

Forum

Urvashi Chakravarty, *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 312 pages. \$65.00

Urvashi Chakravarty's first book, *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England*, neatly addresses the messy matter of a long-held tradition in how slavery and enslavement have been disclosed, taught, and rhetorically weaponized by the colonizing classes and by the descendants of enslavers. Many are inclined to think especially of America when considering the worst offenders of enslavement. I am accustomed to seeing English folks arguing in Twitter comments that invoking the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which ended trading of enslaved persons within the English colonies while preserving legal slavery itself, absolves England from receiving a similar—or equal—amount of vitriol regarding their role in the trade of other people. Presently in American education, states like—but not limited to—Florida have been utilizing state power to educate students with...well, fictions of consent about America's relationship with slavery. Of course, this is nothing new. As a Black woman educated and raised in the United States, I am fluent in these fictions. *Fictions of Consent* relays the methods by which these fabrications about early modern servitude became known to many as voluble truths.

Fictions regarding the transatlantic slave trade and its varied systemic legacies have long-lived and multi-generational lives, often serving a narrative that minimizes the very real role of intentionality behind the preservation and maintenance of these scripts of servitude: "It is the roots of these fictions that this book examines, and the ways in which early modern English iterations of service and servitude laid the conceptual and rhetorical groundwork for such pervasive and lasting narrative and ideological strategies around slavery" (2). Chakravarty invites readers to consider not only England's distinct role in creating and perpetuating such stories about enslavement, but also "to argue that slavery *was* English, and moreover that service was fundamental to its conception" (2). By no means is Chakravarty suggesting that slavery was *limited* to England's colonies, culture, or economy, but that "the long ideological history of slavery was rooted in a set of everyday relations and sites of service—the household, the family, the schoolroom—that simultaneously, and paradoxically, seemed to refuse the possibility of servitude yet honed the fictions that underwrote and authorized bondage" (2).

Just as *Fictions of Consent* focuses on but is not limited to England's relationship with slavery, the subjects of its chapters are not subject to the specific liminality of whiteness, blackness, or otherness. Included in the umbrella of "Slavery, Free Service and Servitude" are Milton's Adam and Eve (Ch. 4), *King Lear's* Kent (Ch. 5), and Hemings' eunuch, Castrato, in *The Fatal Contract* (Ch. 3). Indeed,

bondage comes in many forms and has aligned with many an English social or economic contract.

Chakravarty's reading of bondage in chapter three considers the intersection of bondage and natality within Milton's Adam and Eve, and how *Paradise Lost*:

...is both a forecast and a warning, a reminder that bondage and natality are closely imbricated, that the work on which Adam relies can itself become merely an authorizing fiction of agency, and that the bondage that is intertwined with reproductive futurity implicates a 'tainted' nature. In reproducing itself, Man's 'race unblest' inevitably generates a heritable—and sometimes somatic—mark of slavery (169)

This reading brings to mind a passage from Patricia Akhimie's *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2018), where she observes that "Blackness is made to mean through a particular process by which it may come to be associated across all its connotations, with the absence of trust, comfort, and familiarity—a stigmatized mark of difference" (49). Chakravarty's reading calls attention to a "reproductive futurity" that "implicates a 'tainted' nature"; this "stigmatized mark of difference" that Akhimie identifies as blackness is also a "mark of slavery." *Fictions of Consent* considers Milton on postlapsarian Adam and Eve:

The Law I gave to Nature him forbids:
Those pure immortal Elements that know
No gross, no unharmonious mixture foule,
Eject him *tainted* now, and purge him off
As a distemper...[11.50-53]¹

Her examination of the "tainted nature" of the fallen Adam and Eve, Chakravarty notes, coincides with

...and miserable it is
To be to others cause of misery,
Our own begotten, and of our Loines to bring
Into this *cursed* World a *woful* Race,
That after wretched Life must be at last

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost. A Poem in Twelve Books* [2nd ed.] (London: S. Simmons, 1674), 287. Further bibliographic details for this work can be found in the *English Short Title Catalogue* (<https://estc.bl.uk>), where it is known as ESTC R13351. Emphasis my own.

Food for so foule a Monster, in thy power
 It lies, yet ere Conception to prevent
 The *Race unblest, to being yet unbegot.*
 Childless thou art, Childless remain...[10.981-989]²

As part of their generational punishment, Adam, Eve, and all their consanguineous progenitors must pay for their cardinal sin, being marked as “a woful race,” or “a race unblest,” who would not descend directly from Eve’s womb. Chakravarty locates a similar parallel in the inheritance of enslavement; the process of natality which left even those “unbegot” in positions of predestined ill-fate. Chakravarty writes,

“Adam and Eve are both heirs and progenitors, reluctant reproducers whose most famous progeny is not their own. These heirs, this family, is also a family of indentured servants, whose navigations and negotiations of servitude and succession manifest the nexus of service and blood, of the unfilial and the unlineal, in early modern understandings of kinship and family” (170).

Admittedly, when I have broadly considered slavery and servitude in early modern England, Milton’s Adam and Eve are not the first figures to come to mind. Inherited servitude certainly predates the circulation of the Bible, but Chakravarty illuminates the direct correlation between early modern attitudes regarding the justification of slavery, free service, and servitude, and how these attitudes both reflected and perpetuated popular notions of servitude in early modern England.

This creates a perfect segue for the chapter that most interests me, and which feels most contemporarily prescient, the second chapter, “Leaue to Liue More at Libertie,” a chapter on race, slavery, and pedagogy in the early modern schoolroom. Chakravarty maintains that the schoolroom “emerged as a formative site for the conceptual strategies of racialized bondage and of the place of children and heritability in the genealogies of slavery” (45). In a moment when many American public schools and their districts argue that the right to exclusively teach fictions of consent is a constitutional right, revisionist histories are suggested as a feel-good substitute for more broadly defined—and much more violent—histories. Chakravarty focuses on the fact that “these fictions, and the languages and logics that sustained them, were seeded in the pedagogical contexts

² *Ibid.*, 280.

of the schoolroom” (198). Educators took a unique approach to address England’s relationship with free service: “Through the rehearsal and reiteration of these fictions of consent, the accretion and dispersal of discourses and contexts, slavery becomes not just possible, but palatable” (198).

Chakravarty contends that “the schoolroom, rather than the sea or shore or the slave market, was the primary contact zone for slavery,” and these conceptions were “performed, ventriloquized, and vivified” in the roles of “classical and contemporary slaves as memories, specters, alternates, and intimates in the slave plays that English schoolboys read and enacted” in fulfillment of the requirements for their grammar school educations (3). These plays, principally the comedies of Terence and Plautus, “were significant for their depictions of wily slaves, faithful freedmen, and errant sons learning to become citizens of Rome. But they also staged the kinds of slaves, and the forms of bondage, that would come to inform not only the characters and plots of early modern plays, but the ways in which concepts of slavery and manumission were conceived, fictionalized, and disseminated” (3). Tales of Roman slavery written in Latin would be translated to create and reinforce early modern ideas of slavery, teaching pupils early on that liberty and bondage go hand in hand, and that the duty of service was tied to English citizenship. Chakravarty suggests that “this move insistently resituates slavery as English, reveals the quotidian conditions and everyday environment of compromised consent, and, in coarticulating service and slavery, works to authorize the ideologies of slavery even as it affixes them to racial difference” (74). In Terence and Plautus, the characters would find themselves in negotiable positions of bondage that were often linked to debt and would lead to eventual redemption. Enslavement was a condition that could be shed. But the mark of slavery for blackamoors, for example, was racially rooted and tied to the color of their skin, therefore making the mark of slavery immovable.

Fictions of Consent locates the many variants of bondage, and the everyday conventions, texts, and characters which informed, created, and reflected early modern attitudes regarding enslavement and free service. Chakravarty demonstrates that in early modern England, “slavery was not an extreme or onerous version of service but rather its obverse, a sign that one was excluded from a civic community molded around the enactment of a service that was explicitly articulated as volitional” (4).

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