



**Gavin Hollis, *The Absence of America: The London Stage, 1576-1642*, Oxford University Press, 2015, hardback, 288 pages. ISBN: 9780198734321; £55.**

Reviewed by

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Given the premium often placed on the 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States in today's public discourse, it is hard to imagine a time when transatlantic affairs were deemed peripheral to London's interests. And yet, as Gavin Hollis, Associate Professor at Hunter College, City University of New York, reminds us, in the decades surrounding the 1607 founding of Jamestown, the New World was only of 'marginal' interest to those living in the Old (10). From the opening of the first permanent playhouse in 1576 to the closure of the theatres in 1642, a mere three English plays are believed to have focused on the Americas, none of which have survived, and the fleeting references to the New World in extant dramatic works are rarely enthusiastic about colonial expansion.

Yet, as Hollis argues, absence is not tantamount to irrelevance, and '[j]ust because America was by and large absent from the early modern stage does not mean that early modern drama—and by extension, early modern culture—was not informed by America' (22). Based on the scattered theatrical allusions that are available, Hollis has 'limn[ed]' an impressively cogent 'picture', not only of how English dramatists depicted 'America'—which for Hollis's purposes principally refers to the Virginia settlement—but also of the domestic dynamics driving what he characterises as 'the playing companies' refusal to parrot the Virginia Company's promotional machine' (3, 4).

Across four chapters, Hollis advances a bold and original thesis, namely that the 'absence' of America on the early modern London stage was reflective of a longstanding enmity between those involved in the city's theatre scene and the colony's Puritan proponents. The latter perceived the Virginia project primarily to be a spiritual endeavour, whose pious potential was threatened by irreverent 'players', while the former scorned the Virginia Company's boast that the plantation would inspire both the indigenous population and indigent English immigrants to become exemplary Protestants (2). For Hollis, London city comedies were at the forefront of this theatrical protest, as dramatists repeatedly associated the Virginia project with 'London character types', such as 'the *nouveau riche* merchant, the prodigal, the citizen wife [and] the bankrupt knight' (19). By stressing how Jamestown was a magnet for such 'undesirable' rogues, all of whom were 'not capable of or interested in the transformations [...] projected [...] in Virginia Company propaganda', playing companies emphatically rejected the Company's assertion that colonialism meant conversion (20).

Hollis's study, the first in Oxford University Press's new series in early modern literary geographies, is organised thematically. Building on Louise George Clubb's concept of 'theatregrams', which she defined as 'elements of dramatic composition such as character, situation, genre, and scene' used to 'assembl[e]' 'narrative arcs', Hollis has coined a related term, 'theatrememes', to describe 'shared allusions' that are replicated over time (3). *The Absence of America* therefore explores four such theatregrams and theatrememes. Chapter One begins with the figure of the Virginia Company adventurer, uncovering how the Virginia Company was keen to 'distinguish[h] between the ideal adventurer and the unholy trinity of Devil, papist, and player' (27). Hollis posits that playing companies repudiated the Company's claim, choosing instead to 'collaps[e]' these distinctions and draw the audience's attention to the flaws in colonial rhetoric within plays such as Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) (29). Next, Chapter Two looks at the theatrememe of the settler who purportedly killed and ate his wife. By explicating how fears of the colonist-turned-cannibal resonate across Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston's *Eastward Ho!* (1605), Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (1611) and Philip Massinger and John Fletcher's *The Sea Voyage* (1622), Hollis reveals how Jacobean theatre exposed deep-set anxieties that England, and specifically, Englishmen, were unfit to 'husband' Virginia (77).

The second half of the book turns from the Virginian colonist to the Virginian Indian. Chapter Three argues that the splendid procession of Indian princes in Chapman and Inigo Jones's *The Memorable Masque* (1613), a performance funded by Virginia Company members and which correspondingly celebrates the Company's missionary agenda, was neither accurately nor appreciatively received by Londoners. As Hollis elucidates, *The Memorable Masque* was swiftly followed by Fletcher and Nathan Field's *Four Plays, or Moral Interludes, in One*, William Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* and the court revival of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, all of which deploy the theatrememe of the 'displayed Indian' in ways that deflate the Virginia Company's lofty vision (124). Where Chapter Three adopts a more synchronic approach, scrutinising four performances staged in a single year (1613), Chapter Four is diachronic, tracing, across plays spanning several decades, the theatregram of the European male who assumes Native American disguise. From Robert Greene's *The*

*Historie of Orlando Furioso* (1591) to the anonymous *The Fatal Marriage* (c.1620s) and Massinger's *The City Madam* (1632), Hollis illuminates shifting attitudes to appearance and identity. Finally, the book concludes with a thoughtful Afterword demonstrating how the theatregrams and theatrememes of the early seventeenth-century continued to permeate the Restoration stage in plays such as Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter* (1689).

The quality and range of analysis displayed throughout *The Absence of America* makes it thoroughly deserving of its place on the shortlist for Shakespeare's Globe Book Award 2016, a prize given to an author whose first monograph has provided an 'outstanding contribution to the understanding of Shakespeare, his theatre, or his contemporaries' (Shakespeare's Globe: *Press release*, 1). Hollis produces consistently sharp readings of texts by diverse playwrights, placing better-known plays (Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) in dialogue with lesser-studied ones (Fletcher and Field's *Four Plays, or Moral Interludes, in One*). The book is accessible, with ample contextual information to help orientate non-specialist readers; the introductory sections outlining how ideas circulated through early modern London via an intricate nexus of printers, preachers and patrons gives an especially helpful overview of the city's vibrant culture. Invaluably, Hollis subverts at least two critical commonplaces about the New World: Chapter One's investigation of how tobacco consumption could initially be seen as 'anti-Virginian' makes for a fascinating reassessment of what is often classed as a generically American product, and Chapter Two's emphasis on the *English* cannibal thoughtfully complicates the stereotype that early modern Europeans necessarily equated anthropophagy with native tribes (67).

Speculatively, in light of Hollis's acknowledgement that two of the three lost New World plays were tragedies, one wonders how far Hollis's argument that the genre that engaged most closely with the New World was London city comedy might need to be modified, should any of the 'lost plays' miraculously surface (10). However, no critic can be expected to supply what the vagaries of time have not, and considering early modern America's all-too-frustrating absence from the dramatic archives, overall, Hollis is to be greatly commended for producing a highly intelligent study that substantially advances our knowledge both of the early modern London stage and of the intricacies that have, arguably, been ever-present in transatlantic relations.

### **Works Cited**

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