

Elizabeth Spiller. *Reading and the History of Race in the Renaissance*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. ix + 252 pp. \$90. ISBN: 978-1-107-00735-2.

This original, stimulating, and erudite book brings together what seem at first to be disparate fields: early modern race studies and book history. Spiller argues that, while in recent years race studies in the Renaissance has concentrated overwhelmingly upon race as a performed or performative category, we should not do so at the expense of what constituted the primary experience of racial others for most early modern writers: encounters in and through print. Extending Margo Hendricks's observation that early modern race constitutes an entire epistemology or means of transmitting knowledge about the world, Spiller suggests that early modern readers additionally experienced texts phenomenologically.

Here, the book corrects or adjusts the field's focus on performance over the past two decades: most of us are aware that early modern actors and audience members believed that a fundamental, humoral change took place in the bodies of those who watched or engaged in performances, but Spiller teaches us that early modern bodies were also transformed by the material, corporal practices of reading. Shakespeare, she reminds us, first encountered the racial others that people his plays in print, rather than in person or in performance; moreover, "For romance and the world it imagined, practices of looking (at the heart of what proto-racialism suggested in making skin color and physical appearance an identity category) were integrally connected to practices of reading" (15). Romances engendered melancholy, or black bile, and while there are no documented instances of readers literally blackened by reading, literary sunburn remains within the realm of the early modern possible. In contrast, hearing poetry could re-moisten a brain rendered

“adust,” or excessively parched, dry, and blackened, from excessive romance-reading. Thus “reading experiences . . . sited romance at the fractures of early modern notions of identity” (28). Spiller expertly guides us through the emergence of print culture, through the humoral experience of reading romance and ultimately to the emergence of proto-racial social categories that rendered the humoral model — and the reading experience wedded to it — obsolete.

The book is divided into a methodological introduction and four chapters that engage with particular romances, their textual transmission, and their poetics of race. Chapter 1 discusses race, genealogy, and reading through the intertextual relations between the *King of Tars* and *Amadis of Gaul*. Spiller suggests that while in the earlier romance conversion modes subordinated ethnic descent to faith, after the fall of Granada race replaced conversion, transforming previous romantic conventions of stable identity. Chapter 2 discusses the many early modern versions of Heliodorus’s *Aithiopika*, in particular Amyot’s translation, and additionally develops the relationship between reading romance and reading paintings. Spiller offers a beautifully clear analysis of the relationship between Aristotle’s *Poetics* and his *Physics* before demonstrating Amyot’s rejection of the latter, in part because of emerging notions of race. Chapter 3 engages with the “conversion of the reader” in Ariosto, Herberay, and Cervantes. Spiller pays elegant and thorough attention to the importance of the physical form of romances published as books, including (with regard to Herberay’s text) the development of serialization, the use of the more legible Garamond font, single-column printing, more systematic punctuation, and woodblock illustration. Spiller also introduces an element of biographical study, and suggests that we can contrast Zoraïda’s destiny in the *Captive’s Tale* in part 1 of *Quixote* with Ana Félix’s uncertain fate in part 2 not only as versions of Cervantes’s own experiences but also as emblems of the changing relationships among faith, race, conversion, and romance.

While each chapter makes its case with elegance, chapter 4 is especially compelling, as it draws together the book’s interests in race, romance, biography, and the idea that “how one read could identify who one was” (159). Spiller suggests that in both parts of the *Urania* Wroth is “trying to create . . . a fiction that, when read correctly by the proper reader, would become a genealogical document of her (and her children’s) identity” (160). In part 1 Wroth’s attempt misfired, as Denny and others misread her text and her already-nostalgic use of black melancholy to destabilize race, gender, and intellectual work (178). But it was William Herbert’s repudiation of his and Wroth’s children in favor of his nephew, argues Spiller, rather than others’ misreadings, that contributed to “Wroth’s decision not to finish or publish this portion of the romance” (163).

Although Spiller carefully credits earlier scholars for their insights into early modern race, this book is extremely original, generously instigating further discussion and opening up new fields of inquiry. The volume itself is appropriately well-produced, crisply printed, and accurately edited. Finally, it is a pleasure to read Spiller’s prose: in parts the book reads as compellingly as the romances it analyzes. The experience of reading the book changes our understanding of both early

modern race and reading, just as, Spiller convinces us, does the reading of romance.

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