



**Urvashi Chakravarty.** *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 312 pp. ISBN 9780812253658. \$65.00 hardback.

William Harrison’s *Description of England* (1587) declared that slavery could not persist on English soil and Thomas Smith’s *De Republica Anglorum* (1583) asserted that “the nature of our nation is free”.<sup>1</sup> In response to such statements, Urvashi Chakravarty’s *Fictions of Consent* contends that slavery was a “fundamentally English phenomenon, its architecture built on the everyday relations of early modern England” (198). Indeed, Chakravarty’s award-winning debut shows how the mythology of an inherently English freedom (albeit one conceived in terms of universal service) helped to legitimize the enslavement of estranged others. In her introductory interpretation of the 1547 Vagrancy Act, with its short-lived legalization of enslavement for vagrants who refused to serve a master, Chakravarty makes the crucial point that “the only condition that authorized bondage was – ironically – masterlessness” (4). This 1547 Act introduces us to an

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum* (London: Henry Middleton for Gregorie Seton, 1583), 2.24. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12533.0001.001?view=toc>. While *Fictions of Consent* sets out to show that slavery was English, it also demonstrates (and without contradiction) that slavery was border-crossing (3; 68–74; 95–100).

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exemplary “fiction of consent”: in order to avoid the penalty of slavery, the vagrant *must* consent to work. Chakravarty’s probing analysis demystifies the relationship between ideas of freedom and slavery in early modern England by attending to this paradox and others like it.<sup>2</sup> Rather than accomplishing this feat in the self-contained realm of political theory (a worthy but more familiar approach) this book achieves it in the complex field of English everyday life: the schoolroom, the household, the contract, the company, and the stage.

*Fictions of Consent* takes us on two interwoven literary-historical journeys. The first journey begins in the grammar schoolroom, where future Harrisons and Smiths enacted the part of slaves in Roman comedies by Terence and Plautus. These “slave-plays” were foundational to the humanist curriculum, and Chakravarty traces their influence on early modern drama in a series of astute, comparative close readings. The second journey begins in the archives of labor history, with attention paid to contracts of apprenticeship, indenture, manumission, case records, and captivity narratives. Here, Chakravarty identifies precursors to later, transatlantic structures of racialized slavery, and explores their influence on canonical literary texts (William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* among them). The two journeys are interlaced in a complex, intelligent structure that resists easy conclusions.

Chakravarty argues that “early modern fictions of consent were coextensive with, and constitutive of, fictions of race” (7). Across the book she shows how this kind of fiction relied on the strategic indeterminacy of affective and literal bonds, kinship and servitude, mutuality and force. Paternal authority was fused with the authority of the “magister” (slave-master and teacher) in schoolrooms and apprenticeships; parental claims on children were usurped by the indenture contract. The early modern household and family were structured by bonds of service and blood. Such elisions would later go on to underwrite the structures of transatlantic slavery and the racist fictions that were developed around it, as the epilogue makes clear.

*Fictions of Consent*’s historical thinking moves simultaneously backwards and forwards from its base in early modern England: “as we excavate early modern England’s

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<sup>2</sup> In addressing this paradox, Chakravarty joins a distinguished group of scholars including Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982); Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry*, 26.4 (2000), 821–65; and, in early modern studies, Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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genealogies of servitude, we must also unearth its bound futures” (13). Yet, as her pluralization of “genealogies” and “futures” indicates, Chakravarty resists fixing the book’s findings to a single narrative. Instead, she offers a range of continuities between classical Roman, early modern and later conceptions of service, servitude, and slavery. The book “compels us to revise [...] where we look for archives of histories of slavery” (8), putting literary and documentary texts, material artefacts, and theoretical concepts into conversation. Chakravarty’s reorientation of where (and how) to look for these histories responds particularly effectively to slavery’s near-invisibility in sixteenth and early seventeenth-century English archives and its relative absence, beyond metaphors, in literary representations. Chakravarty finds slavery where it has been erased in early modern translations of Roman drama, for example (54); she finds its coercions prefigured in the lacunae of early modern labor contracts (138; 145), and she finds it when she digs beneath English words like “family” to locate key Latin words like *famulus* (Roman household slave).

Throughout the book, but especially in Chapters One and Three, Chakravarty’s analysis is powered by her knowledge of early modern drama; she moves easily across a vast corpus of canonical and less familiar plays. Chapter One opens by taxonomizing five kinds of livery, each of which it then uses in turn to draw out conflicting conceptions of service in the context of Elizabethan actors’ companies and a wide range of plays including Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, John Cooke’s *Greene’s Tu Quoque*, Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, and Ben Jonson’s *The Case is Altered*. These analyses build a fascinating picture of the tensions between servitude and free service that were articulated through livery as vestiges of feudalism met “nascent capitalism” (42) in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. They also initiate the book’s continued investigation into the role of gift-exchange in sustaining fictions of consent, and the ways in which early modern culture tried (and failed) to make servitude legible in visual marks or signs. In Chapter Three, Chakravarty tracks the household servant—including the trope of the “parasite”—from Terence’s *Eunuchus* through Jonson’s *Volpone*, Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling*, *Twelfth Night*, William Heminge’s *The Fatal Contract*, and a number of popular pamphlets. This is a rich seam, and the chapter uses it to argue that the intimate or “familiar” servant embodies the threatening confluence of strangeness and kinship at the heart of the family, which

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was defined in this period by both bonds of service and those of blood. It concludes with brief readings of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors*, and how they associate birth with bodily marks and servitude, in order to suggest that, in the culture of this period, "the stain of slavery works its way into bloodlines of descent" (130).

Chapters Two and Four highlight the book's sustained investigation into the relationship between children and servitude.<sup>3</sup> The child emerges as a focus in Chapter Two's exploration of the schoolroom in which the grammar schoolboy is positioned at once as a future master and the object of his "magister's" violent disciplinary power. Chakravarty foregrounds a philological link: Latin "puer" (boy) and "servus" (slave) are both glossed as "servant," among other things, in John Véron's 1575 *A Dictionary in Latine and English* (52). Servitude and pedagogy were also associated, the chapter goes on to show, in the context of early modern apprenticeships. In these contexts, however, as in the English captivity narratives that Chakravarty goes on to explore, servitude was supposed to be "if not consensual, then revocable" (74). This chapter raises the question of how and for whom slavery came to be seen as an irrevocable condition. It turns in conclusion to the racialization of blackness during this period. Drawing on Imtiaz Habib's archival work on the presence of black servants in England, Chakravarty focusses on *ethiopissa*, the Ethiopian slave-girl in Terence's *Eunuchus*, and points to the contemporary significance of her designation in a translation by Thomas Newman as a "*Blackemore Wench*" (82). In one of the book's arresting archival moments, Chakravarty shows us a manuscript version of the play in which a contemporary reader had inked in the face of *ethiopissa*: "our mystery doodler articulates race as both additive and inherent, intimate and alienated, a vestige of classical president and a symptom of contemporary mores" (85). By the end of the chapter, the schoolroom is positioned as a space in which early modern texts were "untangling racialized servitude" from English "antecedent[s]" (88) in the bodies of English schoolboys and mariners.

The book returns to children and childbearing in Chapter Four, which analyzes the

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<sup>3</sup> This through-line of the book combines a particularly broad range of history and theory including Lynn Enterline, *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, 12.2 (2008), 1–14; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Jennifer L. Morgan, "Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, 22.1 (2018), 1–17.

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continuities between English apprenticeship contracts and Atlantic indentures, highlighting the Privy Council's legal equivocations around the practice of "spiriting" underage children to labor in the colonies (148-9). This chapter goes on to read Milton's Adam and Eve in parallel with colonial indentured laborers, detecting subtle shifts of register that indicate their ambivalence about endless gardening in Paradise (155-8). At this point, Adam and Eve are bound to their "service" (4.420) by what Eve articulates (echoing Satan) as a boundless debt of gratitude. After the Fall, their bondage becomes genealogical. Hence the poem and its principal characters are drawn into articulating an ethics of "anti-natalism" (158-70). Sin, Death, and monstrous generativity are horrifically related. Should Adam and Eve have children just to condemn them to a life of suffering? It seems they must, if only, surprisingly, because abstention is out of the question (164-65). Chakravarty concludes that these debates in *Paradise Lost* "expose the construction of natalist imperatives that accompany and even authorize postlapsarian bondage" (167). Meanwhile moral and somatic darkening are conflated in the language of "tainted[ness]" (168). Chakravarty's complex argument identifies an incipient racial logic in the epic's transition from grateful servitude to blood-based bondage and heritable marks of sin. This chapter may be of particular interest to Spenserians due to its focus on epic. Its argument triangulates with Dennis Britton's reading of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in *Becoming Christian* (2014), which identifies an English protestant racialization of religious identity in the infant Ruddymane's unwashable, blood-stained hands.<sup>4</sup> Together these readings raise compelling questions about the relationship of natality, theology, servitude, and race in the two English poems.

Chapter Five—a highpoint of the book for me—brings Shakespeare's *The Tempest* together with Terence's *Andria* and its depiction of a freedman or "libertus" bound into continuing networks of obligation. It extends Chapter Four's investigation of blurred affective and contractual bonds with the argument that, in a culture held together by the idea of service as "perfect freedom," it is also true that "in freedom lies perfect service" (175). In Terence's *Andria*, the freedman Sosia is obliged to remember his manumission by gratefully serving his former master. Chakravarty connects this tense Roman situation to the paradox of Ariel's "contingent and fundamentally provisional" (180) freedom. If the

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<sup>4</sup> Dennis Austin Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 59–90.

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one who has been “freed” dares to forget his liberty’s origin, as Prospero accuses Ariel of doing, he can be re-enslaved (or in this case, re-imprisoned in a tree). In what sense then was he ever free? And yet, in contrast to the situation of Caliban, Ariel’s relative spatial unboundedness means he is free *enough* to “enact” some “volition” and *thus* to be a perfect servant (184). Chakravarty brings her argument into the Atlantic context, moving towards the end of the seventeenth century, with the case-study of Adam in Boston, Massachusetts, a “negro man” who was threatened with transport and re-enslavement by his former master, John Saffin, on the charge of failing to serve “cheerfully” for a contracted seven years (190–94). But Chakravarty argues that John Saffin promised Adam his liberty in order to secure the kind of service that can only be performed in (anticipation of) freedom. Once again, freedom was made conditional on perfect service, where perfect service was really an obligatory payment for freedom, and the whole shaky structure could be collapsed back into servitude.

The book’s epilogue moves forward in time, showing how the “discourses of affection and mutuality were weaponized” (199) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and American juvenile literature to propagate the racist myth of willing servitude. Ending thus, *Fictions of Consent* gestures towards the kinds of historical continuity that it has opened up for critical race studies. If affective fictions, the idea of the family, and the legal forms of indenture, apprenticeship, and debt mediated service and servitude in the period leading up to England’s large-scale investment in racialized slavery, this may throw light not only on the period of Atlantic slavery, but also on similar structures that were used to maintain white supremacy after abolition and the American Civil War. For early modernists, the epilogue is a reminder of our literary canon’s involvement with later discourses of slavery and race.

*Fictions of Consent* requires us to hold our thinking open to complexity, resisting the allure of simplified narratives. Chakravarty does not intend, for example, to “determine’ the provenance of racialized slavery” (7) nor to settle extensive debates about the relationship between indenture and slavery in the Atlantic world, though she adds much to them. She has redrawn the landscape of early modern English literary studies to reveal the central place of slavery within it, and the ground is shifting in the aftermath. Scholars of classical drama, labor history, critical race studies, and historians of slavery from all periods will want to read this book, as will early modernists across specialisms.

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Its magnitude and importance will become increasingly evident in the conversations it makes possible between its readers.

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