

## The Spenser Review



**Jane Hwang Degenhardt.** *Globalizing Fortune on the Early Modern Stage.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. xiv + 239 pp. ISBN 9780198867920. \$95.00 hardback.

In his sixth-century work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius established both the enduring image and the predominant understanding of Fortune, or Fortuna. From him we get the image of the fickle goddess turning her wheel, which arbitrarily dictates the earthly vicissitudes experienced by all, regardless of status. Boethius's characterization of Fortune initiated a long-lasting theological tradition, active throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, according to which successes or failures experienced in the sublunary world should be held in equal contempt, since they represent only the arbitrary whims of "the wavering lady," as the authors of the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559) call her.<sup>1</sup> By the Renaissance, then, Fortune had accrued a long history of signaling the folly of human ambition. In her fascinating new book, *Globalizing Fortune on the Early Modern Stage*, Jane Hwang Degenhardt identifies an early modern shift in the potential meanings of Fortune and aligns that shift with the rise of global travel, commerce, and colonialism. In the period, as the book's introduction outlines, Fortune begins to be associated in visual culture with the vagaries of sea travel and trade, and Degenhardt identifies and explores engagements with this association in the period's drama. In a number of different ways, *Globalizing Fortune* suggests that the commercial operations of professional theater and global trade ushered in new ways of reading Fortune that saw in her the opportunities as well as the inevitable failures associated with chance, and which granted human subjects a greater degree of agency in the pursuit of their earthly ambitions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lily B. Cambell, ed., *The Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938; repr. Barnes and Noble, 1960), 68.

## The Spenser Review

Chapter One offers readings of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1588/89) and Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1589/90). It suggests that Marlowe's play, through Faustus's "insatiable desire for power and possession" (80), demonstrates the threats of dealing in extremes, broadly speaking, and more particularly dramatizes the danger of adopting rapacious imperial practices. Greene's play, on the other hand, explores the possibilities afforded by a more open, and more collaborative engagement with the new global context. Degenhardt develops this reading in relation to Laura Doyle's concept of "inter-imperiality": an understanding of global imperial history as comprising of interplay between multiple complex cultural and imperial forces, as opposed to the *translatio imperii* understanding dominant in the Renaissance, whereby one pre-eminent (invariably Western) imperial power supplants the next in a linear pattern.<sup>2</sup> The chapter reads *Doctor Faustus* as relying on the former understanding of empire and *Friar Bacon* exhibiting a shift toward the latter.

In Chapter Two the discussion moves on to William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596) and Thomas Heywood's *The Four Prentices of London* (c. 1594), considering in particular the complicated interplay between Fortune and providence as manifested by these plays. Accepting the tremendous risks associated with trade ventures and colonial projects, for instance, might for a Christian represent a misguided submission to the whims of Fortune in the name of earthly profit, yet might also be seen as demonstrations of a Calvinist faith in God's plan. Both of these plays, Degenhardt argues, demonstrate the capacity of theatrical performance to give the impression of events being open-ended and ruled by Fortune; however, in both cases a Providential guiding hand is subtly concealed. This process is racially inflected: in *The Merchant of Venice*, the result of a court case which seems to have any number of possible outcomes is ultimately rigged by the performing Christian against the Jewish plaintiff, and the jeopardy of the crusading adventure undertaken by the brothers in *Four Prentices* is, the audience implicitly knows, illusory, since in the theatrical context in which it was consumed, the play's Muslim antagonists simply could not have been allowed to win.

In Chapter Three Degenhardt reads Thomas Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (c. 1600) and Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West, Part 1* (c. 1600) as plays promoting, in

---

<sup>2</sup> Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

## The Spenser Review

different ways, the idea that Fortune represented opportunity to be seized as much as corrupt worldly goods to be eschewed. Preparing the ground with a discussion of early modern discourse, such as that found in John Dee's *Perfect Arte of Navigation* (1577), that argued for an opportunistic yet morally justifiable engagement with the new global world, Degenhardt shows how *Old Fortunatus* dramatizes the dangers of Fortune but, unlike the medieval morality tradition from which it is derived, does not reject it entirely, showing also in the figure of Ampedo the hazards of the refusal to take speculative risks. Degenhardt reads *The Fair Maid of the West* as using Bess's unimpeachable sexual morality and her emotional fecundity as a means of legitimizing the English accumulation of gold through contemporary privateering expeditions against Spanish ships. The chapter concludes with a reflection upon the way in which both plays, in morally justifying the seizure of opportunity, remain silent on the implications for those who suffer most from the expansion of empire.

The fourth chapter returns to Shakespeare, providing readings of *Hamlet* (1600) and *Pericles* (c. 1608). Degenhardt here explores the analogy of the theatrical production (the product, like a mercantile venture, of collaborative investment) as a ship at the mercy of the "sea" of audience opinion, and thus subject to the same risks and rewards of Fortune as those engaging in global trade. Degenhardt argues again that the plays offer a more optimistic outlook on the risks and possibilities inherent in both sea travel and theatrical ventures by modeling, in the shape of Hamlet's miraculous escape from death at sea and the increasingly improbable storm-swept solutions to Pericles's problems, how a patient and willing faith in fortune can lead to results that look rather like providence at work.

The book closes with a brief afterword, entitled "The Darker Side of Fortune," which reflects on the fact that the opportunities presented by global commerce and travel were of course something quite other than opportunities for the many non-European peoples undermined and exploited by the colonialism that this new formulation of Fortune sought to justify. "Without limits or regulation," Degenhardt notes, "opportunistic approaches to fortune risk encroaching on the fortunes and welfare of others" (208). If I have one criticism of *Globalizing Fortune* it is that this important consideration might have been engaged with on a more sustained basis throughout the study, rather than being saved for an afterword that might strike some readers as an afterthought. That is not to say that the ethical implications of European global

## The Spenser Review

expansion are not discussed elsewhere in the book. The racially determined distribution of Fortune's favor figures in the readings of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Four Prentices of London*, and the chapter on *The Fair Maid of the West* and *Old Fortunatus* explores the plays' engagement with the ethical implications of English acquisitiveness and colonial ambitions; however, there was perhaps room for additional exploration of the darker side of the early modern reimagining of Fortune being identified here.

Aside from this, there were some occasional missed opportunities, or perhaps threads to be picked up by future scholarship in this area. At times Degenhardt reads the plays as championing a willing and resilient embracement of whatever situations Fortune presents; she notes, for example, that *Friar Bacon* "exhorts human beings to respond to fortune with a willingness to accept whatever unfolds, exhibiting trust in the beneficence of a providential outcome and a readiness to seize its blessings with *jouissance*" (89), while *Pericles* "valorizes patient endurance and suffering as key characteristics of virtuous traveler-cum-imperialist" (195). Although it is not named as such in the book, this begins to sound rather a lot like stoicism, which had me wondering where the early modern prominence of thinkers such as Cicero might have figured in the reshaping of the relationship between Fortune, Providence, and opportunity that Degenhardt identifies. While the subject of the work is theater, it would also have been interesting to see some engagement with the *de casibus* tradition, which is not mentioned; *The Mirror for Magistrates*, for example, with its ambiguous handling of the relationship between Fortune and Providence and its situating of England within a *translatio imperii* mode of history, might have provided an illuminating context for the reading of *Faustus* and *Friar Bacon*.

Nevertheless, this book adds much to our understanding of the early modern deployment of Fortune as both a literary trope and a framework for understanding the apparently arbitrary nature of earthly successes and catastrophes. In particular, it offers novel insights into the ways in which early modern England used Fortune to make moral and intellectual sense of its engagement with global trade, travel, and colonialism. Through her alert analysis of the drama and related material, Degenhardt provides a sense of a theatrical culture—and a society more broadly—more open to the embracing of risk and in the process of developing a greater confidence in the capacity of people to dictate their own course. The readings on which this characterization is built are fresh and lively, offering a wealth of new ideas in relation to an interesting

## The Spenser Review

mix of canonical and non-canonical texts that will make this book valuable to scholars and students well beyond those specifically interested in the histories of Fortune and trade.

*Andrew Duxfield*  
*University of Liverpool*