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# Manly Mechanicals on the Early Modern English Stage

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Ronda Arab. *Manly Mechanicals on the Early Modern English Stage*.

Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2011. 226 pp. \$72.50. ISBN: 978-1-57591-159-5.

Ronda Arab convincingly argues for a discourse of work-centered masculinity in the early modern theater, providing a historically-informed account of the various types of masculinities of crafts- and tradesmen that populated the Renaissance stage from roughly 1590 to 1610. Furthermore, her study restores nuance to critical conversations about masculinity and reminds us that artisanal and craft labor on the early modern stage is worthy of critical attention. Stage representations of laboring men — who excite, please, and sometimes frighten the audience and who could defy, challenge, and deconstruct class categories — underscore that their manliness matters and that they are vital members of the English nation.

In her introduction, Arab considers what constituted physically laboring male bodies as manly bodies, arguing that the stage was an important site for “discursive negotiation over the meanings and value of labor and laboring bodies” (27). Representations of the vital, vigorous masculinity of laboring men on stage challenged aristocratic or elite masculinities that embodied the ideal of the closed, controlled body. Arab argues that it was the theater’s exhibition of laboring bodies on stage — which was part of the tradition of Corpus Christi guild theater of the late medieval period — that shaped ideologies of dignified and productive work in post-Reformation society. Such ideologies also influenced ideas about the theater, as authorities often saw actors as having eschewed manual work for play.

Arab’s succinct opening two chapters, large portions of which were published elsewhere prior to this book’s publication, focus on the vigorous and productive male body and the dangerous male body, respectively. The main focus of chapter 1 is on Dekker’s *Shoemaker’s Holiday*, and Arab shows how this play celebrates the commercially productive working man in his household workshop. Productive work carried out by a vigorous body like that of Simon Eyre defines English masculinity and becomes the foundation for the English nation. Arab demonstrates

how the play satirizes the excesses and effeminacy of elite masculinities and reveals anxieties associated with gender, status, and work. In chapter 2, Arab explores the fears of laborer riots during the 1590s, and using Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* as her prooftext (with brief forays into *Life and Death of Jack Straw* and *Sir Thomas More*), she shows how the patriotic artisan rebels led by Jack Cade configure a masculinity that frightens and excites, and the violent physicality of the artisan rebels is unmatched by any aristocratic character in the play. Furthermore, she suggests that these dangerous bodies attempting to destroy the social order with their artisan skills and tools are aesthetically appealing and exciting to watch.

The final two chapters are the longest and strongest in the book, and they focus on the sexualized male body and the insufficiently masculine body, respectively. Chapter 3 provides astute close readings of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labour's Lost* in the context of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, which sought to secure the exclusive nature of elite masculinity. Arab argues that in both plays, the distinctions that separate high from low masculinity are undermined, and gender is revealed to be performative rather than essential. The working man's body is sexualized in these plays and proves to be a threat to elite women and men alike. She calls attention to the "artisanal civil sexuality" that is realized in Nick Bottom and shows "that men of low status can embody even the most socially elite models of masculine behavior" (118, 94). Chapter 4, with its focus on Beaumont's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Dekker and Middleton's *Honest Whore*, and Marston's *Eastward Ho*, provides wide-ranging close readings that examine early modern goods and commercial activity in relation to changing codes of masculinity and the ambiguous boundaries between social groups in the early seventeenth century. The commercial theater stages the shift in the work of the artisan class from manufacture to purely trade and selling, and these satiric city comedies express anxiety about a less-physically demanding (and less dangerous or exciting) form of masculinity embodied in the shopkeeper's feminized and compromised body.

In her thought-provoking concluding chapter, Arab examines how theater men and laboring men shared significant identity overlap by pointing to how the commercial theater emerged out of the world of craft and trade labor. The work of theater men in Renaissance England was a new type of labor — creative labor — and Arab makes the case that the emasculating dependence on the market — pleasing customers to make a living — was central to both the stage player and the shopkeeper.

*Manly Mechanicals on the Early Modern English Stage* is a rejoinder to critical scholarship that simplifies or ignores the laboring classes and regards the working man as merely a source of laughter. The book leaves unanswered how tragedy constructed working bodies in the period, and I was left with questions about how exactly the laboring man was represented on stage in the three decades leading to the closing of the public theaters in 1642. The fascinating 1647 illustration of tradesmen that graces the book's cover — which includes images of laboring men including the confectioner, box maker, soap boiler, glover, and button maker — deserves discussion and could offer a way to engage plays of these later decades.

Nonetheless, Arab's study opens up a place for working men in critical conversations about Renaissance masculinity, incisively showing how the laboring classes were integral to English theatrical tradition and how they challenged elite forms of masculinity.

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