

Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xii + 221 pp. + 17 illus. ISBN 0-521-82935-6. \$65.00 US.

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Pascale Aebischer's *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* is an interesting, well-written monograph on four Shakespeare plays that have enjoyed recent popularity in stage and film adaptations: *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. In each chapter, she discusses the bodies that appear on the stage and how the staging of these bodies (in most cases mutilated or dead) affect a viewer's interpretation of both the play and the adaptation. While her study does touch on some theoretical issues, such as feminist theory, subjectivity, "otherness," and semiotics, it is not exclusively theoretical, nor does one need to have a firm grounding in these approaches to understand her arguments. Though the plays and their dead bodies are indeed disparate, the book is still a unified whole, as Aebischer remarks:

Looking at Shakespeare's violated bodies in performance — at representations of the rape, mutilation and murder of silenced Lavinia, the walking dead that people the court of Elsinore, the racially stigmatised bodies of Aaron and Othello, the stifled voice of Desdemona and the vilified and displaced female bodies that make way for the all overwhelming suffering of Lear and Gloucester — allows me to return to language these silenced, objectified, stereotyped bodies by restoring them to the realm of discourse. (13)

As one can see, this study is indeed quite wide-ranging in its selections of texts and topics, but well-organized in its treatment of them, as she strives to give the more marginalized characters a new voice in the discourses of stage and film.

Aebischer's study begins with "*Titus Andronicus*: Spectacular Obscenities," a discussion of Lavinia's rape and the ensuing violence of revenge in *Titus Andronicus*. In this chapter, the most interesting in the book, she addresses the physical silencing, but also the eventual silent speech of Lavinia in both Shakespeare's play and subsequent adaptations. Some of the more prominent adaptations she studies are Peter Brook's 1955 version, Trevor Nunn's 1972 RSC production, and Julie Taymor's recent movie *Titus* (1999). In the case of each adaptation, Aebischer discusses the presentation of Lavinia's rape and how the audience first sees Lavinia onstage after her mutilation.

In almost all cases, the staged violence perpetrated against Lavinia leaves the audience wanting more violence against the rapists/mutilators. In fact, Aebischer relates the anecdote of two young women who, about to leave a performance because of the violence, decide to remain when they learn that the rapists will die. In addition, Lavinia is the first character to break out of her prescribed role of silence, which makes Lavinia's "silence" come through loud and clear. Despite the presence of Lavinia's "speech," though, most performances emphasize her death at Titus's hand.

Aebischer's second chapter, "'Not dead? Not yet quite dead?': *Hamlet's* Unruly Corpses," addresses the dead bodies that appear in *Hamlet*; the chapter's segments focus on the Ghost, Ophelia, Polonius, and Yorick. A few of the major productions she discusses are Matthew Warchus's 1997 RSC production, Kenneth Branagh's *In the Bleak Midwinter* (1995) and *Hamlet* (1996), and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). Continuing the discussion of revenge from the previous chapter, Aebischer comments:

The relatively straightforward movement from physical evidence to action in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* is portrayed in *Hamlet* as a mediated relationship via remembrance and faith that must compensate for the lack of physical evidence and consequent doubts of the hero. (75)

The second half of the chapter discusses Yorick's skull both on stage and screen; Aebischer argues that "if Yorick's skull is disturbingly polysemous on the page and the stage, it can be equally promiscuous in its signification on screen" (93). On stage, the skull symbolizes both Yorick and Ophelia, while onscreen, close-ups can create new relationships and significance for Yorick's skull.

The third and longest chapter, "Murderous Male Moors: Gazing at Race in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*," provides a discussion of both Othello's racial marginalization (linked to that of Aaron) and Desdemona's silencing (linked to that of Lavinia) in *Othello*. In this chapter, some of the more influential productions that Aebischer discusses are Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), Oliver Parker's 1995 *Othello*, and the Jonathan Miller/Anthony Hopkins 1981 version of *Othello*. The first half of this chapter addresses the marginalization of both Othello and Aaron; both the play's text and the staging mark them, as male Moors of color, as different/other. Much of Aebischer's discussion involves how the audience gaze is directed to these two characters, either by skin color or costuming. In addition, she quotes Paromita Chakravarti's statement that "while a white actor can be thought able to represent Othello's blackness, a black or Asiatic actor is considered capable only of demonstrating his own negritude" (49) (cited by Aebischer 110), so she ponders the question of whether or not Othello and Aaron should be played by black actors. The second half of the third chapter addresses Othello's voyeurism and silencing of Desdemona. Othello gazes on Desdemona

and sees "a white, smooth, translucent surface which he is afraid to pierce." (131) That he cannot shed her blood shows that Othello cannot accept "the full implications of his voyeuristic gaze." Like Lavinia, Desdemona is killed (silenced), but then comes back to life — "she has insisted throughout on having the last word and does so again" (133).

"En-gendering Violence and Suffering in *King Lear*," the fourth chapter, provides a discussion of Goneril's, Reagan's, Lear's, and Gloucester's onstage suffering. In this chapter, Aebischer studies, among others, two influential performances: Adrian Noble's 1993 RSC production and Nicholas Hytner's 1990 RSC production. Her comment on the suffering of Lear and his daughters is particularly astute. Writing of Gloucester's blinding by Lear's daughters, she writes that "the violence *engendered* by Lear's actions in the opening scene is *engendered* by his daughters' actions at the centre of the tragedy" (167). Aebischer then observes that "the blinding thus becomes the pivot of the play as well as the central point at which the play demands that the audience take sides;" (168-69) in this case, they "inevitably" side with the "oppressed and violated old men" rather than the "cruel younger women." In *Lear*, the men's suffering clearly takes precedence over that of the women.

*Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* will probably be most attractive to and useful for those studying film and/or stage adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, for its focus is indeed on productions rather than on critical interpretations of the texts themselves. A beneficial segment is the appendix of main productions cited in the book, which is a valuable resource for anyone studying adaptations of these four plays. For each entry, Aebischer lists the title, director, principal cast (both the roles and the actors who played them), place of performance or filming, production company, year, and archival materials consulted. The chapters themselves, which are rich with detail of the more ephemeral stage productions, should be helpful for directors and actors who are considering staging new productions of Shakespeare's plays. Other helpful and interesting additions are the seventeen illustrations of some of the productions to which Aebischer refers and a thorough index. Pascale Aebischer's book is a welcome addition to the scholarly discussion about adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, especially since the canon has expanded to treat stage and film productions as texts in their own right.

## References

- Aebischer, Pascale. 2004. *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chakravarti, Paromita. 2003. "Modernity, Post-Coloniality and *Othello*: The Case of *Saptapadi*." In *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures*. Edited by Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche, and Nigel Wheale. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan. 39-56.