

Erin Minear. *Reverberating Song in Shakespeare and Milton: Language, Memory, and Musical Representation*.

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This is an elegantly written and thought-provoking book, richly researched yet completely original. The title suitably represents the sophistication of linking three key concepts by the term *reverberation*, which works throughout as both a literal term and a complex metaphor for literary allusion and for “earthly music as an echo of celestial harmonies.” Its “multiple and overlapping meanings” (1) enable *reverberation* to map fascinatingly involved relations between music, language, and memory. Memory is triggered, represented, and symbolized by music; language describes or evokes music but may also turn itself into music and substitute it. Music, “heard, imagined or remembered” (1), is a catalyst for memories but also a symbol for the cosmos, the microcosm of the psyche, and for social interaction. It reinforces sung verse, but also colors, invades, and obfuscates the spoken word. While the term “musical representation” refers to descriptions of music and to the way in which musical imagery determines descriptions of love, madness, the body, and the body politic, Minear’s argument is that “Shakespeare and Milton reproduce not the specific formal or sonic properties of music but its effects” (2).

These effects are caught in the chapter headings: Minear focuses on the way in which music complicates, destabilizes, and even dispenses with meaning. “Creeping music” infiltrates *The Merchant of Venice*; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Othello* are haunted by the evasive sound of treacherous puns and disintegrating verbal music: “We Have Nonesuch.” In *Hamlet*, “Sonic Phantoms” like the cockcrow, bell strokes, and drums import threats to Denmark’s health that may be restored if Fortinbras manages to reinstate “the music of war,” but they also impose harmony on disjointed, distressing experiences when Ophelia’s madness and death are prettified by her singing and by Gertrude’s and Laertes’s lyrical language. “Playing Music” describes music that is performed but also re-enacted in speech in *Twelfth Night*, with voices that are “simultaneously mocking and heartbreakingly sincere” (140), whereas *The Tempest* takes “the infiltration of speech by music” (140) to a confusing extreme where “bringing harmony literally alive results in an unsettlingly attractive presentation of pain” (162).

The chapter “Warbling Fancies” goes on to argue that this eerie, multifaceted way in which Shakespeare’s music does not work in performed set-pieces but rather like “a disturbance in water” (1) profoundly fascinated John Milton. Describing

Shakespeare as “warbling his native woodnotes wild” in “L’Allegro,” he saturated both that poem and “Il Penseroso” with resonances of *The Tempest* and *Midsummer Nights’ Dream*. In *Comus* and particularly *Paradise Lost*, the attractive perfection of music as an embodiment of prelapsarian harmony becomes questionable, excessive like Eve’s charms. The possibility that “musical recollection . . . brings the past alive in the present” is ultimately “dismissed as a dangerous kind of nostalgia” (198) that Milton turns definitely away from in *Paradise Regained*. When Christ refutes Satan baldly and unmusically (“Tempt not the Lord thy God he said and stood” [262]), the echoes are multiple but verbatim, no longer lyrically allusive: Milton quotes Jesus quoting Deuteronomy in Matthew 4:6 Shakespeare’s fluid music of allusive and intertextual language “that has ceased to mean” (abstract) is finally arrested and overcome.

This “story” (1) is anchored in wide-ranging scholarly references, justifying the unusual procedure of including important critics’ names in the index. In chapter 1, the detailed rehearsal of the familiar dichotomy between celestial and seductive music has a whiff of the painstaking dissertation introduction, but most of the extended footnotes provide genuinely interesting windows into publications whose insights serve Minear’s own complex argument. As soon as that is to the fore, all is well: an impressive sweep of freshly read details establishes dense networks between (often unobtrusive) individual musical-acoustic metaphors, allusions and descriptions, and sonic effects of language. The variety of these interlinked observations argues convincingly for the “uncanny and divine” pervasiveness of music which Milton perceived and ultimately suspected in Shakespeare’s language, and which we are made to perceive with him. The writing is fluent and imaginative (if occasionally suffering from adjective overload) and does credit to Stephen Greenblatt and Barbara Lewalski, whose names figure prominently in the acknowledgments.

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