Nina Levine, *Practicing the City: Early Modern London on Stage*, paperback, 200 pages, New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. ISBN 9780823267873, £23.99.

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All the world's a stage and London, in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century, was a stage for, and a stage of, an emergent credit economy, involving both indigenous inhabitants and immigrants, which the theatre dramatized and debated, offering audiences a means with which to practise, imaginatively, intellectually, intensely and playfully, the developing forms of association and negotiation in the burgeoning commercial city. Nina Levine's book "considers how local residents conceptualized and experienced an increasingly diverse metropolis and how the local theater worked to mediate this experience" (3). In Ben Jonson's first play with a London setting, *Every Man Out of His Humour* (first performed 1599), Cordatus asks the audience "to presuppose the stage the middle aisle in Paul's" (3.1.2-3). Levine takes this as her starting-point and puts the general question that runs through her study: "what does it mean to *presuppose* that the stage is the city?" (1). *Every Man Out* suggests that "by taking the city as its subject, the stage introduced a new dimension into theatrical experience, opening up a reflexive space between the city and stage in the here-and-now of performance" in which "Londoners might begin to 'practice' ['practise' in British English] the city" (2).

Pursuing this idea of a new dimension of theatrical experience in which to practise the city, Levine relates five plays that engage with London life to contemporaneous discourses and activities, linking Shakespeare's *1* and *2 Henry*

IV to the credit economy; *Sir Thomas More* to the collaborative writing which generated it; William Haughton's *Englishmen for My Money* (1598) to teach-yourself language manuals for merchants; and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (1611) to the plague mortality bills.

Crucial to the commercial references in the two *Henry IV* plays, in Levine's perspective, is the real-life legal wrangle known as Slade's Case, which ran from 1595 at the Devon Assizes to the Exchequer Chamber in 1597 and then through both the Exchequer Chamber and the King's Bench until the delivery of a final decision in 1602. The argument was about whether an oral agreement (in this case to buy grain) included the promise to pay for it, even if that promise was not made explicit. The ultimate judgement was that a bargain, even without an explicit promise, was a legally binding contract for performance or payment because any such bargain included an *assumpsit*, in which one of the parties to the contract assumed, in the sense of taking on, the obligation to pay. As the great jurist Edward Coke declared: "every contract executory imports in itself an *assumpsit*, for when one agrees to pay money, or to deliver any thing, thereby he assumes or promises to pay" (qtd Levine 41).

In *1 Henry IV*, Hal embodies an *assumpsit* approach when he tells Douglas: "It is the Prince of Wales that threatens thee, / Who never promiseth but he means to pay" (5.3.42-3, RSC Shakespeare 2007). And the Prince does, in a range of situations, pay what he promises. The play, toggling between timezones and social spheres, "transport[s] a Lancastrian prince into the familiar workaday world of early modern London, a world of clinking pewter, inflated prices and unpaid bills" (26). In *1 Henry IV*, Hal moves "from prodigal to chivalric merchant" in a way that "celebrates the benefits of turning economic practices to political use" (39); but "the betrayals and bad faith of *2 Henry IV* warn of the dangers, especially when credit is extended solely on the basis of a gentleman's, or a prince's, word" (39). The most lethal example of this danger is in 4.1. when the rebel lords, Mowbray, Westmorland and the Archbishop of York, trust John's "princely word" (4.1.301, RSC Shakespeare 2007) and disperse their army, after which John promptly arrests them for capital treason on the grounds that, while he will keep his promise to "redress [their] grievances" (4.1.351), he made no promise to give them their freedom or lives and they have placed themselves outside the realm of honour and justice: when Mowbray asks "Is this proceeding just and honourable?", Prince John remorselessly replies: "Is your assembly so?" (4.1.348-9).

The ending of *2 Henry IV*, which unfolds in the heart of London, is more complex: there is a sense in which the new-crowned Henry V makes good on the promise he gave in *1 Henry IV* when, as Prince Hal, he plays his father the King and Falstaff plays Hal and pleads for the non-banishment of Hal's fat friend whose girth encompasses the globe, contains multitudes: "banish plump Jack, and banish all the world". Hal replies: "I do, I will." (2.4.350-1) – although here Hal is playing a role in an impromptu mini-play within the main play, so the status of his promise is questionable. In other respects, Hal might be said, in an *assumpsit* perspective, to have made implicit promises to Falstaff on which he reneges, reaffirming the privileges of dynastic succession, which empower him to cancel any supposed debt to his raffish former companions, over the credit

practices of the late sixteenth century which, in theory, treated all parties to a contract as equals. Those practices are further subordinated when Hostess Quickly and Doll Tearsheet, whom Levine dubs "[t]he entrepreneurial women", "are suddenly criminalized" (45). It is significant that Prince John, who tricked the rebels into disarming, approves of all these actions: "I like this fair proceeding of the king's" (5.5.8).

The ending of *2 Henry IV* has, however, always caused critical disquiet and, Levine suggests, its attempt to banish the developing credit economy of late sixteenth-century London is offset by its Epilogue, a "liminal space" (46) between theatre and reality that reintroduces the language of contract, casting the speaker in the role of debtor and the audience as creditors, with the former offering the play that has just been performed as payment for a previous "displeasing play" (5.5.101). Taken as a whole, the *Henry IV* plays, Levine asserts, invite their audiences "to imagine princes together with themselves as subject to a shared set of economic and political relations even as it asks them to reconsider the hazards and gains of those obligations" and also "reminds them that performance, in all its meanings, theatrical as well as legal, is the medium within which the city's population makes good on its credit, binding itself in networks of obligation that extend from the past into the present and future" (49).

While the geographical reach of the *Henry V* plays extends well beyond London, though significantly centred there, *Sir Thomas More* tells "a London story", "bounded by a local geography that extends from Cheapside and St. Martin's le Grand to the Guildhall" and More's Chelsea home (50). Incorporating references to "at least twenty different city locations", it provides "an insider's guide to the city's streets and taverns" and puts London's citizens centre stage: "[a]rtisans, apprentices, servingmen, the Lord Mayor, London recorder, aldermen, local magistrates, sheriffs, and More's own household" (50). But its opening could incite xenophobia: it "provocatively returns to the ground zero of sixteenth-century London's exclusionary politics, the May Day riots of 1517, when hundreds of citizens and apprentices took to the streets in violent attacks on the city's foreign population" (50). The Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, found this scene potentially inflammatory, for he wrote on the first page of the manuscript: "*Leave out the insurrection wholly and the cause thereof*" (qtd Levine 51). Without wanting "to exonerate the violent riot at the play's center" or to deny the negative aspects of these "exclusionary politics" (50), Levine argues that the element of "protest" (51) links the citizen uprising with More's own story and that "protest", like credit, entails "relations across difference within the metropolis" (52).

"[R]elations across difference" are also evident in the very manuscript of *Sir Thomas More*, which was the product of divers hands, including perhaps Shakespeare's: it is, as Levine says, the "most complex record of theatrical collaboration" surviving from the period (53). She focuses on the "striking convergence of collaborative form and civic content" in *Sir Thomas More* as "a basis for considering homologies between theatrical practices and networks of urban practice" (54). In Levine's view, *Sir Thomas More* is "an especially resonant example of collaborative exchange" because:

> the possibilities for collaborative labor play out in both form and content, as shared writing comes together with a staging of civic unrest to open up multiple levels of engagement – between playwriting and protest, authorship and authority, theater and politics, and citizens and aliens. (54).

Sir Thomas More does not, however, idealize collaborative activity: the play "enacts, even as it is constituted by, an ongoing circulation of collaborative practices marked by conflicts, confusions, and the messiness of actual labour" and all of these adumbrate "a model for collective belonging" that is less about "consolidating identity" than "about acknowledging and mediating the plurality of metropolitan life" (54).

William Haughton's *Englishmen for My Money or A Woman Will Have Her Will* concerns Pisaro, a Portuguese merchant and moneylender living in London who wants his three half-English daughters, Laurentia, Marina, and Mathea, to marry three wealthy foreigners: the Frenchman Delion, the Italian Alaro and the Dutchman Vandal. The young ladies, however, favour and finally secure their three English suitors: Harvey, Heigham, and Walgrave. As Levine points out, Haughton's plot draws on ancient Roman New Comedy but innovatively sets it "within the walls of London, in contemporary locations that extend from Pisaro's neighbourhood of Crutched Friars near Tower Hill to the Royal Exchange and Paul's Walk" (79). Haughton's play stands out for two further reasons: as "the earliest surviving comedy of contemporary London life" and for "its exuberant xenophobia" (79), the latter especially evident in its unrepentant "mimicry of national stereotypes and vernaculars" (80). Levine identifies this "persistent mockery of foreign tongues" as "central to [the play's] strategy of containing the threat of the alien without sacrificing the city's commercial investments" (81). In a dilemma familiar then as today, there was a conflict between the desire to limit the number of "foreigners" and the need to negotiate with them to profit by international trade. This need led to a proliferation of teach-yourself books designed to help London citizens learn foreign languages, especially French; these books focused on trade and took the form of dialogues. Claudius Hollyband's *The French Schoolmaster* (1573) developed this kind of manual further by providing "an extended dialogue sequence set not in the foreign locales typical of the genre but in a contemporary London vividly rendered with local detail and civic pride" (91) – though one from which, in Hollyband's depiction, foreigners were absent. "With the city at its center, *The French Schoolmaster* is as much a primer on contemporary London culture as it is on the French tongue" (92).

Englishmen for My Money, in "its fascination with foreign tongues, city locales, and linguistic performances"(99), has key resemblances to Hollyband's language manuals, modelling "the contradictions that come from trading in tongues" (107). The play mocks foreign accents while showing that English gentlemen – the suitors of Pisaro's daughters – must imitate the foreign suitors in order to defeat them. Thus, it reinstates "strangeness within the English gentlemen themselves" and "in the process disrupt[s] distinctions between native and foreign" (107).

In *The Roaring Girl*, Middleton and Dekker bring a real person, Mary Frith of Bankside, on to the stage and engage with a plurality of temporal modes, of

experiences of time. A different and heightened awareness of time was produced, Levine argues, by the regular mortality bills numbering those dead from plague and this may have carried over into the audience experience of *The Roaring Girl*. The play offers "strikingly contradictory attitudes toward commercial time" (121), or "merchant's time" (109). It links "consumer desire", the wish to possess commodities, with the metonymies of "merchant's time": "the exchange bell (2.1.392) announcing the closing of business for the midday meal"; "the clock at Savoy (3.1.29) sounding the time of Laxton's assignation with Moll in Gray's Inn Fields"; and "Sir Alexander's much-prized German watch" (122). The failure of this watch to keep time, however, is "playfully proleptic, an explanation of Sir Alexander's failure to keep up with his son's counter-plotting and a critique of merchant's time itself, especially its death-defying attempts to control future as well as current markets" (123).

The conclusion of *The Roaring Girl* may seem to move from commercial time "to a timeless universe of marriage and reconciliation" where "the jostling marketplace reverts to rural community" (124); but "the play's intrigue plotting continues to resist, if not discredit, any endorsement of utopian harmony" (125), making such harmony and "market-driven intrigue" look "rather like two sides of the same coin, mutually supportive and complicit in the business of urban commerce" (125).

Moll herself remains an outsider at the end of *The Roaring Girl*, refusing to resolve not only "questions of gender identity" – this irresolution is now a critical commonplace, as Levine acknowledges – but also "the temporal oppositions between future-directed commerce and retrospective fantasy" (127). Moreover, Moll's "double status as stage persona and historical personage" highlights a slippage between, not only the real and the fictive, but also "the here-and-now of the present performance and the then-and-there of pasts and futures unfolding outside the bounded space of the [theatre] walls" (127). This division between "now" and "then" in the performances of *The Roaring Girl* is "in some sense homologous to the temporal work of the mortality bills" of plague deaths (131); both unite their audiences in a present awareness of a past that is, in the moment of apprehending it, slipping away: the plague victims, like theatrical performances, are marked as past in the very moment their present significance unfolds to those reading the mortality bills or watching a play in the theatre. But whereas the mortality bills, serving the interests of both commerce and social control, "quantify the present and past so that futures might be calculated and predicted", the performance of *The Roaring Girl* "suggests yet another order of futurity, one that opens out to a recursive logic of repetition, variation, and invention even within the sequential trajectories of death and commerce" (132). The play's "proliferating performances", which are at the same time "'taking place' and 'passing away' to appear elsewhere", "give the slip to temporal and spatial boundaries, evading both the promise of theatrical self-presence and the threat of finitude and death within the city" (136-7). But finitude and death are not so easy for the players and spectators who give and watch the performances to evade: as Sir Walter Ralegh's poem comparing life to a "short Comedy" concludes, "Only we dye in earnest, that's no Jest" (Gardner 1971, 35): and in

times of plague, "the dreadful rhythm marked out by the mortality bills continues to haunt the theater" (137).

Instead of a conclusion, Levine finally offers, appropriately for her theme, an "Epilogue", a liminal space through which the reader moves out of the book into further reflection on its argument and examples. As in her introduction, she takes up a Ben Jonson play, *The Staple of News*, and especially the paratextual address "To the Readers" in the 1631 edition of the play, which seems to seek to control audience responses, thus effectively acknowledging that the theatre depends on its spectators for its very existence. Returning to Cordatus' request in Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour* "to presuppose the stage the middle aisle in Paul's" (3.1.2-3), which Levine cited in her introduction (1) and which generated the overall question her study has pursued, she declares that "[i]n asking audiences 'to presuppose' that the stage is the city, early modern plays about London give powerful form to theater's democratizing possibilities"; their "nexus of theatrical form *and* explicitly urban subject matter […] allows city spectators […] unusual license and liberty" (145). Levine cites Jacques Rancière's claim, in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), that the "collective power" of spectators does not emerge from their identity as "a collective body" or "from some specific form of interactivity" but from "the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way" (qtd Levine 147); in Levine's view, this points to "the possibility that in its urban turn the early modern stage enabled spectators to engage in the freedom of urban plurality, simultaneously identifying with and distancing themselves from each other as well as from the events on stage" (147).

Levine's argument depends heavily on the assumption of homologies between diverse discourses and modes of representation, an assumption inherited from New Historicism with its rejection of the causal assumptions of Old Historicism: rather than x causing y, x and y are held to be sufficiently alike for a relationship, whose exact nature is undefined, to be asserted. She is also fond of what we might characterize as an "even as" mode of argument, a legacy of deconstruction's stress on the way a text inevitably undermines its own premises; such a mode claims that "even as" a play seems to take one position, it is simultaneously undermining it or offering an alternative position. For example, she says: "even as *Englishmen for My Money* trades in national stereotypes, it also troubles that trade by confounding normative distinctions between English and aliens" (100). It is noticeable as well that in some of her specific claims, Levine starts in provisional mode, employing "may" as a modal verb to express possibility rather than certainty – for instance, "the more radical intervention of mortality bills within the theater *may* have been to complicate the temporal experience of performance itself" (112, italics added) – but soon slides into declarative assertions. For all the fascination of the dramatic texts Levine selects and the discourses with which she links them, the conceptual looseness in her homological and "even as" assumptions, and the overreaching in her initially provisional assertions, mean that there are moments, within the richly packed 148 pages of her main text, which call to mind the displays of a street magician who offers plausible illusions rather than proof. But the performance is worth watching and could generate more substantial discoveries.

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