

Robert Henke. *Poverty and Charity in Early Modern Theater and Performance*. Iowa

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PAVEL DRÁBEK

UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Reading through historic documents about and by the great artistic figures of the past, the correspondence, the memoirs, and accounts, there is one frequently recurring theme: poverty. Historiographers often pass it by as it is the art, the ideas, and the achievements that constitute the artists' claim to lasting importance. The material and essentially human side of their living — their needs, debts, and even hunger — often lands on the dark, unseen side of historiography. Robert Henke's *Poverty and Charity in Early Modern Theater and Performance* is a profoundly humanistic book in this respect; poverty is not only an economic by-product (Henke is not a cultural materialist), it is a state of humanity — hence the *charity* of the title. Although not explicitly stated, the project can best be contextualised with the philosophies of humanity and bare life as propounded by Giorgio Agamben, particularly in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (*Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la vita nuda*, 1995) or *The Highest Poverty* (*Altissima povertà: Regole monastiche e forma di vita*, 2011). I would have liked Henke to elaborate on these philosophical and theoretical connections as they provide the epistemic contexts of his approach. Henke's objective and core contribution is a rounded portrayal of poverty or, if you will, the early modern theatre culture of poverty: early modern 'theatergoing might be a particularly propitious way to both conceive and feel the complexity of early modern poverty' (4). Opposing the ideological interpretation with a long tradition, Henke argues in an opening discussion of *King Lear*: 'Early modern "theatricality" ... could do much more in regard to poverty than to dismiss

beggars as fraudulent actors ...; it could shed imaginative insight into different economic and existential conditions, just as the theatrical spectacle of “Poor Tom” causes Lear to see the world differently’ (5).

Judging by its cover, metaphorically, Henke’s book is modest in its aim — ‘Choosing three actor-based theater/performance traditions in addition to Shakespeare’ (5) — but its findings and their consequences for the understanding of early modern theatre are extraordinary and impressive in the ease with which Henke traverses languages and cultures. ‘Each of the five case studies examined here (two playwrights, one literary form, one performance practice, and one type of theater) displays complex and heterogeneous accounts of the poor, going well beyond the neatly censorial view but not limited to uncritical sympathy as well’ (8). In a low key, Henke sets out to consider ‘mainly Italian and English but also German, French, and Latin texts and performance practices’ (6) but this seeming narrowing down is established on a rigorous knowledge of other performance cultures too. In respect to his theme, Henke reminds us that the Spanish, French, or Italian professional theatres were institutionally and legally connected with charities and establishments for the relief of the poor, thus firmly establishing the link between poverty and the transnational theatrical culture. Henke builds upon some existing research into early modern poverty, beggary, and theatre (such as Bronislaw Geremek’s studies of the Italian and French poor or William C. Carroll’s book on poverty in the age of Shakespeare) but paints a transnational image, drawing parallels and links that are truly revelatory. Perhaps because the book’s title does not mention Shakespeare, it has eluded the academic ‘Shakespeare industry’ and hasn’t received the critical attention it more than deserves.

‘The land of Cuccagna, where one is paid for sleeping and imprisoned for working, and where one enjoys the free, unlabored bounty of the earth’ (60) is a revered, chimerical vision of a bountiful paradise — a transnational trope, Henke argues, that kept reappearing in

comedic routines, in extreme dramatic situations, as well as in serious treatises. This is a remarkable finding and was for me one of the revelations of the book. Among others, it provides a profound cultural resonance to Sly's dream in the induction of *The Taming of the Shrew*. On finding the drunken beggar Sly, the lord

devises his fanciful scheme of fine clothing, a sumptuous banquet, attendants, and an Italian play precisely in order to transport Sly to a fictional world: "Would not the beggar then forget himself?" (Induction 1.41). The tantalizing and ephemeral fantasy that the lord perpetrates on Sly resembles the Cuccagna fantasies of the Italian piazza pamphlets. (140)

Henke remains soberly and firmly in touch with the hard evidence of the texts he studies but his observation is suggestive of numerous parallels in theatre history, such as the convention of onstage feasting as a practical and real version of Cuccagna in nineteenth-century theatre used as a crafty trick by actor-playwrights to make the impresario feed the company.

Similarly, the comical routines of eating imaginary food that Henke identifies in sixteenth-century Italian comedy have survived in the comedic tradition until the twentieth century. (I was reminded of Jaromír Pleskot's 1955 film *Obušku, z pytle ven* based on a traditional tale of the Fortunatus kind, featuring Ladislav Pešek as the beggared prodigal who feasts on a long list of delicacies that only he can see.) Henke pragmatically observes that 'The figure of the starving *zanni* became programmed into the DNA of the commedia actors' (9). This simple sentence is a nutshell containing a message with far-reaching consequences.

Henke's longterm fascination with Italian playwright Angelo Beolco, better known as Ruzante (b. 1496–1502, d. 1542) culminates in Chapter 4 'Ruzante: Necessity and Invention' (84–108). Building on Ronnie Ferguson's studies, the chapter establishes this remarkable playwright as a key figure of early modern Italian theatre — 'worthy of Plautus, Shakespeare, and Molière in the pantheon of great actor-writers' (7) — and makes a significant contribution

to the recognition of this neglected figure. I would have wished to get a closer feel of Ruzante's plays: Henke analyses their driving forces, their themes, and characteristics in line with his agenda but the brief (though numerous) extracts whet the appetite but don't satisfy the hunger (mine, at least) to get to know the theatrical flesh and bone of Ruzante's art. Unlike when working with Shakespeare, the classical library of a theatre historian, Henke's discussions of Ruzante, while well argued and convincing, didn't resonate as profoundly with me since I lack the referential framework on which to build the complexity of the understanding.

The magisterial Chapter 5 on 'The Commedia dell'Arte: Poverty at the Margins' (109–35) confirms Henke as a leading expert on the Italian comedy. This chapter probably makes the strongest claim in yoking poverty and performance. While Henke is wary of jumping to conclusion and asserts that 'it is certainly the case that many of the actors *could* have experienced poverty firsthand' (110), the material he summons is telling (citing Domenico Brunì's treatise of 1623):

If I were to tell you about the misadventures that happened to me and the dangers that I underwent in the three days that it took us to get from Bologna to Florence, it might seem like a fairy tale and yet it's true, because in Savena we almost drowned, and in Scarico l'Asino the wind knocked me off my horse, or mule, or whatever. We had to descend the Giogo by foot, and in Florence no one was willing to take me in that evening because I looked too much like a beggar. (111)

This is in many ways emblematic of Henke's book: a sober history of the *conditio humana* of performers and theatre in Europe between 1500 and 1700. Unassuming and stripped of rhetorical bombast, this study is another rigorous probe and can be confidently placed next to Henke's other books that have transformed what we know of early modern transnational theatrical culture.