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0521844053 - Service and Dependency in Shakespeare's Plays

Judith Weil

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SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

This is an unusual study of the nature of service and other types of dependency and patronage in Shakespeare's drama. By considering the close associations of service with childhood or youth, marriage and friendship, Judith Weil sheds new light on social practice and dramatic action. Approached as dynamic explorations of a familiar custom, the plays are shown to demonstrate a surprising consciousness of obligations and a fascination with how dependants actively change each other. They help us understand why early modern people may have found service both frightening and enabling. Attentive to a range of historical sources and to social and cultural issues, Weil also emphasizes the linguistic ambiguities created by service relationships and their rich potential for interpretation on the stage. The book presents close readings of dramatic sequences in twelve plays, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *King Lear*.

JUDITH WEIL has recently retired from the post of Professor of English at the University of Manitoba. Co-editor, with her husband Herbert Weil, of *The First Part of King Henry IV* (Cambridge, 1997), she has published widely on Shakespeare and Renaissance drama, including essays in *Marlowe, History and Sexuality: New Critical Essays on Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Paul Whitfield White; *The Female Tragic Hero in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Naomi Conn Liebler; and *Approaches to Teaching English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Karen Bamford and Alexander Leggatt.

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For Herb Weil

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Preface

This book began with a question asked by students in a seminar about Women in the Renaissance. “Why were servants so prominent?” they wondered, reflecting on the anonymous tragedy *Arden of Feversham* and on the poems of Isabella Whitney. They belonged, as does much of the book, to an era of scholarship which encouraged close scrutiny of subordinate actions.

Without the enthusiastic support of students and colleagues at the University of Manitoba, I could never have developed this project: Judith Owens criticized papers and shared research discoveries; John Rempel sent reading lists; George Toles made me take psychological criticism more seriously. For challenging arguments and indispensable information I would also like to thank Adam Muller, Karen Ogden, Arlene Young, Terry Ogden, Jonah Corne, Kathleen Darlington, and Nicola Woolff. Sociologists Charlene Thacker and Raymond Currie introduced me to connections between service and slavery by suggesting studies on Brazil and South Africa.

I am grateful to the Shakespeare Association of America for inviting me to chair a seminar on “Slavery in Renaissance Drama”; strong contributions by seminar members opened up a number of exciting new perspectives. I am also much in debt to Lynne Magnusson and Edward McGee for asking me to present a paper to the Elizabethan Theatre Conference exploring my approach. At a crucial early stage, criticism of the project by Scott Macmillin made it seem more promising than I had thought possible. For happy exchanges of ideas and for their generosity in publishing my essays on related matters I would like to thank Michael Hattaway, Naomi Conn Liebler, and Michael Neill.

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For permission to reprint a revised version of material in “Household stuff’: Maestrie and Service in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” published in *Elizabethan Theatre XIV*, ed. A. L. Magnusson and C. E. McGee, I wish to thank the P. D. Meany Company, Toronto, Ontario.

Permission to reprint a selection from Di Brandt, *Questions i asked my mother* (1987) has been granted by the Turnstone Press Ltd., Winnipeg, Manitoba.

This book has been produced through years of watching and teaching Shakespeare’s plays and through dialogue with the fine company of Shakespeareans. I have singled out one of them in my dedication.