



Poverty and Charity in Early Modern Theater and Performance (Studies Theatre Hist & Culture)

Robert Henke

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Whereas previous studies of poverty and early modern theatre have concentrated on England and the criminal rogue, *Poverty and Charity in Early Modern Theatre and Performance* takes a transnational approach, which reveals a greater range of attitudes and charitable practices regarding the poor than state poor laws and rogue books suggest. Close study of German and Latin beggar catalogues, popular songs performed in Italian piazzas, the Paduan actor-playwright Ruzante, the commedia dell'arte in both Italy and France, and Shakespeare demonstrate how early modern theatre and performance could reveal the gap between official policy and actual practices regarding the poor.

The actor-based theatre and performance traditions examined in this study, which persistently explore felt connections between the itinerant actor and the vagabond beggar, evoke the poor through complex and variegated forms of imagination, thought, and feeling. Early modern theatre does not simply reflect the social ills of hunger, poverty, and degradation, but works them through the forms of poverty, involving displacement, condensation, exaggeration, projection, fictionalization, and marginalization. As the critical mass of medieval charity was put into question, the beggar-almsgiver encounter became more like a performance. But it was not a performance whose script was prewritten as the inevitable exposure of the dissembling beggar. Just as people's attitudes toward the poor could rapidly change from skepticism to sympathy during famines and times of acute need, fictions of performance such as Edgar's dazzling impersonation of a mad beggar in Shakespeare's *King Lear* could prompt responses of sympathy and even radical calls for economic redistribution.

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