

Kim Solga. *Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp xi, 212.

Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts takes as its subject acts of ‘violence against women around the turn of the seventeenth century in England’ (1) and considers the ways in which these acts, which are often subject to erasure, might be staged in contemporary performance. In this work Kim Solga aims ‘to imagine what it might mean to represent early modern experiences of violence against women on the stage in an ethical way, a feminist way, today’ (1). Solga outlines her argument through a carefully theorized introductory chapter that neatly identifies her critical debts both to work on early modern drama and culture and to debates in theatre and performance studies. Central to Solga’s argument is her elaboration of the concept of the ‘in/visible act’. For Solga, the ‘in/visible act is the performance of violence against women as critical forgetting; it charges its witnesses to come to terms with what we’ve missed but also with *how* we’ve missed’ (17, Solga’s emphasis). She argues that in/visible acts position spectators as witnesses to the ways in which the violated female body is elided and the ways in which performance can work to insert this violent disappearance into the frame of performance, drawing attention to the mechanisms that tend to efface it.

Solga’s conception of in/visible acts provides a useful model for theorizing that which is missing or absent and she elaborates her critical framework in four convincing chapter-length case studies which focus on particular plays, acts of violence (primarily rape and domestic violence), and contemporary productions: Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (Deborah Warner and Julie Taymor), Heywood’s *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (Katie Mitchell), Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (Peter Hinton and Phyllida Lloyd), and Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling* (Declan Donnellan/ Nick Ormerod). This range of plays and productions is welcome, expanding the work of earlier studies such as Pascale Aebischer’s *Shakespeare’s Violated Bodies* (Cambridge, 2004) and Carol Chillington Rutter’s *Enter the Body* (London, 2001) which focus primarily on representations of women in performances of Shakespeare’s plays and complementing Roberta Barker’s recent work, *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender and Performance, 1984–2000* (Basingstoke, 2007). Given the comparatively mainstream nature of the performance companies and venues that Solga considers — the Stratford Festival, the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, Cheek by Jowl at the Barbican — I would

have been interested to know how she might have accounted for the work of companies outside these privileged cultural institutions and sites of performance, especially fringe companies with specifically feminist agendas, and the implications this might have for arguments about spectatorship, witnessing, and agency.

Each of the case studies is organized using a similar structure. Solga begins by offering a reading of the in/visible acts of violence in the early modern play text under consideration, often in relation to contemporaneous texts such as *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* (1632), William Whately's *A Bride-Bush, Or, A Direction for Married Persons* (1623), and Philip Stubbes's *A Crystal Glass for Christian Women* (1591). These concerns are then developed in relation to contemporary performances. This strategy works well and the interplay between early modern culture and contemporary performance enables both an historicized reading of violence against women and a consideration of how these acts of violence might be 'performed' and received in contemporary cultures without collapsing into transhistorical similitude. Solga's attentive reading of early modern culture, which draws on a substantial body of feminist scholarship, might have been developed further through consideration of the implications of an all-male cast. Here it might have been productive to think more about the ways in which 'in/visible acts' might be played and analyzed in relation to the absent female body on the early modern stage, especially given Solga's interest in 'the problems that adhere to the female body in representation during moments of *literal* stage violence' (4, Solga's emphasis). Solga's brief comment — 'His/her performance [of Lavinia's rape] has no precedent' (49) — is tantalizing in this respect; it might also have been fruitful to consider contemporary all-male (or all-female) performances of these texts in light of the articulation of in/visible acts.

The chapters make engaging arguments in relation to the texts under discussion but occasionally I found myself wanting further elaboration of a particular concept or set of critical references such as the claim that the 'ghost of the Duchess's ghost' 'bears the capacity to transform' the play 'into a site for modelling a spectator who pushes beyond the specular and into the space of ethical encounter beyond' (102). I was also struck by Solga's use of 'queer', in the sense of 'strange', 'odd', or 'uncanny', to describe aspects of performance; this might have been usefully linked to the concept of in/visible acts, as 'queer' similarly works critically to destabilize and disorient normative representational practices. While each of the chapters offers a convincing

analysis, I found the final chapter on *The Changeling* most compelling thanks to Solga's nuanced and elegant reading of the ways in which the organization of theatrical space, especially relationships between spectators and performers, can be pivotal in establishing what she describes as 'an architecture of feminist performance for this otherwise patently anti-feminist play' (145).

The book concludes with a brief afterword that offers an impassioned 'call to arms for all who have in the past called themselves feminist spectators, and who are willing now and in the future to call themselves feminist spectators' (179). If Solga's project is to identify possibilities 'of what an ethical, feminist performance of violence against women in contemporary early modern theatre can look like', the book's final claim upon its reader is to make the 'ethical reception' of such performances 'a reality' (179). This call is, however, traced by one of the tensions that informs Solga's project. In her identification of the competing critical voices that surround the productions she discusses — voices that are often at odds with the ideal feminist spectator as witness — she points to the ways in which performance refuses to be contained by the intentions of its makers and in which spectators might, in turn, refuse the call to be ethical witnesses to violence (or even to acknowledge the existence of such a position). Given the multiplicity of spectatorial viewpoints that Solga works hard to acknowledge alongside her own subjectivity as a spectator, I wonder whether her use of 'we', 'us', and 'our' might have been reconsidered. These terms produce a peculiarly homogenizing effect that seems at odds with the book's theoretical materials and subject matter, even as I take seriously the call to produce a community (or, indeed, communities) of ethical feminist spectator-witnesses.

This book is admirable for its commitment to a model of ethical spectatorship, sometimes in the face of performances and popular and academic discourses that work to resist such possibilities (even as this resistance may, on occasions, provide the ground for the ethical model that Solga elaborates); for the clarity of its argument; and for its perceptive, carefully researched, and elegant readings of particular performances. Solga offers a compelling model for a critically and politically engaged early modern *performance studies* (delineating its difference from work on early modern drama in/and performance) that I hope will influence further work in this area. *Violence Against Women* is invaluable reading for students and academics of early modern drama in contemporary performance, especially those concerned with the political and ethical implications of staging (and watching) violence against women. Its concern with the ethics of spectatorship and the politics

of re-presenting acts of violence against women also marks its useful contribution to these debates in theatre and performance studies more broadly and to feminist performance criticism in particular.

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Paul Whitfield White. *Drama and Religion in English Provincial Society, 1485–1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp 247.

White's monograph provides a much-needed survey of not just religious, but also a significant amount of so-called 'secular' theatrical activity — the distinction is revealed to be illusory — in early modern provincial England. He revises outdated received wisdom in the light of original research and influential recent scholarship in a well-documented volume that is likely to be useful to specialists and generalist instructors alike.

The organization and methodology of the study are perhaps its greatest achievements. First, working only loosely chronologically, White instead takes the importance of 'local conditions of sponsorship, production, and reception' (5) as his rationale for grouping theatrical events 'mainly along institutional lines' (5). The institutions in question are parishes, civic bodies (including religious and trade guilds), universities, private households (including those of ecclesiastical leaders), and traveling troupes. Second — a point not articulated explicitly in his introduction, but just as important to the impact of the book as the first — he builds his argument through a cumulative series of case studies centered on clusters of clearly related, if not always demonstrably linked, pieces of documentary evidence about individual performance events. Readers hoping for a coherent new narrative account of the progress of early English theatre will be disappointed, as will those seeking hypotheses about the probability of wide-spread patterns of theatrical activity based on statistical analyses of surviving (identified) documents. Without ever short-changing his debts to other scholars or to the work of Records of Early English Drama editors in particular, White consistently acknowledges the impossibility of both narrative and statistical generalizations. Instead, he emphasizes the range of often contradictory impacts of a single event as