

Elizabeth J. Rivlin. *The Aesthetics of Service in Early Modern England*.

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Elizabeth Rivlin's study brings together two major strands of recent scholarship: literary treatments of early modern service (including work by Richard Strier, Michael Neill, and David Schalkwyk) and the material labor of the public theater (as seen, for example, from Natasha Korda and David Kathman). She contributes to these scholarly discussions, and unites their central concerns, by proposing "aesthetic service" as a way to think about the link between literary production and early modern service in its various forms. Eschewing what she calls "catastrophic narratives" that focus solely on oppression and disenfranchisement, Rivlin draws a more complex picture: one that allows for both upward and downward mobility, self-possession and dispossession, and an array of new possibilities for early modern subjects and, most particularly, for texts and authors. In her words, the lens of aesthetic service allows texts to "generate performances that inaugurate not only new dispositions and conjunctions but also new dispossessions and disjunctions" (5). In demonstrating this thesis, Rivlin looks not only at the varying articulations of service during this time of transition from feudalism to capitalism, but at early modern literary criticism — particularly Philip Sidney's discussion of mimesis in *The Defence of Poesy* — for its tendency to condemn the "mingling" of forms, the very kinds of mixing that aesthetic service exploits for the purposes of "inaugurating" the "new."

The argument unfolds over five chapters that span a range of different genres, with primary attention given to drama (including city comedy and tragicomedy) and prose fiction. Chapter 1 addresses two of Shakespeare's early comedies, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Two Gentleman of Verona*, by reconsidering these plays' critical status as Shakespeare's "apprentice work." Rivlin literalizes and expands this traditional assessment by attending to the ways in which the plays use servants to investigate new possibilities for subjectivity; she also ties this exploration to Shakespeare's own early experience with the theater, an occupational arena that itself relied heavily on apprentice models. Chapter 2 turns to Thomas Nashe's prose tale *The Unfortunate Traveller*, attending to the imperfect, scattershot, and even transgressive service of the tale's hero, Jack Wilton. Rivlin extends her reading of Jack's adventures beyond thematic treatments of service toward an examination of the status of prose fiction itself in early modern literary culture. In chapter 3, Rivlin applies the concept of aesthetic service to two texts often paired in critical discussions — Thomas Deloney's prose tale *The Gentle Craft* and Thomas Dekker's city comedy based on that tale, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. Rivlin finds that both texts depict the "continual circulation between identities and genres of service" (102) in dynamic and often surprising ways, with implications not only for service itself during a period of early capitalism, but for the development prose fiction and the re-envisioning of collective theatrical space. Chapter 4 delves into the complicated case of Ben Jonson, a writer whose simultaneous embrace and rejection of service labor has long constituted a paradox for his readers. Rivlin finds a way to unite these two seemingly opposite attitudes in her reading of *The Alchemist*, *Discoveries*, and several lyric poems. Finally, chapter 5 revisits Shakespeare by examining representations of servants and service in two tragicomedies, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

Throughout the five chapters, Rivlin continually offers new and innovative readings of much-discussed texts. For example, in chapter 5 she frames her readings of Shakespeare's tragicomedies in a surprising yet convincing way: by noting common ground between the self-representational strategies described in Baldesar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* and Thomas Harman's cony-catching pamphlet *A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly called Vagabonds*. This unexpected pairing allows Rivlin to compare representational strategies between the *The Winter's Tale's* courtly servants (Paulina and Camillo) and its Bohemian rogue (Autolycus), two sets of characters that critics typically have kept separate due to their divergent class positions. In keeping with recent scholarship on service, this study's findings emerge not from any grand historical narrative of progress or disenfranchisement, but from careful, nuanced readings of the texts under consideration. Scholars of early modern literature and culture will profit from reading Rivlin's book. It will reward not only students of early modern social history, but readers interested in the literary criticism and aesthetic theories of the period.

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