

Bruce R. Smith. *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp xiv, 386.

My mother adored Boston, the city of her birth. Her love of place was rekindled as our family crossed over the western border of Massachusetts from upper New York State. ‘Ah, here we are in Massachusetts!’ she would exclaim: ‘Just smell the air!’ We children were convinced that we, too, could identify the state by its uniquely fresh smell! Years later I had the occasion to travel throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland with a colleague who would exclaim at each stop, whether Canterbury, York, Leeds, Sterling, Cork, or Exeter: ‘Ah, the light here is so different, so distinctive!’ Shining above, however, and providing the light, was the self-same sun.

Bruce R. Smith has written with similar love of place about Elizabethan and Jacobean London, though his subject is not the olfactory or the visual, but the auditory. Early modern London, he argues, had a distinctive sound-signature, almost entirely lost with the revolutions of time, but essential to an authentic appreciation of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. To the extent that the early modern sound-scape can be reconstructed, the imaginative reader or the canny director may, with Smith as his guide, understand and perhaps re-create something of the sounds – occasional, verbal, musical – heard by Shakespeare and his contemporaries both in their plays and as background noises.

Smith begins with a discussion of the human voice, particularly the phoneme [o:], prominent in the English language, which he investigates as a physical act (make the sound with your mouth); as a sensory experience (listen to the sound as made by another); as an act of communication; and as a political act, for speech establishes relationships. This is the ‘O-Factor’ of his sub-title, with further punning on ‘oral’ and ‘orality.’ Smith expands upon his theme over the three broad parts of his book, which he entitles – both evocatively and somewhat mysteriously – ‘Around’, ‘Within’, and ‘Beyond’. ‘Around’ considers the variety of sounds which would have been heard in the city of London, in the surrounding country-side, and at Court. ‘Within’ is broken down more conventionally into chapters on ‘Games, Gambols, Gests, Jest, Jibes, Jigs’; on ballads; and on ‘the Wooden O’ – not only the Theatre and the Globe, but the Rose, Blackfriars, and the recently reconstructed ‘Shakespeare’s Globe’ on Bankside. ‘Beyond’ considers the variant sound-scapes of Ireland and Wales, of pre-colonial and colonial North America, and of pre-colonial and colonial Africa, both in themselves, and as they were perceived and incorporated by English observers and exploiters.

From the opening words of the opening chapter, indeed from the opening word of the Acknowledgments – ‘Huh?’ – it is clear that this is the work of a scholar madly in love with words and sounds: individual phonemes (particularly [o:]); the human voice (male, female, post-pubertal, mature, speaking, singing); grunts and groans; stringed, wind, and percussion instruments; the acoustical properties of open and enclosed spaces; sounds as amplified or moderated, reflected or absorbed; dialects and languages; sounds made by domestic implements and by exotic devices. Smith’s love of sound is often incorporated into his own text as prose-poetry. Normative academic discourse is routinely violated, whether by sentence fragments, direct intrusion of the author’s voice, notated music, sportive chapter titles (4: ‘Re: Membering’), and the persistent use of a typographic perfect circle (not reproducible here) variously representing a letter of the alphabet, a sound, a word, a symbol.

Among the various chapters, each of great import, are several of exceptional interest. I particularly enjoyed No. 10, entitled, with characteristic enigma, ‘Listen, Otherwise’. From the beginning the reader is faced with a puzzle: does this mean ‘Listen ... but in a different way than is your wont?’ or ‘Listen! Otherwise (i.e. if you don’t listen), either you will miss out on something important; or you cause great harm; or you will pay a penalty’. The subject of the chapter is the encounter of the imperialist English with ‘border’ cultures, including Wales, Ireland, and North America, the latter encompassing Native Americans and Africans (whether via the Caribbean Islands or direct from Africa). Smith’s citations of early-contact conversations with the natives of Virginia and Massachusetts create a wonderful feeling of ‘being there’.

I loved reading this book, which developed in large part out of a series of seminars at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. Since I myself participated in one of these seminars (and am named in the ‘Acknowledgments’) I experienced more than a little ‘déjà-vu’. Like many of my fellow participants, I thought at the time, ‘What is this guy up to?’ I could see and appreciate many individual parts of the enterprise, but what is the final point? With the completed book in hand, I can now come much closer to appreciating ‘the final point’, both the completeness and the importance of Smith’s survey.

Smith demonstrates a significant mastery of numerous fields of knowledge: anatomy, phonology, phonetics, linguistics, audiology, history, literary theory, architecture, philosophy, music, dialectology, geography, cartography, anthropology – the list could go on indefinitely. His exposition is generally clear enough that the reader can follow, though some points are inherently difficult or obscure. A reader unfamiliar with musical notation will miss out on a great deal – could Shakespeare himself have coped? A complex diagram of overlap-

ping circles on p. 17, looking like flower, or a Venn diagram from hell, is perhaps comprehensible in broad generalities, but what precisely is the exact status, for example, of the geometrical segment which incorporates 'psyche', 'society', and 'media', but excludes 'body'?

Smith is overwhelmingly right and convincing in his general thesis that the more we understand any aspect of Elizabethan and Jacobean life and theater, the better we will understand and reconstruct plays and indeed all surviving artifacts of that most rich and interesting culture. He makes us alert to aspects of play texts which probably escaped our full attention: onomatopoeia, ejaculations, constellations of vowels and consonants, instrumental music, songs, trumpets, drums, and other off-stage or on-stage sounds required for complete dramatic effect.

It needs to be asked, nevertheless, whether Smith is right in every particular, and also whether his study constitutes an achievement on which others can build, or whether it is likely to remain an isolated monument, astonishing in itself, but remote from wider scholarly enterprise.

Smith's analysis of the sound-scape of London lacks, in the first instance, a fully external comparative dimension. Did London have a different sound-scape from contemporary Paris? Rome? York? Norwich? Stratford-upon-Avon? Church-bells may well have allowed a blind-folded listener to know that he was in London and perhaps even guess his location, but, apart from speech and identifying dialects, could he have done so from listening to sounds issuing from households or workshops? Did a London blacksmith make a different noise from a Parisian blacksmith? A London print-shop from a Venetian print-shop? In general, did London have a truly distinctive soundscape, or would all European cities have sounded pretty much the same before the industrial revolution? If the latter was the case, do Smith's observations have full explanatory power?

As for ambient sounds and silences, it is true that the steam engine, the electric motor, the internal-combustion engine, the jet engine, and the helicopter have altered the sound-scape of London over the centuries, yet near-perfect silence is easily found even in modern London, and perfect silence must be the same everywhere and at all times. Perhaps, since church bells and jet planes are banned from today's London between midnight and 6:00 am, the City is quieter at night now than at any time over the last 1000 years.

As for the sound of human speech, it is true that a detached analyst can isolate phonemes on a more-or-less objective basis, but it is also true that speakers of a language are normally too caught up in speech to think about sound. When I listen to spoken Chinese, which to my shame I do not

understand, I hear it as sequences of odd sounds to which I can attach no meaning; when I listen to my native English, I hear it not as sound but as language. When I first began to learn German, I thought its sounds very peculiar, and even objectionable in their harshness; as I began to master the language, I no longer heard it as sound at all. Is English, indeed, in any way distinctive, or are all languages essentially heard by native or expert speakers as pure language rather than as individually signifying sounds?

Smith isolates [o:] from other phonemes for purposes of analysis, pointing out that it is sometimes meaningful in itself, as in a cry of physical or mental anguish ('O' or 'Oh!'). But generally considered, [o:] is simply one of many phonemes available to any particular speaker of any particular language, has no natural pride of place, and is not heard as an isolated sound-phenomenon in the course of normal speech. Granted that [o:] has the highest intensity of any English phoneme at 29 decibels (226), it must also be true that all phonemes are perceived as relatively even over individual words and sentences, as we don't *experience* [o:] as more than four times louder than [f], which comes in at a mere 7 decibels. This issue becomes critical with respect to Smith's claim (225–6) that 'a concentration of consonants ... positively require[s] that the actor playing Ophelia speak relatively softly when he says, '*My Lord, I have remembrances of yours / That I have longed long to rede/lover*' (italics added by Smith). In a large auditorium such as the Globe, it is necessary for the (originally male) actor to make his voice audible at all times to all playgoers in the theater, including the most remote. The softer the phoneme, the *louder* the actor will have to speak to make himself heard at all. (We have probably all attended plays where an actor simply drops out as a character because he does not keep this rule in mind.) Perhaps the resolution of this riddle is physiological: though the actor will have to speak soft phonemes louder to be heard, these phonemes may be *perceived* by the audience as spoken more softly.

Smith devotes considerable attention to the shape and volume of the original Globe and its modern replica on Bankside, drawing on principles of acoustical engineering to explicate its sound-scape. But it needs to be recognized that acoustical engineering is a notoriously inexact science. The designers of the San Francisco Symphony Hall, built in 1980, hired the best acoustical engineers available at the time, yet the building was a disaster for concert-goers until the acoustical retrofit of 1992. As to the reconstructed Globe, I am not alone in thinking that at 100' in diameter it is considerably larger than its original, and that the Rose, at about 80', should have set the standard. If I am correct, then the modern Globe, where the strain on the voices of most actors

is palpable, is not a fair test of the accoustical sound-scape of Elizabethan and Jacobean theaters.

If editors of *Hamlet* buy into Smith's argument, they must necessarily prefer the Folio's 'O, o, o, o, o' to Quarto's 'O'; similarly, editors of *Othello* must necessarily choose the Folio's 'Oh, Desdemon! dead Desdemon: dead. Oh. Oh', and (more complexly) the first folio text of *King Lear* (13–14). Indeed, every available interjection and ejaculation must be retained or restored. Most editors will want, however, to weigh Smith's arguments against other considerations, including assumptions about scansion – perhaps another aspect of a putative sound-scape.

Most of my quarrels with Smith, or second thoughts, boil down to a contest between particularism and universalism. Smith's project is relentlessly particularist. He claims, in effect, 'Unless you understand these particular details about the plays and the culture from which they derived, you will not understand Shakespeare (and his contemporaries) as well as you might; as well as you should'. I tend to feel that the whole point of Shakespeare is his universal appeal: the poems and plays surpass the bounds of their originating moment, so that it is not necessary to return to Elizabethan and Jacobean England to get their full effect. Unsurprisingly, neither Smith's position nor mine is entirely self-consistent. While I do not feel it is *necessary* to return to the days of yesteryear, I revel like an Uncle Scrooge in every scrap and ort from Elizabethan and Jacobean life rescued from oblivion by Smith's research. Smith for his part imposes a universalizing blanket of sympathy on the mores and beliefs of all cultures which are *not* English. Smith's historical persona is not that of a true Englishman who shares the scorn of his countrymen for outsiders, but of a Kennedy liberal who takes the part of the Welsh and Irish, of the Native American and the African, *against* the overbearing and unsympathetic English; that is, against the very culture from which the plays and poems of Shakespeare and his contemporaries sprang.

Does Massachusetts smell different from up-state New York at their border? Does Canterbury have the same light as Cork? Was the sound-scape of London unique? Are peoples, languages, and cultures more different from one another than they are similar? Does an anachronistic sympathy for the underdog enhance or impair our ability to understand a past culture, including Shakespeare's? Was Shakespeare in every way a contemporary Londoner, or did he escape the bounds of his culture?

Since *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* does not systematically address such questions, but is confident rather than questioning of its own assumptions, I suspect that it will endure as the perfect statement of a thesis

which must be savored and acknowledged with gratitude, but is less likely to serve, like early contributions to the 'new-historicist' movement, as a foundation of and an example for a new school of inquiry.

Alan H. Nelson

Robert Weimann. *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*. Ed Helen Higbee and William West. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp ix, 300.

Robert Weimann is best known for his 1978 book, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, and its influential extension of Richard Southern's spatial distinction between *locus* and *platea* in the late medieval and early modern theatre. Much of Weimann's subsequent work has been in different ways involved with teasing out the implications of that early book's politicized distinction between the representational place, or *locus*, and its function within the dramatic fable, and the presentational space, or *platea*, where the performer and audience meet. *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice* is no exception: here, as in his 1996 volume, *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (to which the volume under review serves as 'a self-contained sequel' [xi]), Weimann is concerned with questions of authority, specifically here the relative, contested, and mutually constitutive authority of writing and playing in the early modern theatre. Rightly lamenting 'that "performance" in Shakespeare criticism by and large is viewed either as performance *of* the plays or as performance inscribed *in* dramatic speech – never or rarely as a formative force, as an institutionalized power in itself, as a cultural practice in its own right' (4–5), he sets out 'to answer the question of how and to what extent performance in Shakespeare's theatre actually *was* a formative element, a constituent force, and together with, or even without, the text a source of material and 'imaginary puissance' (5).

In doing so, Weimann establishes and in some senses deconstructs a series of binaries that operate throughout the eight chapters of his study in more or less material or analogical relationship to one another. These include author/actor, pen/voice, writing/playing, *locus/platea*, representation/presentation, textual/verbal, writerly/performative, character/actor, poetry/prose, and perhaps more surprisingly city/suburbs, private/public (theatres and perform-