

6-12-2017

# The Dynamics of Inheritance on the Shakespearean Stage / Michelle M. Dowd

Mary Learner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mary Learner (2017) "The Dynamics of Inheritance on the Shakespearean Stage / Michelle M. Dowd," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 12 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Modern Culture by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

**Michelle M. Dowd. *The Dynamics of Inheritance on the Shakespearean Stage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 304 pp.**

Reviewed by MARY LEARNER

Michelle M. Dowd's *The Dynamics of Inheritance on the Shakespearean Stage* uncovers spatial dimensions of inheritance as represented in early modern drama. Perhaps more importantly, her well-researched study challenges preconceived notions about patrilineage as a strictly regulating force in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Offering attentive readings of an array of texts, Dowd's exceptional book provides a new perspective on inheritance during a time of socioeconomic upheaval, a time that necessitated navigating legal and societal restrictions to find spaces of flexibility.

Distinctive to Dowd's approach to inheritance is her use of spatial theory to read moments of agency and mobility in proto-capitalist England. By investigating how drama stages the instabilities of succession, Dowd reveals ways that playwrights reimagine primogeniture. Dowd relies on Michel de Certeau to consider representations of space in various registers, including spatial rhetoric within the plays, the interactions between characters onstage, the physical position of the audience, the movement of goods, and the presence (or absence) of heirs. Through her capacious usage of spatial theory, Dowd expands work by scholars who have focused on geographical space, and situates her scholarship as engaging with research on early modern kinship and socio-economic dynamics.

In Chapter 1, Dowd summarizes the legal underpinnings of patrilineage. She uses historical material, such as genealogies, surveying manuals, estate maps, laws on male primogeniture, and wills to establish customary inheritance practices. She also points to ambiguities within the system, including variables resulting from "personality, individual agency, and affective attachments" that prove essential to her interpretations (65). Although primogeniture laws were designed to maintain stability, the idiosyncrasies of cases demanded more flexibility in reality. For Dowd, this legal elasticity was compounded by economic developments that led to more circulating property, urban migration, individual travel, and social mobility that made inheritance less straightforward. She claims that these changes took place within a condensed amount of time, beginning in the late sixteenth century and ending by the Restoration. At the heart of patrilineage during this window, therefore, is a paradox: a "socio-spatial tension" within the desire for fixity and continuity, which is a desire that ironically contributes to a need for increased mobility (64).

Subsequent chapters are organized by problems of inheritance. Dowd focuses on figures who disrupt traditional lineage, paying particular attention to widows, prodigal sons, heiresses, and bachelors. Chapter 2 turns to John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* to explore the effects of a widow's remarriage. Dowd persuasively argues that by keeping the Duchess's sexual reproduction within an

## Reviews

illicit marriage unseen and offstage, Webster creates a space for female agency to disrupt patrilineage. By comparing Webster's text to his source material, William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure*, Dowd observes that the play alters the ending so that the Duchess's son with Antonio, her steward and clandestine husband, inherits the dukedom, rather than the son from her first marriage. Webster's tragedy also amends *The Palace* by leaving the Duchess's sexuality offstage and visually inaccessible. A "search for clarity" requires that all viewing the action must reassemble "synecdochal fragments" to notice that the duchess upsets the expected order of inheritance (90, 99). Dowd qualifies this agency: although the spatial dynamics of privacy facilitate her desires and allow an alternative line of inheritance, by leaving the Duchess's challenges to patrilineage unstaged, the full extent of her authority remains indeterminable. If Dowd's reading echoes previous scholarship about the Duchess's confinement, sexuality, and inscrutability, her emphasis on the incongruities of her eldest illicit child as inheritor of the duchy is fresh and exciting, drawing attention to this instance of aberrant patrilineage, one which is easy to overlook.

Chapter 3 marks a shift in Dowd's book away from marriage as a changing force to the significance of trade, travel, and mobility, starting with prodigal sons. Dowd concentrates on profligates in lesser known plays such as John Fletcher's *Monsieur Thomas*, Thomas Heywood's *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody, Part II* and *The English Traveller*, and frames these plays with historical context to account for the unexpected economic benefits of prodigality. The late sixteenth century saw two social phenomena related to the risk of mishandling wealth that affected aristocratic heirs: luxury goods were readily available in London, resulting in higher costs for household maintenance and increased reliance on credit; simultaneously, gentlemen were becoming involved with foreign trade and mercantile ventures. Profligate sons travel abroad in *Monsieur Thomas* and *If You Know Not Me*, but their itinerancy provides an opportunity for the male heirs to redeem their social position and serve an educational purpose. Dowd's interpretation of *The English Traveller* is especially fascinating since its focus is a son who has metaphorically strayed, though still physically at home, and her reading emphasizes Young Lionel's comedic plot over Young Geraldine's tragic one, which has received more critical attention in previous scholarship.

In Chapter 4, Dowd focuses on the problem of missing male issue in William Shakespeare and George Wilkins's *Pericles*, analyzing the play's indebtedness to prose romances with its episodic structure and multiple settings, as well as its prominence of mobile heiresses. Dowd examines how *Pericles* mourns his childlessness in relation to diary entries about barrenness within marriage and expressions of grief after the death of a child. She ultimately claims that *Pericles* provides a traditional perspective on inheritance by downplaying episodic scenes that undermine typical patrilineage, such as Marina's presence in a brothel. Scenes set in "insular, melancholic spaces" suspend time and further the plot, but Dowd suggests that the conclusion of the play reveals that these spaces are not conducive to the linear narrative of patrilineage. Transgressive scenes are excluded from the final speeches in the play, effectively erasing disjunctions from the story and reaffirming patriarchal authority (179).

## Reviews

Finally, Chapter 5 investigates a different isolated space in two of Ben Jonson's plays featuring childless misers. *Volpone* and *Epicene* present insular households of bachelors located in the midst of economic city centers. In both comedies, Dowd sees resonances with accounts of aristocrats migrating to London to form relationships with other men in order to strengthen their credit, only with the intention of maintaining their family's inheritance. But the analogous spatial dynamics and representations of male alliances are where the similitude between the plays ends. Dowd makes a strong case that Jonson teases out nuances of potential outcomes of inheritance within an urban setting through the differences between the plays. *Volpone* attempts to accumulate wealth with the help of Mosca, his servant, but without any intention to perpetuate his legacy. This unidirectional movement of goods breaks norms of patrilineage since it has no sense of futurity. *Epicene*, however, provides a different model: Morose remains within his house due to his dislike for the bustling noise of London, unlike machinating *Volpone* who must remain inside to maintain the illusion of being ill. Unlike *Volpone*, Morose does desire to marry and produce heirs, but only to ruin his nephew's claim to inherit. *Epicene* provides a more conservative depiction with its main character who longs to return to an aristocratic system of absolute maintenance of a country house that includes controlled circulation of individuals and goods within an enclosed space. The connections Dowd draws between these two plays are striking, and expanding this argument to other plays outside of Jonson's canon would be a fruitful direction to think more about male alliances and subversions of patrilineage.

Overall Dowd's treatment of inheritance is thorough and encompassing, especially in the breadth of historical and literary texts and the complex theoretical framework that she includes. Brief sections on *King Lear* nicely bookend her middle chapters. Although this book is less interested in royal succession, with Shakespeare's *Lear* and Nahum Tate's revision, she effectively satisfies the near-requisite analyses of the play that is perhaps the quintessential early modern text associated with failed inheritance. And if Dowd's spatial approach is unclear in places of her analysis throughout the book, this seems only due to the ambitious variety of registers of space that she includes, and does not detract from scope of her project. Indeed, the messiness of spatiality parallels the "messy contradictions" that were integral to the lived experience of inheritance (256).

Dowd's analyses would be stimulating for any scholar of early modern drama, family dynamics, or economic history, and her focus on the metaphorical and literal spatial components of drama are evocative regardless of specific interest. Particularly compelling is the queering of kinship that emerges from studying mobility within these spatial complexities. Dowd resists the heteronormative narratives that have often become attached to early modern patrilineage and observes a range of practices that broaden the purview of relationship dynamics. Most excitingly, this book provides a model for a theoretical approach that relies on spatial thinking—including rhetoric, staging, audience position—which could translate to other studies. Moreover, this thought-provoking book reminds us of the fascinating complexity and centrality of patrilineage in early modern life, and that the imaginative spaces uniquely made

## Reviews

possible through drama and performance are rich locations to access the intricacies of inheritance.

---

**Mary Learner** is a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on early modern drama, women's textualities, and book history.