Early Modern Literary Studies

Michelle M. Dowd and Natasha Korda, eds, *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). xiii+291pp. ISBN 978 1 4094 1077 5.

Alison Searle
University of Sydney
alison.searle@sydney.edu.au

This collection of essays explores how labour, workers, goods, capital and systems of economic exchange were represented on the early modern stage, focusing particularly on the concept of work in all its manifold forms, and, in general, deploying a loosely Marxist theoretical paradigm. Despite these commonalities, the range of material covered by individual authors is surprisingly large – as 'work' involves a complex array of activities including shoemaking, sewing, perfumery and other forms of craftsmanship, morris-dancing, trickery, prostitution, domestic service, magic, agricultural labour, sheep-shearing and seamanship. Similarly, while the type and degree of labour is regulated by an individual's economic assets, social class and ethnicity, the Protestant Reformation's theological redefinition of work as a holy vocation, not a divine punishment resulting from the Fall, ensures that the workers considered encompass all levels of the social hierarchy, from virtuous gentlewomen, to indentured servants in the North American colonies, and slaves in the Caribbean. This catholicity extends to the range of performances included under the rubric of 'early modern English drama' – progress entertainments, civic pageants, entrepreneurial one-man shows, like Will Kempe's morris-dance from London to Norwich, as well as comedies, tragedies, tragicomedies, historical and travel plays written for the outdoor and indoor playhouses of Elizabethan and Jacobean London. Indeed, the work of the theatre and its complex interconnections with the proto-capitalist economy of early modern England is a recurrent and unifying theme throughout the volume.

The editors claim that *Working Subjects* interrogates 'the processes by which the drama began to forge new connections between labor and subjectivity' (p. 1), paying detailed attention to the material and poetic dimensions of the medium, and investigating 'the interface between changing or historically emergent modalities of work and the forms of subjectivity to which they gave rise in a broad range of dramatic genres' (p. 3). Valerie Forman takes up the issue of genre in one of the most ambitious essays in the

collection. She argues that tragicomedy – the most popular dramatic genre in seventeenth-century England – 'makes global trade and travel its subject precisely because….it is the product of a relationship between two potentially opposing genres – one that foregrounds loss, and the other resolution' (p. 209). Due to its 'narrative basis in the economic logic of [Christian] redemption' it is 'particularly well suited to negotiate the complexities of England's participation in global trade'. 'Tragicomedy's redemptive emphasis on loss and return registers and addresses these economic complexities through its reimagining of initial losses as expenditures that return as, and even produce, more prosperous futures' (p. 210). Forman's reading of *The Island Princess* and *The Winter's Tale* is a *tour de force*, but does not entirely resolve the methodological difficulties of reading the genre of tragicomedy, via its allegorical roots in the biblical metanarrative, as a representation of proto-capitalist economics.

Even more problematic are the generalisations in David Hawkes's essay that (in Jean E. Howard's words) 'sees the early modern theatrical mode of production as directly contributing to the seismic and pernicious cultural shift by which abstract symbols came to substitute for actual things both in finance and in regimes of representation' (p. 249). As Howard further notes, in her stimulating afterword, the early modern theatre's 'mode of artistic production was mixed' interrupting 'seamless realism' with a range of 'popular performance traditions, such as clowning, jigging, asides…that broke the representational frame' reminding 'the audience of the labor of the actor and the difference between actor and role' (p. 250). This is precisely what many of the essays explore, making a significant contribution to our understanding of the roles played by women and working-class men in the drama of the period. Molly Hand locates 'women workers of magic as active agents for whom magic is…a trade by which they earn a living' (p. 161); Natasha Korda traces the material skills of alien craftswomen and their self-representation in civic pageants; Holly Dugan excavates the increasingly important contribution of female perfumers; Sara Mueller examines the way aristocratic women stage-managed their role as household managers and talented embroiderers in progress entertainments for Elizabeth I; and Ronda Arab demonstrates the careful narrative inscription that Will Kempe gave to his dancing, as a masculine employment demanding hard, physical labour.

Though these particular essays show that a measure of agency and economic independence can be recuperated from early modern dramatic representations of women and working-class men, the collection also uncovers the ways in which individuals and groups of people could be occluded on the grounds of gender, class and ethnicity. Crystal Bartolovich notes that *The Shoemaker's Holiday* 'despite its manifest respect for the artisanal, cannot imagine a self-made citizen elite as an effect of labor because this

would be too dissonant with period understandings of status and rule, which were assumed to be by definition distinct from labor and those who performed it' (p. 36). John Michael Archer, similarly, explores the ambiguities characterising the relationship of citizens and aliens as working subjects in Dekker's play. From quite a different angle, Elizabeth Rivlin demonstrates the sheer hard work involved in the various performances staged by the 'venture tripartite' of Dol, Subtle and Face in *The Alchemist*, which concludes with the expropriation of the fruits of their labour by the master of the house, Lovewit. Michelle M. Dowd critiques the more problematic way in which various early modern plays represent female servants, turning the social reality of 'sexual vulnerability itself into a fictional narrative, replacing the real danger of coercion that obtained in master-servant relationships with a discursive fantasy of female desire….[F]ictional narrative does the work of distancing messy social realities by rendering them salacious entertainment and therefore of limited social threat' (p. 143). In the volume's final essay, Daniel Viktus explores how the genre of the travel play developed to offer a similar vicarious experience to the 'new class structure' of 'English capitalists' who 'paid to experience…imaginatively, the travels of dramatic characters…that claimed to create substance out of an airy nothing, while relying on the sweating labor of those whose surplus labor-power [whether seamen or actors] made those adventures and profits possible' (p. 242).

Working Subjects makes a significant contribution to the critical literature on early modern English drama with its clear-sighted, socially engaged analysis of how the theatre was implicated in the period's material cultures, local and global economic networks and work at every level.