination of early modern scientific and pedagogical texts grounds her claims firmly in contemporaneous discussions of voice, breath, and hearing. Bloom continuously pushes her argument to its logical possibilities, stressing its theoretical and textual implications for critics, even going so far as to contrast the sensibilities of contemporary productions with the early modern models she has elucidated.

Where Bloom's argument falters is in this continual expansion to its possible extremes. At times her conclusions, though well argued and contextualized, seem to outstrip their support. This is most notable in her third chapter, in which she argues for female auditory agency, suggesting that the slippage between "constructive defense and destructive deafness" allows "gender differences and the logic of gendered hierarchies [to] break down" (159). Here Bloom performs some very detailed analyses and makes some very fine distinctions between constructive and destructive aural defense. These distinctions become fine enough, however, that Bloom's own categories suffer some blurring and her conclusions, while intriguing, fail to be completely compelling.

Regardless of these occasional weaknesses, the text represents a fascinating expansion of material criticism to include categories no longer considered material by contemporary culture. In addition, Bloom's argument that early modern ideas about female vocal instability actually enable a venue for feminine agency presents a fascinating critical lens for further study, and may, in fact only fail to be fully compelling because of the amount of ground Bloom has to cover in order to make her claims. The depth and sophistication of her argument, and the diverse and well-rounded theoretical and textual bases for her claims, make Bloom's book a rewarding addition to the early modern scholar's bookshelf. ✱