“The shore gang”: *Chance* and the Ethics of Work

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The sub-title of *Chance* declares it to be “A Tale in Two Parts.”¹ The novel is a *fabula duplex* in ways more subtle and complex than merely in its overtly bi-partite form: this is a novel full of dichotomies that provide deeply thematic as well as formal structures. A choice between two options even characterized its author’s deliberations over the novel’s direction, as he reveals in his “Author’s Note”:

> like a sanguine oarsman setting forth in the early morning I came very soon to a fork in the stream and found it necessary to pause and reflect seriously on the direction I would take. … My sympathies being equally divided and the two forces being equal it is perfectly obvious that nothing but mere chance influenced my decision in the end. (vii)

This essay will consider the topic of work, which features in two of the novel’s dichotomies – work and leisure, and work on shore versus work at sea – in order to demonstrate that *Chance* is strongly concerned with the ethics of working life, and that this concern reflects Conrad’s ambitious attempt to anatomize British society at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Both of these dichotomies are presented at the novel’s opening, in which a confrontation between Charles Powell and a waiter in a riverside inn on the Thames estuary is witnessed by the novel’s frame narrator, as well as one of its many internal narrators, Marlow. Powell, a yachtsman, addresses the waiter as “steward,” revealing him also to be a sailor: for Powell, the sea has provided work as well as leisure. “Presently,” we are told, Powell “had occasion to reprove that same waiter for the slovenly

¹ The serial version of *Chance* in the *New York Herald* (January-June 1912) was sub-titled *An Episodic Tale, with Comments*. The sub-titles of the two versions clearly indicate a transition from the serial’s looser structure and discursive content to the more thematically and formally disciplined book version. See also Jones (2009).
manner in which the dinner was served.” He does so “with considerable energy” before addressing Marlow and the frame narrator:

“If we at sea,” he declared, “went about our work as people ashore high and low go about theirs we should never make a living. No one would employ us. And moreover no ship navigated and sailed in the happy-go-lucky manner people conduct their business on shore would ever arrive into port.”

(3-4)

Powell expands with a sweeping condemnation of all trades and professions that do not involve the sea:

No one seemed to take any proper pride in his work: from plumbers who were simply thieves to, say, newspaper men … who never by any chance gave a correct version of the simplest affair. This universal inefficiency of what he called “the shore gang” he ascribed in general to the want of responsibility and to a sense of security.

(4)

What becomes clear as we read on is that Powell’s observations are more than merely one man’s rather jaded opinion. For a start, his view is supported by another jaded commentator, Marlow, whose “patronizing comments for women readers outlining the superior ethics of seamanship as opposed to the corrupt morals of those living on land” in the serial text were, as Susan Jones has revealed, “severely cut in the book version” (2009: 293).

The novel’s exploration of the ethics of work goes well beyond the commentary of its internal narrators. Part I features an extensive cast of representatives of the “shore gang,” many designated only by their employment: Chapter 1 alone has, in addition to the hapless waiter, a doorkeeper, cab-drivers, boot-black boys, policemen, and sentries. Later in Part I we meet characters designated as “the governess,” “the financier,” and “the pressman” and hear much about the late Carleon Anthony, who is repeatedly “the poet.” Few of these characters emerge from the narrative with a positive assessment of their conduct and morality.

In order to demonstrate how the novel endorses Powell’s jaundiced view of the ethics of work on shore, this discussion will focus on three representatives of the “shore gang”: de Barral, who, before he became a swindling financier, was a clerk; John Fyne, a civil servant; and de