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Chakravarty, Urvashi. Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England

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Chakravarty, Urvashi.
Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England.
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The three keywords that frame the argument in this book designate the three kinds of bound labour described in non-literary and literary texts in early modern England and in early British America. Urvashi Chakravarty's densely argued and compellingly written book shows slavery, servitude, and free service to be conceptually connected. But these terms also denote different structures and levels of agency of men and women subjugated to the master's power of rule and ownership of them. The argument shows in revealing detail and with ample original evidence that the early modern slave is not the same as the antique Roman kind, not the *servus* who worked on a *latifundium*, but the premodern type, the *ancilla*, or the household or domestic servant. As Chakravarty elucidates persuasively, the linguistic origin of the two concepts is shared but the valences of bound labour determine the nuances of this connection. These three keywords designate three closely related and intertwined phenomena rather than point to three different stages, from a total absence of freedom to manumission, through which a subject may go through in the temporal and spatial mapping covered by this consistently illuminating book.

This deeply researched study is full of archival treasures. With critical acuity, Chakravarty shows that slavery and servitude both intersect and diverge as socio-cultural and literary phenomena. Where there is a critical line that separates the socio-cultural history of slavery from its equivalent in service, and where such a social picture diverges or coincides with literary fictions, represents a complex, provocative, and fascinating topic, one that is difficult to balance all the time. Yet Chakravarty's analysis finds persuasive solutions to this hermeneutic entanglement. A further complication is added by the introduction of consent (or unconsent at times), a term that is both conceptually and historically part of the cultural and fictional narrative of slavery and service. Again, Chakravarty's probing exploration of this critical intertwining of terms results in original analyses brimming with eloquent power that may well define the course and terms of further research.

The book consists of five chapters, a substantial introduction, and an epilogue that ends the long temporal arc of the argument. The force of Chakravarty's argument comes from the patient and fine-grained philological analysis of the linguistic basis for the English cultural notions of slavery and service in opposition. Etymologies are neither simple nor straightforward; they are layered and circuitous. Chakravarty begins her book with parsing the meanings of the Latin terms *servus*, *servolus*, and *serviliter*, from which the premodern notions of slavery and servitude sprout. The philological picture, however, is not solely English in making. If the premodern English particularity of slavery was not to be considered solely as an insular particularity but within a wider articulation of slavery in premodern Europe, additional etymologies would open-up further meanings along ethnic, imperial, pre-national, and tribal lines. This is the case with the word *sclavus*, which refers to the enslaved Slavs by Charles the Great. From the Charlemagne period, the Latin terms *sclavus* and *Sclavone* became concomitant on the Apennine Peninsula with the concepts that are central to Chakravarty's book: a servant, a child, a person of dark skin. The bustling trade in slaves in the Mediterranean from the twelfth until the fourteenth century saw slaves sold as household servants in markets from Ragusa to Venice to Catalonia. This period of slavery had already been well underway before slavery became "a fundamentally English phenomenon […] built on everyday relations of early modern England, and its foundations rooted in England's universal fiction of free service" (198). "Slavery *was* English," argues Chakravarty (2, emphasis in original); but it was also European, as the classical fictions, to be remodelled in England, indicate.

The argument that service was crucial to the conception of England features as the coherent core of the book. Studied and performed drama features prominently. Ben Jonson's comedy, *Volpone*, and several plays by Shakespeare, from the first comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*, to late romances, like *The Pericles*, and the tragedy, *King Lear*. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* expands the scope of the argument. The Mediterranean, the main marketplace for premodern slaves and household servants in the racial context, is central to the argument that, resourceful though it is, it cannot cover the penumbra of texts in the canon of early English slave fictions. To the large cohort of slaves on stage also belongs Barabas's slave Ithamore from Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*. Purchased by his master on the slave market in the Eastern Mediterranean,

Ithamore is bonded to the Maltese Jew as an executor of his master's destructive plans against Christians.

After the first chapter, which examines the cultural-linguistic idiom of service, the book moves, in the second chapter, to an exploration of "the pedagogy and performance of slavery" (51) in a carefully argued discussion about how the study and performance of the New Roman comedy, especially the widely popular *Andria* by Terence, in which the slave figure is crucial to the plot, shaped the idea of the opposition between slavery and service in grammar-school and university curriculum and dramatic performance. This chapter ends with an excellent analysis of a "catalogue of blackness" in Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae et Latinae, Romanae* & *Brittanicae*. The third chapter continues the exploration of the "philological possibilities and problems" (92), focusing on the servant as the locus of the meeting point of the construction of the early modern family and familial household. Chakravarty elucidates brilliantly the ambiguities with which this association is made in the "affective" (92) fictions in which foreignness, racial subjects (both within and outside the narrative), the proximity of blackness to fairness, and the blackamoor servant-eunuch figure shape the narrative. The fourth chapter examines the indentured servant "as an *alternative* to slavery, and as a function of consent" (133, emphasis in original), and nativity. The literary case study for this point is John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the triangular epic narrative involving the child, servitude, and natality expressed in "the rhetoric of indebtedness and gratitude" (153). The final chapter explores the proportional difference in willingness that determines the level of service in Ariel and Caliban in *The Tempest*; this discussion offers a probing interpretation of the servant Kent in *King Lear*; and ends with an astute analysis of a late seventeenth-century emancipatory narrative of slavery in Massachusetts. The epilogue takes the reader back to Terence and the role his book played in late seventeenth-century writing about the "British Atlantic World" (199), where episodes from *Andria* were transformed into scenes of freedmen.

This intelligent, edgy, wide-ranging, and insightful book makes the reader aware of the profound impact classical city comedy had on the new discourses of slavery and servitude in English literature. In doing so, this book in turn also makes us rethink the larger understanding of what English humanism is about

as a cultural, pedagogical, philological, and imaginative enterprise if a revealing locus of this transformation is slavery.

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