

Patricia Fumerton. *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxvi + 238 pp. index. append. illus. chron. bibl. \$20. ISBN: 0-226-26956-6.

In this ambitious and richly detailed book, Patricia Fumerton examines how the economic instability of early modern England helped to produce a deeply felt experience of itinerancy and social displacement among the working poor. Looking at a wide range of sources, including pamphlets, ballads, parish registers, and the journal of seaman Edward Barlow, Fumerton argues that the period witnessed the emergence of what she calls the “unsettled subjectivity” of poor laborers, a sense of self defined by “economic, interpersonal, and spatial mobility” (50). By attending to low rather than high culture and to dislocated subjects rather than communities, *Unsettled* offers an original and theoretically astute cultural history of early modern vagrancy.

Fumerton divides her study into three parts. In the first four chapters, she mobilizes recent historical work on early modern vagrancy and wage labor in order to offer a theory of low subjectivity. Cultural and economic instability, she argues, was experienced not only by the physically homeless or legally vagrant, but also at times by those slightly higher on the social scale, including apprentices, servants, and housewives. In the second section of the book, Fumerton turns to Barlow’s journal — a fascinating account of a seaman’s life of personal and geographical itinerancy — as a case study to test her model of “elastic,” unsettled subjectivity (5). In part 3, Fumerton considers ballads written about early modern seamen and,

in an epilogue, briefly examines the suggestive connections between the modern American labor economy and its early modern counterpart.

Unsettled is replete with striking insights about early modern culture and the nature of non-elite subjectivity. In challenging critical narratives about vagrant communities and the so-called “rogue underworld” of early modern England, Fumerton provides a compelling, nuanced assessment of the personal and economic dislocations that characterized the lives of the working poor. Her theoretical formulation of low subjectivity is particularly valuable in that it both encourages scholars to think beyond strict legal definitions of vagrancy or poverty and, more fundamentally, challenges us to think of subjectivity itself as mobile or unsettled, rather than as unified or consistent. Fumerton is an excellent close-reader, and her discussion of Barlow’s journal — an ideal case study for her project — is particularly strong in its attention to the rhetorical nuances of his narrative, the text’s engagement with historical developments in navigational charting, and the fascinating illustrations that fill 147 pages of Barlow’s account (many of which are reproduced in her volume).

Two aspects of Fumerton’s argument, however, give me pause. The first is her suggestion that the development of unsettled, lower-order subjectivity in the period was primarily a secular phenomenon. While this formulation enables Fumerton to trace a narrative that leads directly from the early modern itinerant subject to the modern self, her argument that religious definitions of subjectivity are by their very nature more settled or secure than secular ones both elides the dislocations that characterize many spiritual self-narratives of the period and assumes a clear divide between secular and sacred discourses of selfhood. Second, though Fumerton generally handles her source material with a great deal of care, she occasionally makes some questionable assumptions about the nature of representation, as when she argues that broadside ballads — unlike plays or rogue pamphlets — offer the “undisguised voicings” of the mobile, working poor (45). Though I agree that we should be careful not to read plays or rogue literature as factual records of vagrant culture, I think that the same caveat applies to ballads. That is, it is not evident to me that certain types of sources provide more direct access to lower-order subjectivity than do others, or that plays — however inaccurate — cannot still offer useful insights into the subject formations of the working poor.

These hesitations aside, Fumerton has produced a masterful account of the culture of vagrancy in early modern England, one that makes a significant contribution both to early modern scholarship and to the history and theory of subjectivity. As an extension of her previous work on the peripheral and the everyday, *Unsettled* brilliantly illuminates the often dislocated, mobile, and fragmentary experiences of England’s poorest subjects, making it a timely and welcome addition to the field of early modern cultural studies.

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