

---

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Akhimie, Patricia. *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World***

Daniele Laudadio

---

Volume 41, numéro 4, fall 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061924ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061924ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer ce compte rendu

Laudadio, D. (2018). Compte rendu de [Akhimie, Patricia. *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(4), 193–195.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1061924ar>

## Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

**Akhimie, Patricia.**

***Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World.***

New York: Routledge, 2018. Pp. xii, 219 + 14 ill. ISBN 978-0-8153-5643-1 (hardcover) US\$149.95.

*Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World* is a transdisciplinary study that illuminates how early modern notions of race and class are connected to the idea of self improvement as portrayed in some of Shakespeare's plays and treatises of the era. The early modern notion of conduct is central in this work and is intended as a rigid set of norms that evaluated others' behaviour. Conduct literature promoted an ideology of cultivation by which individuals could improve themselves and society if they followed those norms, and which can be found in a number of treatises. As the author writes, upward mobility and self-improvement were prerogatives of the elite, while those below them were excluded from engaging in self-improvement on the basis of their somatic marks and class.

Akhimie sees these racializing processes in some of the most popular Shakespearean plays. In these texts, the characters' visible bodily traits, such as the colour of their skin, bruises, hard hands, and pinches, become stigmatizing and ultimately signified not only their own natural inferiority but that of entire social groups to which they belonged. From being a mere manifestation of physical difference based on phenotype, these marks came to be conceived of as biological, natural, and indelible. Having or not having these marks differentiated between those who were not capable of self-improvement and those who were. Akhimie argues that Shakespeare exposes such racializing strategies through the comments of marginalized characters in his works. Examples abound from many of Shakespeare's characters, such as Iago, Othello, Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse, Caliban, and Bottom. At the same time, the scholar also shows how the exclusion that these characters endure reinforces the idea of their inferiority as a manifestation of their racial and class backgrounds.

In her discussion of blackness, Akhimie suggests that Othello is denied access to upward mobility because his blackness prevents him from being able to improve himself in the highly competitive elitist Venetian mercantile society. This elitist society views him as faulty and untrustworthy due to his blackness, and the colour of his skin eventually excludes him from the social status granted to the elites. The author suggests that, as a sign of his foreignness, Othello's blackness confirms his inability to conform to accepted European behaviours. Othello makes this ideology clear in the final act when he realizes his otherness by defining himself as a monstrous foreigner.

Similarly, Akhimie sees the bruises on Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus, in *The Comedy of Errors*, as marks of their moral and social inferiority. While the bruises might seem to be temporary marks left on the servants' bodies as a punishment for their deficiency in performing tasks, Akhimie shows how the two characters see those marks as a manifestation of their social and moral inferiority. The marks that their masters leave on them as a punishment become a racial sign of their inherited, natural deficiency. The scholar links the analysis of this play to the reading of domestic manuals, arguing that the punishment that these manuals describe as a means of good governance of the house serves to racially stigmatize a group of people—the servants—as morally and physically inferior.

Even hunting and entertainment as forms of recreation differentiated the elites from the servants since these activities were connected to the idea of self-improvement. By law, only the elites could practise the activity of hunting, which came to testify to their imaginative capacity for self-improvement. The scholar reads these racializing references to hunting and to the entertainment in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and argues that entertainment is a prerogative of those who have the imaginative capacity for it. In these literary works, the labourers' hard-handedness becomes a racializing somatic mark expressing their innate lack of intellectual faculties, which signifies the hardness of their minds.

Akhimie reads *The Tempest* under the light of the similitude of gardening recurring in the literature of conduct. The ideology of cultivation of self in this form of literature lists good and bad qualities. One should nurture good qualities and weed out bad ones. Similarly, the couple Miranda and Ferdinand are chaste and cultivated courtiers in opposition to Caliban, whose pinches on his skin are symptoms of his deprivation and abandon. Akhimie also argues

that Caliban's body activates implicit considerations over the competing claims of hereditary owners of the land and its labourers.

The last chapter of the book links early modern England to today's global world in a powerful, acute way. Akhimie shares a personal anecdote about her brother, a big, tall, dark-skinned man, who took up the habit of walking around his neighbourhood in central Florida while she was writing this book. In the wake of the numerous killings of unarmed black men by US law enforcement officers during the so-called "pedestrian checks," the scholar shares her worries about her brother not making it back home after one of those evening walks. By linking another genteel early modern activity such as pedestrianism to today's common habit of walking, Akhimie urges readers to think about the fluidity and adaptability of race as a social construct. She also encourages readers to understand that racism is a historical phenomenon that is pervasive in our everyday lives. If pedestrianism in early modern conduct literature was a healthy activity for the freeborn to enjoy the benefits of the free air, this form of self improvement is not possible for some individuals today as they are seen and checked as potential threats on the basis of their own somatic marks. Bodily marks deviating from the dominant group's somatic norm are still racial signifiers affecting, more or less overtly, people's lives. By connecting past and present notions of race, Akhimie argues for the necessity of a more inclusive rhetoric that could dismantle the naturalizing discourses of racial profiling and discrimination limiting some individuals' ability to succeed.

DANIELE LAUDADIO  
University of Toronto

**Alonge, Guillaume.**

*Condottiero, cardinale, eretico. Federico Fregoso nella crisi politica e religiosa del Cinquecento.*

Studi e testi del Rinascimento europeo, 42. Rome : Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2017. xxiv, 392 p. ISBN 978-8-8935-9015-0 (broché) €44.80.

Ce premier ouvrage de Guillaume Alonge s'inscrit dans un vaste débat historiographique international sur la question de l'évangélisme et de ses ramifications. Depuis les recherches de Delio Cantimori, qui s'est interrogé dans