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Visible God: A Study in Culture, Drama and the Mystery of Commodification in the English Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

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VISIBLE GOD: A STUDY IN CULTURE, DRAMA AND THE MYSTERY OF COMMODIFICATION IN THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

by Pier Paolo Frassinelli

The area of interest of this thesis is summarised by the term commodification. This is on the one hand anachronistically and yet unavoidably framed by the broader discourses of modern political economy and social and cultural theory; and on the other it immediately recalls recent turns in Anglo-U.S. literary and cultural criticism that are deeply ingrained within the present historical and theoretical moment. In a significant number of recent critical studies on Shakespeare and his contemporaries, in fact, the shared interpretative preoccupations of the new theoretical and historicist criticism, that during the last two decades or so have been broadly grouped under the recurring headings of subversion and containment, power and ideology, the self and sexuality, are now in the process of being reinscribed in a critical and interpretative horizon that increasingly foregrounds economics, the market and material production and reproduction.

This study therefore is proposed both as a metacommentary on contemporary debates in cultural and literary criticism and theory, and as an original historical materialist interpretation of early modern cultural texts that include writings from popular Elizabethan literature such as Thomas Harman and Robert Greene's social pamphlets and, in particular, a body of dramatic works by Thomas Dekker, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton.

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I dedicate my work to the memory of my father, Luisito Frassinelli.

A Note on Texts

Whenever possible, I have used modernised editions. The dramatic and literary texts used for quotation are listed in the bibliography. I have put the dates of original publication or composition, as indicated in the editions cited, in brackets within the text, while in the bibliography and in the footnotes I indicate the date of publication of the editions that I quote or have consulted.

1

Critical Coordinates

'...every image of the past that it is not recognized by the present as one of its concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably'.
Walter Benjamin[1]

I. Benjamin's Constellations

History, Walter Benjamin claimed, is not a matter of 'once upon a time', but rather of a 'continuum' that the historical materialist must 'blast open'.[2] This claim was meant to advocate a mode of consulting the past that envisages the possibility of grasping the way in which it 'feeds into the warp of the present'. This is a possibility that materialises when the rescuing of some bits and pieces of history suddenly allows them to find a fresh relevance in a present conjuncture. That is, when a previous historical moment is relocated in 'constellation' with the 'time of the now', or *Jetztzeit*, by way of a blurring of temporalities that disengages historical narrative from a lineal and uniform pattern and reconfigures the present itself as a transient moment filled in with hidden possibilities, or, to put it in Benjamin's own cryptically mystic terms, as 'shot through with chips of Messianic time'.

Benjamin's images or tropes such as blasted continuum or constellation stand for a radical break with any conception of a straight and unilinear process of historical advancement and development. Such a conception, he urged, the historical materialist must challenge by bringing into view those discontinuities, arrests and ruptures that may unsettle the accumulative discourse of historical progress and reveal unexpected shocks and pauses during which the present suddenly irradiates fragments of the past

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 257.
[2] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 254.

with flashes of renewed meanings, that in turn will allow us to reread and interpret anew our own present. It should be promptly added here that the point for Benjamin was not, as in some more recent theoretical positions, to assert history as a textual fiction true only to its present rewritings, that is to deny the possibility of having access to the past itself and thus to the specific historical dimension of the cultural documents that we have inherited from it. Instead, his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) place their main emphasis on the active engagement that the act of constellating and reconstellating the past in relation to the present involves. This is a mode of engagement in which the retrospective gaze is openly governed by present concerns, and which Benjamin defines against the contemplative spirit of the antiquarian, empathic attitude, which seals off from view the very moment in which contemplation takes place. As regards the prescriptions for the accomplishment of this engagement, Benjamin urged the adoption of a cautious attitude, particularly so in front of those traces and marks of the past which have eventually come to acquire the status of cultural treasures. In front of the great documents of civilisation, he warned, admiration should be accompanied with cautious detachment, for behind them are hidden anonymous and silent stories that can only be dug up and rescued by brushing, in the words of one of his great *dicti*, 'history against its grain'.[3]

In the present instance, this extemporary reference to Benjamin's epigrammatic notes on historical materialism is meant to introduce the issues that will be discussed in this chapter in a way that, albeit through a decontextualised appropriation that does not claim to do any justice to the original insights of the German critic, I find quite suggestively to the point. Here of course it is not a matter of rescuing - as Benjamin did with German baroque drama, the *Trauenspiel*, in his famously unsuccessful *Habilitationsschrift* - some neglected or forgotten fragments of cultural history. By and large, the subject of this study, which consists of a series of readings in English Renaissance culture, has hardly been relegated to some remote and obscure corner within the room where our cultural treasures are piled up. This is all the more so with reference to that aesthetic model and powerful discursive formation that is identified with the name of 'Shakespeare'. If anything, the latter occupies one of the most

[3] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 248-255.

luminous and central parts of that room as a standing monument to a topical moment in the formation of modern Western identity and cultural tradition: the man of the millennium and the inventor of the human, just to mention a couple of recently awarded prizes. Nonetheless, the notations sketched in Benjamin's *Theses* find their relevance here as an invitation to interrogate the constellation which the specific elements and tracts of English Renaissance culture that are the subject of this study form with the situation and framework that shape my interpretative preoccupations. What follows, then, is an attempt to retrace some of the coordinates of this constellation.

II. The Culture Industry, Before and After

A commentary published a few years ago suggested that one of the key shifts in recent Renaissance cultural criticism has been determined by the supervened 'inability of any postmodern theoretical or historical aesthetics - deconstruction, new historicism, cultural poetics, for example - to ignore the relationship under capitalism between high culture and commodity exchange'.[4] Called into play here is a whole epochal break or rupture, whose theorists claim that, as the suffix 'post' is of course there to state, has put paid to the entire project of modernity.[5] The correspondingly new historical condition has thus come to be identified with a period marker that has exponentially grown to embrace phenomena as heterogeneous and diverse as the revolution of electronics and information technology; a historically original spatial and temporal experience of social life brought on by the introduction and spread of

[4] D. E. Wayne, 'The "Exchange of Letters": Early Modern Contradictions and Postmodern Conundrums', in *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800*, ed. by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 145. Another study that describes recent theoretically oriented Anglo-U.S. criticism of Shakespeare and Renaissance drama in terms of postmodernist paradigm(s) is Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Grady, though, specifically refers on the one hand to 'textualist deconstruction', in which 'Postmodernist assumptions have operated as part of the anti-hierarchical, relativizing textuality at the heart of the method' (4); and on the other to a postmodernist historicism that has radically broken with 'a modern-centred-humanist-essentialist idea of the self emerged in the Enlightenment' (9). I shall go back to this study later on in this chapter.

[5] Cf. Jean François Lyotard's master text, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, English trans. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Lyotard is mainly concerned here with issues of science and epistemology.

technologies such as television, computer, satellite communication and electronic highways; and, within the context of what Fredric Jameson has suggestively called an 'inverted millenarism', the crisis or decline of a host of modern discourses and formations that range from ideologies, art, industrial society and social classes, to the welfare state, Fordism and social democracy.[6]

In its more specifically cultural manifestation, postmodernism, this transformation has come to represent, among many other, quite often contradictory, things:[7] the effacement of the frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture; the fragmentation and *decentring* of the subject or psyche; the effect of sublime; the colonisation of the unconscious by the media and advertising industry; new trends in the arts and the entertainment industry which include pastiche, historicist eclecticism, a general tendency to the levelling of all styles; and, finally, the full integration of cultural production into commodity production in general.[8] Here however, I shall mainly refer to debates about the ensued postmodern erosion of the autonomous space covered by that dimension which modern(ist) thought had constructed as the privileged, transcendent domain of the aesthetic.

To be sure, as many a materialist study on the subject in question has pointed out, this autonomy and transcendence had its material roots precisely in the integration of

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[6] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 1-54. In the following pages I draw on this text to a large extent. However, before I go any further, I should add that much as they offer many a powerful and thought provoking insight in contemporary global transformations in fields as diverse as culture, ideology, architecture, space, economics and theory, Jameson's stances have a quite distinct U.S. flavor about them. See Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak's timely call for attention to the implied subject-position from which these stances are put forward: 'For Jameson's text to make sense, the reader must fill a subject-position referring at least to State, Institution, Hero-ritual, construction of the object of investigation'. And this is no irrelevant matter. For, she points out, 'a theory of "cultural dominants" must exercise caution about the specificity of subject-positions most particularly, because it is caught in a double bind: a power analysis of cultural dominants is bound to make visible the repression of emergent heterogeneity: unless careful, the analysis can itself collaborate in that repression by refusing it access to the status of the idiom of cultural description' (G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* [Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999], 313-314).

[7] David Harvey, who has written one of the most authoritative and widely read books on this subject, describes postmodernism as 'a mine-field of conflicting notions' (*The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origin of Cultural Change* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990], viii). On the other hand, it has been suggested that there is nothing wrong at all about the fact that few 'words are more often used and abused', for 'this is an appropriate condition for...a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory' (Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* [London and New York: Routledge, 1989], 1).

[8] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1-54.

culture and art into the market economy. Once 'cultural production...becomes autonomous of the various social functions which it has traditionally served' in the church, the court or the state and 'artefacts become commodities in the market place, they exist for nothing and nobody in particular', they 'can consequently be rationalised, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves', Terry Eagleton has remarked.[9] Not only that, for Pierre Bourdieu behind this appearance of autonomy, the project of 'art for art's sake', there is the fiction that sustains an 'economic world turned upside down' in which 'those who enter it have an interest in disinteredness'. In this economic world reversed, the stronger the refusal of going commercial is asserted and the clearer the rejection of immediate economic interest is sustained, the higher is the potential for accumulation of highly valuable currencies such as symbolic capital and cultural prestige or authority. This, according to Bourdieu, results in the modern opposition between the commercial and the artistic proper (genuine art), that is into two opposite relations to the economic. The former based on short-term investment, careful marketing and minimization of risk through the offer of products matching pre-existing demands (large scale cultural production); the latter based on high risk, long-term investment in the accumulation of symbolic capital (restricted or 'high' cultural production).[10] For Bourdieu the refusal or negation of economic interest serves and feeds into an alternative form of economic investment. This corresponds to the consecration and accumulation of a new range of use values that can in turn be converted into an economic value incommensurable with the economistic terms of sheer costs of production. It is by denying the economic that art and high culture could historically rise above ordinary economi(sti)c valuation and enter the market of things that have 'no price', that is what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic goods'.[11]

From this perspective, then, postmodernism could be said to represent the cultural moment at which these forms of ideological rationalisation and symbolic consecration are finally fully demystified. This is, at least, the position of Jameson's now canonical

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[9] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 9.
[10] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. and trans. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 115.
[11] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by S. Emmanuel

analysis of what he has defined as 'the cultural logic of late capitalism':

> In postmodern culture, 'culture' has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcends itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.[12]

In other words, the point for Jameson is not just that in postmodernity culture has been thoroughly commodified. It is also that with its full integration into commodity production in general, postmodernist culture has ended up being nakedly and unproblematically identified with it. Within this same context, David Harvey writes of a compressed acceleration of turnover time that from the production and consumption of material goods and services has stretched all the way to the market for culture, books, prints, music, movies and entertainment, in which seemingly new fashions rise and fall overnight.[13] In his portrayal of the postmodern condition, cultural production has turned into an integrated and extraordinarily flexible process that absorbs more and more creative energy for the constant generation and regeneration of ostensibly diverse mass cultural products. This is, in turn, part of that epochal transition which Harvey describes as the passage from Fordism to 'flexible accumulation'. And among the key markers of this new system of flexible, accelerated accumulation he enlists the constantly expanding consumption 'not only [of] personal, business, educational, and health services, but also [of] entertainments, spectacles, happenings, and distractions...(a visit to a museum, going to a rock concert or movie, attending lectures or health clubs)'. 'If there are limits to the accumulation and turnover of physical goods', Harvey concludes, 'then it makes sense for capitalists to turn to the provision of very ephemeral services in consumption. This quest may lie at the root of the rapid capitalist penetration, noted [among others] by Jameson, of many sectors of cultural production from the mid-1960s onwards'.[14]

Postmodernism thus is, among other things, a reference to a cultural dominant that

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(Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

[12] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, x.

[13] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 284-307.

has fully naturalised, still ideologically speaking, a world in which the commodity-form has pervaded every interstice of social and cultural life subsuming it into the circuit of exchange values. So that even the idea of an all-incorporating, profit-oriented 'culture industry' merging intellectual production, art and entertainment, information and politics put forward by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the age of radio broadcast, cinema and subscribed popular magazines, has today become quite obsolete.[15] For one thing, the provocation, if that is the right word, of what might once have sounded like an oxymoron, 'culture-industry', has now largely lost its scandalising impact.

In terms of periodisation, for Adorno and Horkheimer the emergence of the culture industry corresponds to the monopoly stage of capitalism in cultural production, a stage in which 'because millions participate in it, certain reproduction processes are necessary that inevitably require identical needs in innumerable places to be satisfied with identical goods'. For them, the radio (but also Hollywood cinema or pop music) fittingly exemplified this relationship in which consumers are classified, organised and labelled by cultural productive apparatuses that turn 'all participants into listeners and authoritatively subject them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same'.[16] In Adorno and Horkheimer's theorisation, the 'culture industry' works as a threateningly impersonal and homogenising self-reproductive machinery. Its diverse products, even when they present what might at first sight appear as differences in style and novelties of various kinds, are no more than pre-regulated and superficial deviations from the standard that serve to maintain an illusory appearance of individual choice. 'Mass' is their other key term. Neither a numerical nor a sociological categorisation, it constitutes the consumers of the culture industry as an homogeneous entity, cutting across social divisions, that comes to be identified with the stylised models and schemata of the standardised cultural products that these consumers are fed with. For Adorno, in particular, the advent of the culture industry coincides with the ultimate form of alienation of socially embedded cultural practices, that is, with the

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[14] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 285.
[15] T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 120-167.
[16] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 121-122.

unmaking of both the oppositional spontaneity of popular culture and the distinctive values of high art:

> [The culture industry] forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousand of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total.[17]

Recent critical interpretations of postmodernism have taken this model of how commercial cultural apparatuses work in capitalist modernity as something like the 'prehistory', in Jameson's own words, of a postmodern dimension in which the immense dilation and borderless expansion of commodification has left no privileged high cultural or aesthetic dimension out of its embrace and levelling dint. So that 'the older...frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture' has ended up being effaced altogether and we now witness 'the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern' (beginning with, of course, Adorno and Horkheimer themselves).[18]

On this we can go back to Shakespeare, this time to the uncanny expansion of the Shakespearean cultural and entertainment industry throughout the different niches of contemporary transnational commodity culture. For if one were out to seek some exemplary instance to substantiate Jameson's claim, it would be difficult, I believe, to find anything better than a recent cinematic text such as Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996). This movie, with its futuristic urban landscapes, references to Hollywood westerns and pulp fiction, chemical drugs, Latino and queer subculture iconography, pop-rock soundtracks and MTV-esque fractal editing, has represented, as Denise Albanese maintains in a brilliantly argued essay, an extraordinarily successful and smart example of 'exuberant capitalization on the

[17] T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein, English trans. (London: Routledge, 1991), 85. Note, by contrast, Adorno's definition of popular culture: 'something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves', 85.
[18] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 2.

prevalent mass esthetics of...[the] global youth market'.[19] This is a cultural product that Adorno and Horkheimer would have no doubt indicted as a most striking example of the culture industry's aesthetic barbarism. In Albanese's more approving terms, *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* represents a fully cinematic, pop culture appropriation of Shakespeare that positively stands against more conservative operations such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) or Branagh's Shakespeare movies. For the latter, with their 'visual rendition of traditional literary capital', participate 'in a belated discourse of bourgeois prestige, where movie attendance demands, at the very least, a nodding acquaintance with a prior tradition of high (verbal) literacy'.[20]

In Michael D. Bristol's words, the nature of the international popularity of the brand name 'Shakespeare' in publishing, movies, video production and commercial theatre lies in its import as 'a term with extraordinary currency in a wide range of discursive practices as a complex symbol of cultural value'. Shakespeare is, he sums up, a label whose commercial success is the result of the capacity of suppliers of cultural goods 'at generating a social desire for products that bear his trademark and in creating merchandise to satisfy this desire'.[21] So that one of the crucial interpretative issues here lies in the dilemmas about how cultural critics should operate when their disciplinary subject is circulated as the commodified good of a gigantic cultural and entertainment industry run by cash investment and corporate control. That is, when 'Shakespeare' - as opposed to Shakespeare - has been transformed into a hyper-reified version of what Michel Foucault called the 'author-function'; into a sign that displaces, in Baudrillardian terms, the use value of the products identified with his name, in

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[19] Denise Albanese, 'The Shakespeare Film and the Americanization of Culture', in *Marxist Shakespeares*, ed. by J. E. Howard and S. C. Shershow (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 216. For cogent discussions on Shakespeare and the culture industry see also, among others, *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. by Graham Holderness (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); M. D. Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); *Shakespeare and National Culture*, ed. by J. J. Joughin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*, ed. by L. E. Boose and Richard Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); *Shakespeare Without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital*, ed. by Donald Hedrick and Richard Burt (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[20] Albanese, 'The Shakespeare Film and the Americanization of Culture', 214. This appreciation for Baz Luhrmann's irreverential take on Shakespeare, though, is not unqualified. In her conclusion, Albanese reminds the reader that the very smartness of this movie is that of 'the global force of free market policy', that when it 'has set itself the task of vanquishing alternative cultural logics, it can even sell Shakespeare' (224).

[21] M. D. Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare*, ix, 5, 28.

order to relocate their commodity-value onto the webs of meanings associated with his iconic status.[22] Thus, Terry Eagleton has indicated the tension between critical practice and the interests of the Shakespearean culture industry as begging the following redefinition: 'the question is, how far can you go in critical interpretation given the political, cultural and ideological constraints and determinants signalled by the name "Shakespeare"? To find a genuine range of use-values for the texts would involve, as a laborious preliminary operation, challenging and dismantling their present exchange-values'.[23]

Yet, it needs to be additionally asked, what does 'more genuine range of use-values' actually mean here? What if the 'exchange-values' have always been there and Shakespeare (as one with 'Shakespeare') was originally a product of a prototypical culture industry? This is the key point of Bristol's *Big-time Shakespeare* (1996), which maintains that 'beginning with the early modern period...Shakespeare's currency depends on the initiatives of entrepreneurs in both book publishing and show business', so that inescapably and right at the outset 'Shakespeare is a term that refers to the large and still expanding aggregate of cultural products and services'.[24] In other words, from this perspective contemporary commodity culture does nothing more than bringing Shakespeare, after his temporary recruitment in the modernist highbrow, auratic notion of literary canon, back to where he originally belonged.[25]

III. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, or Base and Superstructure Once Again?

Whether stretching the genealogy of postmodern commodity culture all the way back to the late sixteenth century represents a legitimate model of periodisation or not,

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[22] See Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader,* ed. by David Lodge, English trans. (London and New York: Longman, 1988), 197-210; Jean Baudrillard, 'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign', in *Selected Writings*, English trans., ed. by Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 57-97.

[23] Terry Eagleton, 'Afterwords', in *The Shakespeare Myth*, 207-208.

[24] Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare*, x.

[25] Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare*, 28. See also, from a British perspective, Alan Sinfield, 'Heritage, the Market, Regulation and Desublimation', in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (2nd edn; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 255-280.

however, remains a matter for interpretation. In the hermeneutic circle that frames our relation to the past, our interplay with the documents, histories, formations and texts that we rescue from it is constantly caught in between the alternative poles of familiarisation and estrangement, identity and difference.[26] Here I just wish to suggest that the present writing is unavoidably sustained by choices that are to be made constantly: about what we decide to appropriate from the past, about how we represent it and account for our own engagement. As the title of this thesis is meant to indicate, its area of interest is summarised by the term commodification, which on the one hand is anachronistically and yet inescapably framed by the broader discourses of modern political economy and social and cultural theory; and on the other immediately recalls, as I am now going to discuss in more detail, recent turns in Anglo-U.S. English Renaissance literary and cultural criticism deeply ingrained within the present theoretical moment.

It appears in fact suggestive, even if perhaps still a bit premature, to subscribe to the indication that the ascendancy of economics and commodification in interpretative agendas is an inescapable route along which the critical and theoretical debate in Anglo-U.S. Renaissance, or early modern, cultural studies is currently being redirected. The recent dissemination of these themes, or interpretative objects, in this and in other literary periods,[27] as well as in the cross-border field of cultural studies, seems in fact part of a comprehensive relocation of discursive and ideological confrontations that are quickly trespassing and reconfiguring established academic disciplinary boundaries. For the current cross-breeding between the cultural and the economic does not seem to be just a matter, as in the more traditional and distinct framework of sociology of culture, of deploying methodologies and categories borrowed from social and economic sciences in order to investigate the material forces and social determinants of the cultural process - the working of the printing and entertainment industry or the literary market, the social divisions within and between

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[26] Cf. Fredric Jameson, 'Marxism and Historicism', in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986. Volume 2: Syntax of History*, ed. by Neil Larsen (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 148-177.

[27] See, for instance, *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, ed. by Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); *New Literary History*, Special Issue, *Economics and Culture: Production, Consumption and Value*, 31.2

producers and consumers of culture and the like.[28] Rather, in the present theoretical moment this is increasingly becoming one among the privileged sites and subjects of critical investigation in its own right.

If not too long ago the enunciation of the words literature and economics in the same breath used to be associated with some sort of more or less 'vulgar' Marxism or sociological determinism,[29] during the last fifteen years or so in a significant number of critical studies on Shakespeare and his contemporaries, previously dominant concerns that (to unduly oversimplify the matter for the sake of synthesis) went under the recurrent headings of power and ideology, or the self and subjectivity, have been largely problematised via the reinscription of the English Renaissance in an interpretative framework that foregrounds the cultural thematics and socioeconomic motifs linked to the early modern rise of commercial mercantilism and a (proto)capitalist market for money, commodities and labour power. A basic list of influential works whose titles eloquently speak for themselves here includes: Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (1986); Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988); Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (1991); Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (1992); Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time* (1993); and Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (1996).[30]

(2000).

[28] In an English speaking context, see Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingewood, *The Sociology of Literature* (London: Paladin, 1972); and Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1981).

[29] See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 193.

[30] Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989); Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*. See also, among others, D. E. Wayne, 'Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson: An Alternative View', *Renaissance Drama*, 13 (1982), 103-128; Joseph Lowenstein, 'The Script in the Marketplace', in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 265-278; Karen Newmann, 'City

In relation to the present discourse, what is remarkable about these studies is that along with the legacy of Marxism (see, for example, Halpern's study), they are characterised by a typically postmodernist impulse to pull an array of disparate theoretical strings. And this may also be taken here as evidence for a critical shift in which the thematisation of the economic appears to have lost its traditional connotations which, as I have said before, identified it with the well-defined agenda of Marxism - or that, alternatively, confined it to the particular field of sociology of culture - in order to become a fully validated object of critical interpretation within a broad dislocation that is reorienting the axis of cultural criticism and theory in the direction of what in a now unfashionable parlance could be described as the vexed question of the relationship between base and superstructure.

To be sure, in the kind of new historicist approach exemplified by Greenblatt's slogan 'poetics of culture', references to economics are not necessarily coextensive with what we commonly take as the thing itself. Rather, Greenblatt often assimilates it to his textual readings as a set of key tropes - negotiation, exchange, circulation and so on - that provide a series of apt metaphors or homologies that serve him, on the one hand to break with a notion of the aesthetic object as the product of an 'originary moment', or 'pure act of untrammelled creation'; and on the other, to mark a distance from methods of inquiring 'into the relation between Renaissance theater and society' that 'tend to posit two separate, autonomous systems and then try to gauge how

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Talk: Women and Commodification in Jonson's *Epicoene*', *English Literary History*, 56 (1989), 503-518; Kathleen McLuskie, 'The Poets' Royal Exchange: Patronage and Commerce in Early Modern Drama', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 21 (1991), 53-62; Christopher Pye, 'The Market, the Theatre and the Subject of History', *English Literary History*, 61 (1994), 501-522; D. H. Thurn, 'Economic and Ideological Exchange in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*', *Theatre Journal*, 46.2 (1994), 157-170; S. C. Shershow, 'Idols of the Marketplace: Rethinking the Economic Determination of Renaissance Drama', 26 (1995), 1-27; Kathleen McLuskie, 'The Shopping Complex: Materiality and the Renaissance Theatre', in *Textual and Theatrical Shakespeare*, ed. by Edward Petcher (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1996), 141-164; Robert Weimann, 'Thresholds to Memory and Commodity in Shakespeare's Endings', *Representations*, 53 (1996), 1-20; Crystal Bartholovich, 'Putting *Tamburlaine* on a (Cognitive) Map', *Renaissance Drama*, 38 (1997), 29-72; Alexandra Halasz, *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); David Hawkes, 'Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in the Antitheatrical Controversy', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 39.2 (1999), 255-273; T. B. Leinwand, *Theatre, Finance and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Frederick Turner, *Shakespeare's Twenty-First-Century Economics: The Morality of Love and Money* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Walter Cohen, 'The Undiscovered Country: Shakespeare and Mercantile Geography', in *Marxist Shakespeares*, 128-158; Richard Wilson, 'The Management of Mirth: Shakespeare Via Bourdieu', in *Marxist Shakespeares*, 159-177.

accurately or effectively the one represents the other'.[31]

We need to backtrack some way here. For Greenblatt's way of redefining the issue could be usefully confronted with the break within Marxist cultural criticism itself operated by the philosophical elaboration of Louis Althusser. In particular, in a much discussed essay first published in English back in 1967 - 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (1962) - Althusser included a discussion about the role of economic determination in 'the last instance', in which he famously remarked that actually the 'lonely hour of "the last instance" never comes'.[32] This rhetorical twist served him to highlight that there is no such thing as a pure economic phenomenon that is not in turn embedded in a series of prior (over)determinations and specified through a number of historical factors: social relations, the State, ideological and cultural formations, the national past and inherited traditions, or particular political conjunctures. Althusser's assertion that the last instance never comes in a pure and simple form, in other words, was meant to reinstate the 'relative autonomy'-as-'specific effectivity' of culture, politics, ideology and whatever else Marxist theory has traditionally designated as the superstructure. On the other hand, as Francis Mulhern has retrospectively pointed out, what seems most remarkable about Althusser's theoretical contribution is the ambiguous nature of the outstanding success that it encountered among radical literary and cultural critics. For in Althusser's original exposition the key concern clearly lay in the concept of 'overdetermination', which aimed to reassert a notion of the unity of the social process as a movement in which 'any practice is internally marked by the other practices'. That which primarily caught

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[31] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 11.

[32] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1997), 113. The theme of relative autonomy however, as Althusser dutifully takes care to remind the reader (113), dates back to the late Engels:

> According to the materialist view of history, the determining factor in history is, *in the final analysis*, the production and reproduction of actual life. More than that was never maintained either by Marx or myself. Now if someone distorts this by declaring the economic to be the *only* determining factor, he changes the proposition into a meaningless, abstract, ridiculous piece of jargon. ...If some younger writers attribute more importance to the economic aspect than it is due, Marx and I are to some extent to blame. We had to stress this leading principle in the face of opponents who denied it, and we did not always have the time, space or opportunity to do justice to other factors that interacted upon each other. ('Letter to Joseph Block, September 21-22, 1890', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, English trans. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 651-653.

the attention of cultural and literary theorists and critics, on the contrary, was the notion of 'relative autonomy', which seemed to grant a licence to shift the attention from the structure up to the superstructure. The explanation here, as Mulhern provides it, is that whereas 'overdetermination' appeared to work as a challenge or constraint to interpretative freedom, the notion of 'relative autonomy' could be taken as an appealing occasion to legitimise an allegiance to the tradition of historical materialism within the context of a full time engagement with cultural and literary criticism; or, alternatively, as a bypass to a plurality of diverse theoretical routes. 'Relative autonomy', Mulhern concludes, was liable to be assumed as a satisfactory formula for the rearticulation of the social determinants of cultural texts outside what had progressively come to be perceived as the straightjacket of reflection (Lukács) or homological (Goldmann) interpretative models.[33]

Now, it is not in the least my intention here to pass under review the season of Althusserianism in Anglo-U.S. cultural and literary debate, a season whose peak, as witnesses usually testify, dates back to sometime around the mid Seventies and the early Eighties. More to the point, I have briefly recalled it in order to illuminate new historicist critical procedures in a contrastive light. For Althusser the ultimate aim was to replace economics as an ultimately determining instance with the overdetermination of a plurality of autonomous effectivities, that were in turn subsumed in the unity of the social structure as a whole. Conversely, in Greenblatt's writings economics is intended less as a referent located at a specific level of the social formation, than as a model to represent a dynamic process that brings into motion not just literal currencies, money and commodities, but also highly figural ones, such as the collective dynamic circulation of pleasures, anxieties and interests expressed at its best by 'great art' (a notion that Greenblatt relentlessly defends).[34]

Yet, it does not seem to be the case that this model of economy of cultural production intends to erase, as it might appear at a first glance, the distinction between the socioeconomic and the discursive in order to subsume the former wholesale into

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[33] Francis Mulhern, *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 62-67.
[34] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1-20.

the latter. Rather, Greenblatt's flexible use of economic tropes and homologies enlightens in remarkably elegant and creative ways the multiplicity of intercourses and transactions relating the processes and the products of literary and artistic representation and, to put it in the words of H. Aram Veeser, ...'that's never defined'.[35] Or perhaps, we should rather say something like: Greenblatt's definition of the extra-textual dimension is problematised by an acknowledgement of the gridlock in which, given the theoretical premises that Greenblatt seems to move from, the definition ends up being caught. For, according to the kind of deconstructionist lesson embraced in one of Greenblatt's overt theoretical statements, 'history cannot be divorced from textuality, and all texts can be compelled to confront the crisis of undecidability revealed in literary texts'.[36] Thus, the theoretical gridlock here seems to lie in that while the polymorphic and variegated forms of exchange and negotiation outlined in new historicist readings involve the existence of distinct and separate levels (those between which these transactions are done), the textualist theoretical discourse embraced works to undermine the possibility of grasping the very boundaries that make up this very distinction. Still, as Greenblatt refuses to surrender completely to the permanent deferral and displacement of the possibility of piercing the veil of textualisation, this refusal is enacted by means of an ingenious series of tricks in which guiding methodological criteria are constantly kept away from view. This is achieved by diverting the attention of the reader through a breathtaking sequence of narrative *coups de theatre*. Hence the ambiguous and permanently undefined status of Greenblatt's metaphoric of circulation and negotiation. It is not to be taken as merely a set of tropes, but it is not to be taken literally either; it suggests a series of extra-textual determinations, but these are posited as the always already textualised. In sum, given the undeniable appeal and sophistication of Greenblatt's interpretative performances, the question which remains open in his works is whether the brilliance of the local

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[35] *The New Historicism*, ed. by H. A. Veeser (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 286.

[36] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London & New York: Methuen, 1985), 164. The 'kind of' here stands for the recognition that there is much more to deconstruction - at least in Jacques Derrida's original version of it - than its assertions about the undecidability of textual signifiers. See, in this respect, Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak's very useful 'Appendix: The Setting to Work of Deconstruction' (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 423-431). See also P. P. Frassinelli, 'Il Nuovo storicismo e la storia', *Allegoria*, 20 (1995), 121-123.

readings that they present could actually be generalised, properly theorised and hence systematised as a model for critical interpretation.[37]

Conversely, in Anglo-U.S. Renaissance criticism another way of addressing the vexed problem of the relation between cultural production, representation and society has been theorised by way of the recognition that the former two are themselves material and social practices. The key theoretical reference, this time, is of course Raymond Williams's stance for a 'cultural materialist' interpretative methodology. For the cultural materialist, texts are not just assemblages of words aimed to deliver some kind of meaning, ideological content or aesthetic experience, they are also material artefacts with a social life of their own made of the social processes of their production, circulation and consumption. Drama is not just a particular textual form, but also a social event materialised through the work and the operations of actors, theatrical companies, directors and actual audiences. Both literature and drama are in turn the products of certain means (specific literary and dramatic practices, techniques and conventions, the press, the playhouse, theatrical companies, etc.) and relations (between authors, playwrights, actors and their audience, between directors and actors and so on) of production organised in particular formations and institutions (patronage or market relations, corporate sponsorships or state subsidies, for instance). When Raymond Williams analysed, in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980), the 'productive forces' and 'productive labour' that had traditionally been associated with the notion of the economic or social 'base', he found that their reduction to those activities that correspond to certain specialised areas of capitalist economics represented a dead-end for any possibility of developing a materialist conception of culture and, more specifically, of 'the economics of modern cultural activity'. Instead of what he perceived as a limiting form of reductionism, then, he proposed that among the productive forces and labour are included all those activities that constitute 'the primary production of society itself, and of men themselves, the material production and reproduction of real life'. So that, if 'we have [this] broad sense of productive

[37] Cf. *The New Historicism*. This important collection of essays opens with a position paper by Stephen Greenblatt himself ('Towards a Poetics of Culture'), in which he asserts that one 'of the peculiar characteristics of the "new historicism" in literary studies is precisely how unresolved and in some ways disingenuous it has been - I have been - about the relation to literary theory' (1).

forces, we look at the question of the base differently, and we are less tempted to dismiss as superstructural, and in that sense merely secondary, certain vital productive social forces, which are in the broad sense, from the beginning, basic'.[38]

From this standpoint, one could therefore say that the problem of the relationship between base and superstructure is in a way a misplaced one. For, as others have observed, Raymond Williams's move actually splits 'the base and superstructure metaphor' into two sets of 'bases', one 'general' and one 'cultural', that produce an extension of material forces in which cultural and artistic practices are reclassified as an integral part of the base itself.[39] As Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield have put it in the 'Foreword' to *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985), cultural materialism anthropologises culture by positing it as 'one set of signifying practices among others', as 'a whole system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world' that cannot 'transcend the material forces and relations of production'.[40] The key word here is 'practice'. The polemical objective of these declarations - along with a ahistorical, self-referential or autotelic notion of the cultural object - is the positing of binary divisions between the cultural text and its background or context that efface both the materiality of the processes of cultural production and consumption and that of their social effects. Through this emphasis on 'practice', the cultural object is thus reconfigured as a site of negotiation and conflict where different subjective and social meanings can be produced. During the last couple of decades there has been a lot of discussion between cultural materialist and new historicist critics on this, that is about how effective the production of subversive, alternative and oppositional cultural meanings can be; and to which extent, on the contrary, these are always already contained by the structures of domination that go under the heading of 'power', in both its macro and micropolitical dimension.[41] Indeed, in Jonathan Dollimore's reconstruction this has been the key way

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[38] Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 1980), 35.

[39] Paul Jones, '"The Problem is Always One of Method...": Cultural Materialism, Political Economy and Cultural Studies', *Key Words*, 2 (1999), 30.

[40] Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 'Foreword', in *Political Shakespeare*, viii.

[41] Among the most influential syntheses and discussions of the thematisation of power and the political in new historicist and cultural materialist criticism, see J. E. Howard, 'The New Historicism in English Renaissance Studies', *English Literary Renaissance*, (1986) 16, 13-43; Walter Cohen, 'Political

in which this controversy has been perceived: 'the two movements have differed over just that: it is new historicism which has been accused of finding too much containment, while cultural materialism has been accused of finding too much subversion'.[42]

IV. Blasting Out the Continuum of History

We may recall at this point that at the heart of the original new historicist interest in the Renaissance lay a strong emphasis on the individuation of this period-marker as the inaugurating moment of modernity. We can look back, in this respect, at the book that is commonly taken to be the signpost that signals the advent of a new historicism in recent Anglo-U.S. criticism, that is Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). The central tenet of this study is 'that there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities'.[43] In order to substantiate it, Greenblatt goes all the way back to the re-blasting of the 'Renaissance' out of the continuum of history by the Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt who, in his famous account of *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), had retrieved this term from the use of concepts such as '*renascentia*' and '*renovatio*' by Italian humanist intellectuals since the fourteenth century. Concepts, these, that were originally meant to designate an age marked by rupture and discontinuity with the immediate past - Francesco Petrarch's 'Dark Ages' - and by a rebirth, renewal, reawakening and revival brought about by the rediscovery of a prior exemplary, or classical, world. This original designation embodied a discontinuous notion of

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Criticism of Shakespeare', in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. by Jean Howard and Marion O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), 18-46; Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Jonathan Dollimore, 'Introduction: Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism', in *Political Shakespeare*, 2-17. On the micropolitics of power, the pivotal influence in the debate has of course been (the late) Michel Foucault. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. by Colin Gordon, English trans. (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

[42] Jonathan Dollimore, 'Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism', *New Literary History*, 21 (1989-1990), 472.

[43] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1.

temporality primarily working within language: that is, within those original documents, texts and manuscripts that had to be retrieved from Roman and, particularly, Greek antiquity; purified from the sedimentation of errors that had been accumulated with their mixing with apocrypha and inaccurate translations from Hebrew and Arab; and finally restored to their original meaning.

Burckhardt, too, reintroduced the term Renaissance in order to indicate historical discontinuity. But in his new version the Renaissance became less a matter of going back to antiquity than the 'beginning of the modern age': the 'birth of man'. The cyclical time of decay and rebirth of Italian humanist scholarship was reconfigured by him as a move towards a future whose temporal scansion was marked by the rising beat of the pulse of progress, civic freedom and inner human discovery. In other words, the history narrated in Burckhardt's influential account was that of the origin and genealogy of the progressive ascendancy of secular rationalism and liberal humanism that culminated in what is commonly identified with the shorthand Enlightenment.[44] As Margareta de Grazia summarises in a recent commentary, for Burckhardt in the Renaissance 'there had been no *re*-birth, only a birth, the "birth of man", a nativity that, not unlike Christ's, provided a crucial historical marker, a point from which to start reckoning time - *modern* time, "the beginning of the modern age"'.[45]

In line with Burckhardt's lesson, Greenblatt identifies the Renaissance with the creation of new forms of identity shaped by the process of individual adjustment to the seismic shift in the customary roles of public life at the beginning of the new age. As one would have expected from the leading figure of a *new* historicism, though, while using Burckhard's model of periodisation as a starting block, Greenblatt subjects it to sharp qualification. The notion that the Renaissance marked a new awareness about those peculiarly modernist objects of concern, 'self' and 'identity', is endorsed by

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[44] Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art, Volume II: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque*, trans. Stanley Godman (London: Routledge, 1992), 3. For an extended commentary on Burckhardt, see Wallace Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), especially chapters 7-11. As Hauser recalls, the term Renaissance was actually firstly reintroduced by Jules Michelet in his 1855 *Histoire de France, VII*, in which also appeared the slogan '*découverte du monde et de l'homme*' (3).

[45] Margareta de Grazia, 'World Pictures, Modern Periods, and the Early Stage', in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. by J. D. Cox and D. S. Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997),

Greenblatt only for him to specify that this was less a matter of the emergence of a free, self-fashioned individual, than 'a way of containing and channelling the energies which had been released' by the crumbling of the old feudal society.[46] Greenblatt's theoretical approach in this context is notably circumspect, so much so that it lets historical evidence create the illusion of speaking mostly for itself. Yet, in a number of hints and references scattered throughout his text, as well as in the very grain of his remarkably emphatic textual readings, one can detect debts to a number of specific and well defined discourses and motifs of contemporary theory. As self and identity are put under scrutiny, they are repeatedly made to triangulate with 'language' and 'power'. That is, two keywords that are called into play to qualify the notion of self-fashioning via the convictions, validated by a number of contemporary theoretical authorities, that 'there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture' and human behaviour is inescapably governed by 'a set of control mechanism - plans, recipes, rules, instructions' (Clifford Geertz); that subjectivity is produced and disciplined by all pervasive technologies of power (Michel Foucault); and, finally, that even the 'innermost self' is dependent 'upon a language that is always necessarily given from without and upon representation before an audience' (Jacques Lacan).[47]

In the ensuing debate, these theoretical issues would symptomatically displace the attention from the specific historical argument of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, including from its highly suggestive discussion of early modern imperialism and religious struggles. Many a critical commentary would in fact be devoted to expose how from the theoretical crossroads at which Greenblatt locates himself, the drive to self-fashioning, the attempt to model and construe one's autonomous subjectivity, tend to be perceived without exceptions as resulting in a prearranged, unchanging narrative plot, in which the search for individuals engaged in the act of shaping their own selves is always resolved in finding out that these selves have always already been fashioned for them. Thus, Greenblatt always ends up with a conflict whose outcome is that the drive towards autonomy of the subject and the attempt to shape one's own life and subjectivity are no more than superficial illusions behind which we invariably find the

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[46] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* 162.

[47] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 3, 245.

deep and subtle working of all pervasive power apparatuses and normative patterns. As Greenblatt himself summarises:

> In all my texts and documents, there were, so far as I could tell, no moment of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact. If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated but the social and ideological system in force.[48]

Alan Sinfield has dubbed this as the '"entrapment model" of ideology and power', a model which for Sinfield is shaped less by the Renaissance historical processes than by the theoretical position governing Greenblatt's interpretative acts, which presupposes a synchronic structure (political power, culture, ideology, discursive formations and the like) in which the self is always made to sink.[49] And Sinfield, in turn, asks what if by way of decentring a stable and transhistorical notion of subjectivity and human nature - in other words, the stance against essentialist humanism - we find a field of social and cultural forces and groupings whose conflict and confrontation produces results that cannot be decided at the outset? This is, in a nutshell, the objection raised by Sinfield and, more broadly, cultural materialism to the new historicist's 'entrapment model' of textual criticism: even 'a text that aspires to contain a subordinate perspective must first bring it into visibility; even to misrepresent, one must present. And once that has happened, there can be no guarantee that the subordinate will stay safely in its place'.[50] Subjectivity from this perspective is not just a matter of individual aspirations inescapably and always already produced and contained by existing power and ideological structures. It is rather part and parcel of the contradictions and conflicts that are constitutive of a hierarchical and divided society, without which there would of course be no opposition between dominant and subordinate perspectives in the first place.

Cultural materialist critiques of new historicism often note that, for the latter,

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[48] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 256.
[49] Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 80-81, 173-174.

power struggles tend to be located at the level of the textual signifier (both in literary texts and historical documents) rather at the level of the social contradictions which are ultimately responsible for enabling, or disenabling, the efficacy and actual potential of alternative cultural stances and interventions. So, to Greenblatt's ensemble of (loosely speaking) post-structuralist authorities, Sinfield opposes what he calls 'modes of knowledge...that hitherto have been cultivated distinctively within that alien other of essentialist humanism, Marxism. These knowledges are in part the provinces of history and other social sciences - and, of course, they bring in their train questions of historiography and epistemology that require theory more complex than the tidy postructuralist formula that everything, after all, is a text (or that everything is theater)'.[51] Whereas Greenblatt's version of new historicism seems to leave precious little room for any 'significant flaw in the mechanism of the Elizabethan state',[52] cultural materialists are much more ready to examine the extent to which the ideological work done by English Renaissance cultural artefacts, and in particular drama, could effectively challenge and demystify the power apparatus of the state. The historical perspective legitimating a stance for the retrieval of actual subversive potential, within this context, is of course provided by the social, economic and political crisis that would finally explode in the 1640s. 'Is it too ambitious', asks Jonathan Dollimore in the first page of his *Radical Tragedy* (1984), one of the manifestos of cultural materialism, to see 'a relationship between the drama and the English revolution?'.[53]

In more recent criticism, in turn, when the impact of the massive and deep rooted transformations of commodification and the market economy are brought to the fore in

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[50] Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 48.
[51] Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 50.
[52] Alan Sinfield, 'Power and Ideology: An Outline Theory and Sidney's *Arcadia*', *English Literary History*, 52 (1985), 259. Analogous critiques to new historicism have also come from feminist and other Marxist perspectives. See, for instance, Cohen, 'Political Criticism of Shakespeare'; D. E. Wayne, 'Power, Politics and the Shakespearean Text: Recent Criticism in England end the United States', in *Shakespeare Reproduced*, ed. by Jean Howard and Marion O'Connor, 47-67; Carolyn Porter, 'Are We Being Historical Yet?', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87 (1988), 743-786; Carol Neely, 'Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and the New Renaissance Discourses', *English Literary Renaissance*, 18 (1988), 5-18; James Holstun, 'Ranting at the New Historicism', *English Literary Renaissance*, 19 (1989), 189-225; J. E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-21.
[53] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare*

readings of English Renaissance culture, they work to enact a shift from the network of discursive and ideological operations of 'power' that have been central to Anglo-U.S. theoretically oriented historical criticism of Shakespeare and his contemporaries for a couple of decades or so. For as these become privileged items in Renaissance and early modern interpretative agendas, they function as the figures of an historical watershed, the economic phase of pre-industrial, merchant or commercial capitalism, that radically rearticulates under its heading the plurality of practices and complex manifestations of the heterogeneous interests and tensions that punctuate the life of English Renaissance culture.

V. Drama and the Market

I am now going to readdress the issue of periodisaton that I have just outlined in relation to the other critical texts enlisted at the beginning of my excursus. The shared preoccupation that puts them into relation is, as we have begun to see, a set of historical and textual motifs linked to the keyword 'the market' (with the notable exception of Richard Halpern's study, which is framed by an analysis of the transition to capitalism centred on the import of changes in social relations of production, on which more later on).

The central thesis of Jean-Christophe Agnew's *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750*, to begin with, is that the early modern market and theatre were in fact not worlds apart, as playfully suggested in the title, but interconnected elements of an historical process of 'liquefaction' of social identity that marked deep-rooted and radical transformations in early modern society at large. In this study the change signalled by the shift of the actual referent of the market from the local medieval marketplace to its version as a placeless, extra-territorial economic formation within the early modern (proto)capitalist system, is associated with the rise of new economic practices that brought into life unprecedentedly abstract forms of social exchange. These found their fictional afterimage in the 'artificial persons' enacted in Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses.

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and His Contemporaries (2nd edn; New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 3-4.

As the disembodied and obscure nature of the signifiers of commodity and money, as well as the 'hidden and concealed intentions' of new types of economic agents, came to dominate social life, a crisis of representation arose that reverberated in the portrayal of the unfixed and precarious nature of individual identity in post-ritual and commercial early modern theatre. In this theatre actors staged both their own shift of identity into fictional characters and the replacement of the universal types of medieval mystery plays with mobile, multifaceted and fully secularised *dramatis personae*:

> With the emergence of a placeless market, the threshold experience threatened to become coextensive with all that a deritualized commodity exchange touched. Life now resembled an infinite series of thresholds, a profusion of potential passages or opportunity costs running alongside experience as a constant reminder of the selves not taken. And just as London's Exchange enforced an ideal of financial liquidity, so London's theaters enacted a vision of this new sociological and psychological fluidity. And why not, since the world was at once a market and a stage?[54]

Moving from this same set of historical concerns, in his *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* Douglas Bruster also engages with the modes of self-reflexive representation of English Renaissance theatres' direct involvement with the emergent market economy:

> As sellers of dramatic literature, London's public and private playhouses came to stage scenarios which represented, reflexively, the market's extensive cultural implications; they responded with a felt, if complicit, urgency, I believe, to the ability of economic forces to shape urban society. ...I elaborate...what I call a cultural poetics of the market..., this examination works to show the social mythology and poetics of nascent capitalism in late-Tudor and early-Stuart London as expressed reflexively in English Renaissance drama.[55]

This is the thesis that informs Bruster's book from beginning to end. The point of this study seems in fact to consist in proving, in its own words, that the age of Shakespeare 'could well be characterized as the Age of commodity fetishism'. Thus, in line with

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[54] Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 97-98.
[55] Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare*, 10-11.

what the author describes as his 'materialist vision', all the way from the metaphors of sexual exchange in *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-1602) to the fetishised handkerchief in *Othello* (1602-1605), excerpts from a big chunk of the Renaissance dramatic canon are selected to construct a vast storehouse of images and representations of an object world corresponding to a time in which the market rendered operative and concretised such 'concepts as fetishism, reification, and personification to an extent as unprecedented as it was alarming'.[56]

More engagingly, as the title of his suggestive *Shakespearean Pragmatism* immediately propounds, Lars Engle has reinvented Shakespeare as a pragmatist thinker *avant la lettre*. Shakespeare's anti-foundationalist relativism and contingent evaluations were fed by that rising market economy of which his own theatre was part and parcel. In the new, fast-changing economic world in which Shakespeare found himself operating, Engle maintains, new profit-enhancing moves were to be constantly devised in a way that provided a prototype that anticipated a latterly codified way of thinking. This is none other than U.S. pragmatism in the version of William James's 'cash-values' - which has taken the market as a model to substitute 'a mutable economy of value, action, and belief for what the philosophic tradition has tried to establish as a fixed structure of fact, truth, and knowledge'. According to Engle, 'early capitalist modes of economic organization' at work all around Shakespeare provided him with a life experience at hand to go beyond established hierarchies and transcendental ways of thinking, in favour of a markedly circumstantial and pragmatic treatment of human interactions and of the calculations they are based upon. By way of analysing a carefully selected number of Shakespearean works, Engle thus manages to portray the novelty of Shakespearean art as a post-metaphysical replacing of fixed social truths with an outlook that, from the opposition between fixed long-term to unstable-short term value in the *Sonnets* (1609) onward, explores the consequences of 'doing without absolutes'.[57]

This constitutes what we may call an explicitly 'presentist' reading, in which the dynamics of the market system are used as a *trait d'union* to mobilise early modern

[56] Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare*, 42.
[57] Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism*, 1-26, 227.

texts for the interrogation of contemporary critical problematics in a way that has been pushed further, albeit in a radically different theoretical environment, in Hugh Grady's *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification*. At the basis of this book there is in fact a stance for an openly postmodernist Shakespeare, which for Grady is the only one we can today realistically get, unless we wished to embark on the unlikely task of attempting to shuttle out of our own selves. Still, he argues, there is a grid of historical coordinates that allow Shakespearean drama to become a privileged tool for the investigation of our own postmodern condition. The prefix 'post', in fact, defines our present against that very historical movement or project, modernity, of which Shakespeare's age represented the early manifestation. In the age of Shakespeare, Grady has it, key markers of modern historical advancement such as 'the absolutist state, mercantile capitalism, and the method of instrumental reason...were already leaving their marks on social life'. And so, they could be 'represented, analysed, and criticised in that remarkable abstract and brief chronicle of the times constituted by London's commercial theatres'.[58] According to Grady, contemporary social and cultural criticism (among his tutelary theoretical authorities a prominent role is found for Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse, Althusser and Foucault) has now put us in the position to interpret and conceptualise such marks in a fully theoretical and self-reflexive language. And this enables us to identify in those same political, social and ideological models the work of reifying, alienating processes that correspond to an early manifestation of the tendency of modern capitalist societies to create oppressive structures - economic infrastructures, state apparatuses and mechanisms of subjection - that have escaped the control of the individual subject and fully determine its condition of existence.

As we get to the end of this quick tracking shot, it seems that one of the fundamental issues that has emerged is, again, one of periodisation. This is an issue, to be sure, whose import goes beyond the interpretative themes raised by the studies mentioned above, and whose principal controversial point hinges on the qualification and labelling of the economic phase that corresponds to the changes initiated, if we are to follow Immanuel Wallerstein's model of economic periodisation, by the rise of a

[58] Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, 55.

'world economy that had its genesis in Europe in the long sixteenth century and that involved the *transformation* of a particular redistributive or tributary mode of production, that of feudal Europe (Braudel's "economic *Ancien Régime*") into a qualitatively different social system'.[59] Wallerstein's model of transition is actually in need of some qualification, which I shall implicitly suggest in the following discussion of the 'so-called primitive accumulation'. But for the present purpose, it provides me with a convenient historical demarcation. A further preliminary problem however, arises here with reference to the notion of periodisation itself. In as far as period frames define and select features and characteristics of specific historical phases that by definition exclude that which does not seem to identify with these historical markers, in the present theoretical moment they are due to be immediately associated with repression of particularity, difference and discontinuity in favour of an arbitrary privileging of identity and homogeneity.[60] Furthermore, if the notion that historical periods can be defined on the basis of their characterising traits and identities is often perceived as a symptom of totalising and teleological ways of thinking, even more so is the case with the idea that the passage from an epoch to a different one can be narrativised through a more or less neat account of a pattern of transition. For, to put it in the most schematic terms, a transitional epoch is one in which an older social formation is still surviving the advent of a new historical era, whose driving force, on the other hand, is already clearly perceivable as running towards an inexorable victory over the past social formation that is fighting its final, already lost battle. So that, by allowing lack or confusion of unifying and characterising elements within a given period to be promptly rewritten as the trace of its being located at the threshold of a seismic historical shift, the notion of transition may be perceived as suspiciously providing a ready made and pre-packed suitable solution to an otherwise haunting and troublesome dilemma of periodisation.

As most critiques of the 'master narrative', as it were, of the transition from feudalism to capitalism have been laid squarely down at the door of the tradition of historical materialism, I will now pass to the other critical text enlisted at the

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[59] Immanuel Wallertsein, *The Modern World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy, 1600-1750* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1980), 8.
[60] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 217-222.

beginning of this literature review. Richard Halpern's *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, in fact, is an intervention that has taken charge of requalifying this theoretical problem from within that tradition by way of Etienne Balibar's structuralist reading of Marx. To tackle this point, I shall summarise some aspects of that important discussion as well. In the first instance, Balibar points out that beside its polemical objective - critiquing the notion of an original accumulation of capital through the savings of the laborious and enterprising class of future capitalists put forward by Adam Smith and the classical school of political economy - Marx's much contested formulation, the 'so-called primitive accumulation', was meant to designate a stage of 'pre-history' (that is something which is not yet history proper) of developments to come. Indeed, if one goes back to the manuscript of the *Grundrisse* (c. 1857-1858), it emerges that the issue of the transition to capitalism was originally addressed by Marx as a working hypothesis to try to figure out why the transformation of money into capital takes place at a particular stage of history, instead of any other previous one. In other words, the primitive accumulation was not originally conceived as a deductive explanatory model in which feudalism is seen as a preparatory stage of historical evolution necessarily bound to be dissolved into capitalism. The key problem addressed by Marx is that the idea of a 'previous' (Adam Smith) accumulation of monetary wealth and the large scale development of commerce does not provide in itself an explanation for the emergence of the other characterising aspect of capitalism, a class of 'free', that is propertyless, wage labourers:

> The mere existence of monetary wealth, even its conquest of a sort of supremacy, is not sufficient for this dissolution [of feudalism] to result in capital. If it were, then ancient Rome, Byzantium, etc., would have concluded their history with free labour and capital, or rather, they would have begun a new history. There the dissolution of the old relations of property was also tied to the development of monetary wealth - of commerce, etc. However in fact the result of this dissolution was not industry, but the domination of the countryside over the city.[61]

Thus, Balibar suggests, in order to unravel this riddle Marx elaborates a notion of 'pre-

[61] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. by Martin Nicholaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 506.

history' that implies a retrospective outlook that 'depends on knowledge of the *result* of the movement'. Accordingly, the two key elements that are individuated as the constitutive factors for the historical development of capitalism - the free wage labourer and capital - are seen by Marx as having an independent genesis and specific, albeit intricate, histories that would find their combination only in a subsequent phase, of which these histories embodied nothing more than the latent conditions of possibility.[62] It is not, then, concludes Balibar, that by outlining this historical movement Marx describes the prefiguration of capitalism within a previous mode of production, feudalism, in which of course capitalism did not exist and no anticipation was possible. Instead, Marx's notion of 'pre-history' stands for the arbitrary selection of those specific emergent elements that could only be found as properly developed in a successive phase. Furthermore, 'pre-history' within this context is also to be intended as that which is not yet history proper in another sense. Marx's notion of 'primitive accumulation' is an eminently theoretical construction that aims to delineate certain tendencies and processes, and not a comprehensive and accomplished historical account of all that had happened in a certain time period.[63] It signals the need for the mobilisation of a 'genealogical' discourse that may help to reconfigure the overwhelming heterogeneity of history into a narrative of emergent and anticipatory social forms and phenomena that finds its full explanatory power only in the light of future transformations. Thus, contra recurrent critiques of its supposed teleological fallacy, the enduring value of this model of explanation - taking exception from the actual accuracy of historical account provided in the original Marxian version - is individuated by Halpern in its self-aware theoretical recognition of the retrospective and deliberately selective projection that any historical outlook necessarily casts on the objects of its investigations.[64]

Still, the question that seems to have been left open here is one about social agency.

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[62] Etienne Balibar, 'Primitive Accumulation: A Pre-history', in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, English trans. (London: Verso, 1997), 276-283.

[63] To underscore this point, that is the uneven historical and geographical processes recalled by this concept, Richard McIntyre has written that 'there is no end to "primitive accumulation" as long as capitalism survive[s]' (Richard McIntyre, 'Theories of Uneven Development and Social Change', *Rethinking Marxism*, 5.3 [1992], 80). For a brilliant discussion of this issue in relation to the criticism of Renaissance drama, see Crystal Bartholovich, 'Putting *Tamburlaine* on a (Cognitive) Map', *Renaissance Drama*, 38 (1997), 29-72.

For how is it to be assessed if the outcome of a transition from an epoch to another is fully retraceable only *ex post*, so that we have a process in which its actual protagonists are not conscious of what they have been posthumously described as being engaged with? And a related question also arises when historical phenomena and forms of social and cultural life are encountered that do not seem to belong to either of the two terms - the emergent and the residual formation - which are prescribed to individuate the ongoing historical modification. This is one of the key historical issues addressed by Michael D. Bristol's *Carnival and Culture: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (1985). The key point that is raised in this study is in fact that in as far as early modern popular culture presented characteristic features that in essence were 'neither feudal nor bourgeois', so that they cannot be assimilated to either of the two terms of the transition to capitalism, then it is to be questioned if it is appropriate to use this interpretative framework at all. Yet, Bristol sensibly maintains, as one must as some point concede that something which, however approximately this term may apply to it, has been called feudalism once existed, and also that a different social formation somehow replaced it, a model of explanation is due to be provided. And he astutely does it by suggesting that as 'the blank space of popular festive forms remained very large', it 'therefore offered considerable scope for critical reflection on all forms of domination, feudal as well as capitalist'.[65] This way of phrasing the issue, then, does not entail the abolition of the idea of a transition from a prior social formation to a new one altogether. It rather brings into view specific factors within the historical process that complicate and problematise the broader picture. These include the dimension, or substratum, of those popular practices, customs and cultural expressions that are not immediately reducible to any aspect of the fundamental transitional movement of which the transformations in early modern English society were part. The theoretical support here comes from Ferdinand Braudel's conceptualisation of this change as articulated through the different and semi-autonomous levels that are to be found in the *longue durée* of deeply rooted practices of everyday life; in the grand scale

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[64] Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 63-64.
[65] M. D. Bristol, *Carnival and Culture: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 48-53.

activities of politics, commerce, trade and technological innovation; and finally in the even more abstract and obscure processes of capital exchange and accumulation. This scheme, quite aside from the specific relevance of Braudel's impressively wide ranging social history of the three centuries that precede the industrial revolution, enables the perception of a plurality of social and cultural spaces and patterns of change that, albeit interrelated, develop along specific lines and according to diversified temporalities.[66] In sum, this way of reworking diversified and partially independent patterns of change presents itself less as a wholesale rejection of the possibility of narrativising the diachronic movement involved with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, than a sophisticated and flexible interpretative model for the articulation of the variety of processes and agents at work within it.

It seems to me, in conclusion, that this manner of addressing the problem of the transition to capitalism is in substantial convergence with Raymond Williams's general observations on periodisation of culture within a Marxist theoretical framework. For Williams, every cultural system is to be seen as constituted by the coexistence of a plurality of elements that give shape to a constant dynamic of change. Therefore, the individuation of 'dominant' markers - feudal, bourgeois culture and the like - and the transition from one to the other is indicated as a valid and productive working hypothesis only on the proviso that it is endorsed to test the full value of non integrated, marginal, oppositional, residual or emergent elements always present alongside and within the dominant in varying degrees of subordination, or as agents of resistance and transformation.[67] This is also the position that I maintain in this study, while, at the same time, elaborating a materialist and radically historicist perspective in which my interpretations remain vitally and self-consciously dependent on the present experience of the contemporary, fully commodified object world of our own late capitalist society.

With these qualifications in mind, I am perhaps in the position now to redefine some of the problematics related to the thematisation of the market raised in recent studies in English Renaissance literature and drama. The dilemmas of periodisation

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[66] Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th-18th Century*, trans. by Sian Reynolds, 3 vols (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).
[67] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

indicated above may in fact serve to highlight that interpretative practice within this context confronts cultural documents inherited from a socio-historical formation both genealogically related to, and yet radically different from, the circumstances that shape their present modes of appropriations and understanding. From this perspective, then, the main risk that one runs by keeping the attention focused on the all too familiar category of the commodity, is that in its reconstellation with the present the past might end up as its embryonic prefiguration or still unfocussed mirror image. To counterbalance this risk, an emphasis could be put on the privileged historical location of the early modern period as an eminently transitional phase, in which the market economy presented itself as an emergent element within a society still in touch with a prior mode of production. This provided Renaissance culture with a point of reference to break that veil of reification that, with the rise of an increasingly pervasive commodification system, would later become thicker and thicker. But then again, to which extent would the construction of such a convenient vantage point of observation have to be taken as the product of some kind of present investment? For the moment, I will just add that this study does not try to retreat from these dilemmas. On the contrary, it attempts to make them the very business and object of its interpretative practice.

2

Political Economy and the Sociology of Dramatic Form: 'Masterless Men' and Citizens

I. The Primitive Accumulation Revisited

The texts with which I shall start belong to the Renaissance genres of rogue literature and the cony-catching pamphlets, as they were called, which dealt with the representation of the life of lower class vagrants, beggars and petty-criminals. According to a recent interpretation, these narrative traditions had developed 'as a figurative act of settlement: exposing, dissecting, and classifying all that threatened to confuse social relations in Elizabethan England, tying the loose ends of commerce and crime back to the frayed fabric of society'.[1] Actually, in many instances these texts claimed to be doing even more than that. Writings such as Gilbert Walkers's *A Manifest Detection of Diceplay* (1552), John Awdeley's *The Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1565) or Thomas Harman's *A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds* (1566)[2] - three among the most popular sixteenth century collections of tales about the life of city delinquents and country idlers - introduced themselves with the claim to have been written and published to record and publicly denounce the unlawful practices of their protagonists. This was said to be done in order to help the State policing and punitive apparatuses to bring them to justice. Harman's *A Caveat for Common Cursitors* even provides an appendix with a list of criminals' names accompanied by the call for their 'extreme punishment' (146).

The crimes catalogued in these pamphlets include pretty much the whole spectrum

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[1] Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1986), 65.

[2] All in *Cony-catchers and Bawdy Baskets*, ed. by Gamini Salgado (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); see also, *The Elizabethan Underworld*, ed. by A. V. Judges (London: Routledge: 1965).

of what could presumably be taken by the dominant social groups to represent a threat to the State and to the moral values gluing together and safeguarding the stability of the social structure: idleness and refusal to work, disrespect of any established authority, rejection of religion, theft, dissembling of identity, pandering, prostitution and sexual promiscuity. For Harman, the main threat that vagabonds and 'counterfeit cranks' posed, lay in the 'dissimulation and...scelerous secrets' (84) with which they covered up their activities, beginning with falsely disguising themselves as charity deserving poor:

> the abominable, wicked and detestable behaviour of all these rowsey, ragged rabblement of rakehells that - under the pretence of great misery, diseases, and other innumerable calamities which they feign - through great hypocrisy do win and gain great alms in places where they wily wander, to the utter deluding of good givers.
>
> (81)

Similarly, in another such kind of text, *The Groundwork of Cony-catching* (1592), the social type in question is described as 'sometimes a mariner, and a serving man, / Or else an artificer, as he would feign then. / Such shifts, he used, being well tried. / Abandoning labour, till he was espied'.[3] The rogues and petty criminals of Robert Greene's *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* (1591), in turn, are described as 'in religion méere atheist' and 'outcasts from God'; 'in trade flat dissemblers' (34) and 'preferring cosenage before labor, and chusing an idle practise before any honest form of good living' (20); with the additional remark annexed that they are 'all either wedded to whores, or so addicted to whores, that what they get from honest men, they spend in bawdy houses among harlots' (31).

The idea that these colourful accounts are to be taken as faithful and reliable social report is, of course, highly dubious. However, the fact that the sixteenth century registered an unprecedented explosion of the phenomenon of vagrancy - 'Infynatt numbers of...wicked wandrynge Idell people' responsible for the 'spoyle and confusion of the land', in the words of a contemporary observer[4] - was real enough. And one can

[3] Quoted in Agew, *Worlds Apart*, 64.
[4] *Tudor Economic Documents*, ed. by R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1935), 2: 341.

also safely assume that a huge number of displaced people and vagabonds wandering around the country with no secure means of survival would have actually represented a threat to the established social order.[5] But there were also more abstract tensions and fears related to the profound transformations in the social and economic structure of contemporary English society that this phenomenon seems to have aroused. Christopher Hill cites a government inquiry which calculated that in 1569 there were thirteen thousand 'masterless men' ('servants to nobody') roaming all over England, mostly in the North, and a document estimating that in 1602 there were thirty thousand of them in London alone. He writes that the outburst of the phenomenon of vagrancy was one of the key factors that contributed to dissolve the bonds of dependence and the social allegiances inherited from the structure of feudalism. 'The essence of feudal society was the bond of loyalty and dependence between lord and man': the 'society was hierarchical in structure: some were lords, others were their servants', Hill argues, the 'assumptions were those of a relatively static agricultural society, with local loyalties and local control: no land and no man without a lord'.[6]

As regards its deep and structural causes, the classic historical materialist account outlines that the explosion of mass vagrancy and vagabondage was fuelled, first and foremost, by the social dislocation and unsettlement put into motion by the pressure of enclosures, evictions and dispossession of the peasantry; that is, by that epochal process of enforced and violent separation of the rural labour force from the means of production (land) that Marx famously defined as the 'so-called primitive accumulation':

> [t]he spoliation of the church's property, the fraudulent alienation of the State domains, the robbery of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property, and its transformation into modern private property under

[5] Cf. John Walter and Keith Wrightson, 'Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 71 (1976), 22-42; J. A. Sharpe, *Crime in Seventeenth-Century England: A County Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); J. A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550-1750* (London: Arnold, 1985); A. L. Beier, 'Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England', *Past and Present*, 64 (1974), 3-29; A. L. Beier, *The Problem of the Poor in Tudor and Early Stuart England* (London: Methuen, 1983); A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985); Paul Slack, 'Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598-1664', *Economic History Review*, 27 (1974), 360-379.

[6] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 39.

> circumstances of reckless terrorism, were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation.[7]

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Marx names it 'so-called' primitive accumulation as a polemic reference to Adam Smith's theorisation of a 'prior' or 'previous' accumulation of wealth attributed to the parsimony and diligent industriousness of the section of the population that would become the capitalist class.[8] And, notoriously, what is ambiguous about Marx's demystifying and polemic reference is that he eventually appropriates the very notion that he has just mocked as a serious concept in its own right. So that he ends up providing his own alternative version of it, a version which, Richard Halpern has remarked, is not a 'history' of the primitive accumulation proper, but rather a 'prehistory', 'a constellation of events with no internal articulation', a 'narrative [which] seems merely to identify a space where a history ought to be'.[9]

In turn, among the successive attempts to fill this historical space, one of the most influential and widely debated has been Robert Brenner's study on the 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic development in Pre-Industrial Europe' (1976).[10] Here

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[7] Karl Marx, *Capital,* vol. 1, trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 732-733.

[8] Thus an excerpt from Marx's typically sarcastic onslaught:

> This primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past. In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. Never Mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins.
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> (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 713)

[9] Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 66. See also Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, English trans. (London: Verso, 1997), 273-308.

[10] Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe', in *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. by T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 30-63. The date in the main text is that of the original publication of the article in the journal *Past and Present*. See also Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1946); *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. by Rodney Hilton (London: New Left Books, 1976); and

Brenner redefines the historical processes of the 'so-called primitive accumulation' as the emergence, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century English countryside, of strictly 'economic' mechanisms of exploitation of labour power and surplus extraction. These replaced the typically feudal 'extra-economic' modes of coercion of the agricultural workforce carried out through the use of the political, juridical and military power of the agrarian landlords. In the old serfdom model, direct producers were forced, under the threat of violent repression and legal punishment, to give up part of their labour in the form of unpaid service in the lord's demesne; to give the landlords part of the production in their own family owned land in the form of agricultural products, rent or tax; and finally, to supply their labour for other services, such as artisan work, domestic or military service. The terminal crisis of this model, so Brenner argues, was reached as a result of the conflict between the landed aristocracy and the peasantry, which of course did not give away its unpaid labour, production and wealth without resistance. And this generated a constant struggle between the productive and the ruling class. At its peak this struggle exploded in form of violent revolts, but more often was waged by the productive class by holding back deliveries of surplus, and came to an end when peasants, typically serfs and tenants, eventually succeeded in increasing their bargain power and therefore managed to force their overlords to pay for their labour in wages and to accept payment of rents in cash.

As Perry Anderson also explains in his key study on the *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974), feudal lordship was reliant on 'a mechanism of surplus extraction', serfdom, in which 'economic exploitation and politico-legal coercion were fused'. He describes this system as based on 'organic unit[ies] of economics and polity, which constituted a 'chain of parcellized sovereignties'. According to Anderson, the solvent of this socioeconomic and political structure was the growth of a commodity and money economy and, in particular, the transformation of feudal dues into money rents. 'With the generalized commutation of dues into money rents', he maintains, 'the cellular unity of political and economic oppression of the peasantry was gravely weakened and threatened to become dissociated'. The response to this process by a feudal aristocracy attempting to maintain its hold on the rural labour force, he goes on,

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E. M. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 11-105.

was a move towards the unification of political power, that is 'a *displacement* of politico-legal coercion upwards towards a centralized, militarized summit - the Absolutist State'.[11] Thus, for Anderson the rise of the Absolutist State corresponds to a twofold, markedly contradictory social and political development. On the one hand, it is the product of a political manoeuvre aimed at preserving the old forms of political coercion, 'a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination, designed to clamp the peasant masses back into their traditional social position' and, more generally, a political instrument devised to defend and impose the interests of the feudal aristocracy against those of all the other classes.[12] On the other hand, though, by way of contributing to separate political power from the economic sphere, the Absolutist State promotes the conditions for the development, in the interstices of early modern society, of fully commodified economic relations that are progressively freed from the control of the State apparatus.[13] To be sure, as regards the centralisation and concentration of power in the hands of the monarchy, according to Anderson England saw only an imperfect and partial form of Absolutist State, for before 'it could reach the age of maturity, English Absolutism was cut off by a bourgeois revolution'.[14] But for him this is not the essential point, which, he asserts, does apply to England as well. This point is the separation of political power, which substantially continued to represent the interests of the (neo)feudal aristocracy, from the growing economic power of the new urban bourgeoisie.

Yet, besides the substantive elements of convergence that may be found between them, Anderson and Brenner's theses radically diverge on at least one fundamental issue. For Perry Anderson, as politico-legal coercion is 'displaced upwards', in the hands of the Absolutist State, the economic sphere becomes progressively autonomous

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[11] Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), 19.
[12] Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 18-19.
[13] Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 23.
[14] Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 142. See also Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. by Timothy O'Hagan (London: Verso, 1978). Poulantzas, like Anderson, suggests that in 'England, because of its different concrete situation, the transition from the feudal to the capitalist state seems to be more tardy and more direct, allowing only a precarious existence of the absolutist state' (161-162). In this study, though, the key role played by the Absolutist State in the transition to capitalism is not primarily related to the class conflicts within which it intervenes, but rather to 'the relative autonomy of the absolutist state relative both to the economic instance and to the field of class struggle', which 'was precisely what allowed it to function in favour of primary accumulation of capital' (160, 166).

from political power and is thus set free to develop according to its internal logic and dynamics. In this way the necessary conditions are created for the development of a large-scale commodity market and, more emphatically, for the flourishing of 'bourgeois' society.[15] Anderson ultimately designates this flourishing as the key aspect of the most radical socioeconomic changes in the early modern period. Brenner, by contrast, maintains that the real driving force of the economic and social transformations in early modern England is to be found in the countryside, that is, in the introduction of capitalist rationality in the mode of agricultural production, which led to technological innovation and efforts to reduce cost and raise the efficiency of labour, of which urban development and commercial expansion are indicated as causally dependent or subordinate effects.

But in order to fully grasp the terms and the broad implications of the opposition between Anderson and Brenner's theses, it is worth looking at the way in which the latter have been further elaborated by Ellen Meiskins Wood in her *The Origin of Capitalism* (1999). This study, which largely draws on Brenner's argument, sets out to challenge the well-established convention in Western culture that associates the rise of capitalism with the development of the modern city, the ascendancy to economic and political power of bourgeois and merchant estates and, more generally, with the rise of a fully developed system of international commerce and commodity exchange. These are the key features of what she calls the 'commercialization model'. And an instance of this, as we have seen, can also be found in Perry Anderson's historical outline, although among critical economic histories its more emphatic version is surely Immanuel Wallerstein's world system's theory.[16] The key element of novelty that Wallerstein has introduced in this debate lies in his suggestion that we replace the basic unit of analysis of 'society' - which has been traditionally identified with the historical formation of the nation state and its socioeconomic and political structure - with that of a 'world-system' that from a certain point in history, 'the long sixteenth century', onwards begins to absorb all the pre-existing historical formations and to

[15] Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 23.
[16] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1976); and Wallerstein, *The Modern World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European*

subsume all national and local economies. An integrated world economic system thus emerges that no longer finds any spatial limit to its geographical expansion. This is a process, adds Wallerstein, 'that is still going on today'.[17] He is indeed describing what we would eventually learn to know as globalisation.[18] In Wallerstein's world-system theory, the autonomous role of nation states is subordinated to the inter-state system of which they are a by-product (and the same goes for other formations such as social classes, ethnic groups, regional microsystems and the like). The engine of the development of the modern world-system is the incessant accumulation of capital, which according to Wallerstein is primarily based on an unequal exchange between the poles of centre and periphery, in which the centre appropriates the surplus of the periphery and of the various semi-peripheries.

From Wood's (and Brenner's) perspective, in turn, the crucial limit of this theory is that it fails to explain why there is a passage to a world economic system in which the Western world (i.e. the centre) eventually manages to gain supremacy over the other parts of the globe. For them this cannot be explained by focusing on the sphere of trade, commerce and, more generally, circulation of commodities and money - as in Wallerstein's account - but needs to be analysed from the standpoint of the early modern transformations in the mode of production in Europe. In fact, according to Wood's critique of the various versions of the commercialisation model, its chief problem lies in its representation of the emergence of capitalism as a lineal evolutionary development from an economic system based on local production and limited commodity exchange into a world system of trade and commerce. This is a transformation, in which a pivotal role is usually assigned to the development of early modern urban conglomerates and centres of international trade such as London or the Mediterranean city states. According to this model, which finds its roots in classical political economy, but which has been to a substantial extent reproduced by many of its critics, the modern world market represents an expansion whose origins can ultimately be stretched back to the most archaic and basic forms of commodity

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World-Economy, 1600-1750 (New York and London: Academic Press, 1980).

[17] Wallerstein, *The Modern World System II*, 8.

[18] Cf. Barrie Axford, *The Global System: Economics, Politics and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

exchange. The ascendancy of capitalism, she argues, is thus reduced to a quantitative growth and expansion of earlier forms of commerce which is finally fully enabled, in early modern Europe, by 'the liberation of the urban economy, of commercial activity and mercantile rationality' from the old feudal constraints and obstructive fetters, and 'by the inevitable improvements in techniques of production which evidently follow from the emancipation of trade'.[19] Wood, on the contrary, individuates (still after Brenner) a profound historical rupture that came to an end with the new socioeconomic openings in the sixteenth century English countryside. This break for her did not correspond to the emergence of relatively developed and geographically widespread commodity or money markets as such, but more specifically to transformations in social relations of agricultural production that corresponded to the superimposition in the countryside of 'imperatives of competition, accumulation and profit maximization'.[20] To make sense of this epochal transformation, Wood argues - pretty much in line with Perry Anderson's historical account, although reversing causal relations - that it was necessitated by the process of centralisation of political, juridical and military power that marked the emergence of the Absolutist State.

Having been weakened in their traditional coercive force by the upward relocation of military, political and juridical powers in the central government of the nation state, the agrarian lords increasingly resorted to new methods of surplus extraction. Among these, there was the replacement of customary standards in determination of rents by a market in leases that obliged tenants 'to compete not only in a market for consumers, but in a market for access to the land'. Thus, 'in a situation where other potential tenants were competing for the same leases' and uncompetitive production could mean losing one's land, 'tenants were compelled to produce cost-effectively, on penalty of dispossession'.[21] Hence a dramatic increment in productivity that was ensured and sustained by radical technological innovations, the rationalisation of production and, as a logical consequence, the creation of a growing mass of surplus production. All this fuelled the expansion of the market economy and, to get to the key point here, led to radical transformations in the social division of labour both at a local and national

[19] Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 13.
[20] Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 71.
[21] Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 75-76.

level, which was the result of the fact that the same or indeed a far increased total agricultural output could now be produced by a smaller number of rural workers. In sum, for Wood and Brenner it was this increase in agricultural productivity, which - along with the processes of enclosure of large amounts of land, that were reconverted to pasture for the increasingly lucrative sheep farming that refurbished the raw material for the new textile industries[22] - lay at the root of the massive processes of social dislocation and unsettlement that fuelled the explosion of the phenomenon of vagrancy.

Various critiques have been put forward to question Brenner and Wood's explanatory model. And among these, there is the argument that their emphasis on the pivotal part played by the transformations in the mode of agricultural production and therefore their downplaying of the role played by national and, in particular, international trade and commerce represents an unacceptably restrictive historical construction. Perry Anderson, for one, in his critique of Brenner's argument points out that 'English landowners could never have started their conversion to commercial agriculture without the market for wool in Flemish towns -just as Dutch farming was by Stuart times in advance of English, not least because it was conjoined to a richer urban society'.[23] Furthermore, in recent 'Third-Worldist' critiques Brenner's historical theses have been dubbed as 'diffusionist' and 'Eurocentric': autonomous development at the center, diffusion of development to the periphery.[24] This kind of disagreement is about what may be defined as a matter of ultimate causal authority. Neither Brenner nor Wood refuse to acknowledge the existence or indeed the importance of commerce, trade and urbanisation, nor does Anderson or their other critics deny the transformations in the mode of agricultural production that they focus on. The divergence is rather in terms of different ways of ordering and hierarchising the complex multiplicity of determinations at work in the process of transition to capitalism and hence of diverse models for their interpretation and valuation. And in

[22] With reference to what Thomas More famously described with the image of sheep devouring men, however, Wood suggests that the impact of enclosure may have been overestimated both by contemporary commentators and modern historians (*The Origin of Capitalism*, 83-84)

[23] Cited in Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 39.

[24] See, for instance, J. M. Blaut, 'Robert Brenner in the Tunnel of Time', *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, 26.4 (1994), 351-376. See also J. M. Blaut *et alii, Fourteenth Ninety-Two: The Debate*

this respect, it is worth recalling once more the Althusserian notion of overdetermination discussed in the previous chapter. For the idea of a singular or unitary fundamental determination - the 'ultimately determining instance' which, as Althusser notes, never comes in a pure and splendidly isolated form - is replaced by it with that of a multiplicity of relatively autonomous effectivities, which are allocated distinct, albeit interpenetrating, causal resources. By this, however, I do not mean to suggest that we should do away with the notion of determination altogether, or even with the idea that some historical factors are indeed more determinant than others. Rather the notion of overdetermination shall serve here as a reminder that any historical phenomenon is in fact always located at the conjucture of a plurality of different and intertwining historical threads. As Aijaz Ahmad has put it in a different context, we should replace the idea of 'a unitary determination' with that of 'a *tension*, a mutually transformative relation, between the problematic of a final determination...and the utter historicity of multiple, interpenetrating determinations'.[25] This is also the position argued through in the rest of this chapter - an inflection of the 'so-called primitive accumulation' with an emphasis on the multiple determinations at work within and around it.

II. 'Masterless Men' and Citizens

The early modern explosion of vagrancy brought with itself a radical change of policies and attitudes towards the poor, which shifted from an emphasis on the local community provision of relief and on the Middle Ages discourse of 'holy poverty', to a predominantly punitive and disciplining legislation and set of discourses.[26] As a product of the massive social displacement and uprooting that underscored the decline of the self-enclosed local corporative 'unity of economic and polity', the growing population of wandering migrants and vagabonds came to represent a menace, a marginal and alien other to be forcibly reincorporated in the structure of power and subjection of the newly centralised Tudor and Stuart State apparatus. This change of

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About Colonialism, Eurocentrism, and History (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1992).

[25] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 120.

[26] Beier, *Masterless Men*, 73-76; Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 72-75.

policies and attitudes found a formal expression in those notorious 'bloody' statutes and acts that constituted the core of early modern legislation aimed to enforce the restraining and repression of the vagrant poor. These legal measures included decrees stating that beggars too old or in any way unable to work receive a beggar's licence, while sturdy vagabonds be tied to the cart-tail, whipped until bloody, returned to where they came from and, once there, 'put...to labour' (1531); that idlers who refuse to work be condemned as slaves to the person who has denounced them as vagabonds, forced to work in exchange for bread and water, and if they run away thrice be executed as felons (1547); that vagabonds and idlers above fourteen years be whipped, burned through the ear unless set to work, while their children be bound to service (1572); that stocks of materials for poor to work on be set up in every town, and houses of correction be opened in every county for those refusing to work (1576); and finally, failing all of the above, that dangerous and incorrigible rogues and criminals be committed to jail, banished or executed (1598).[27]

Michel Foucault makes the crucial point, in respect to the punitive mechanisms envisaged by this body of legislation, that at the heart of the Absolutist technology of power there was the inscription of its visible mark on the subjected body. This is one of the things that distinguish it from the means for the enforcement of social order and control in later political systems. These later means are all those exercises, routines and obligations which define and sanction normal and deviant behaviour in modern capitalist societies, and which are accomplished through disciplinary institutions such as the prison, the factory, the hospital, the school, and the like.[28] In the present context, an attempt to impose prescriptive, as well as punitive, mechanisms of control and regulation of social life can be found in the letter of the *Statute of Apprentices*, first issued in 1563, which primarily aimed to limit the geographical movement of the lower class wandering multitude, to introduce a rigid system of labour discipline and

[27] Respectively in 'Concerning Punishment of Beggars and Vagabonds' (22 Henry VIII c. 12, 1531); 'For the Punishment of Vagabonds and for Relief of the Poor and Impotent' (14 Elizabeth I c. 5, 1572); 'For Setting the Poor on Work, and for the Avoiding of Idleness' (18 Elizabeth I c. 3, 1576); 'For the Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars' (39 Elizabeth I c. 4, 1598). These are excerpted and summarised in Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52-53. See also Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Longman, 1982); and Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 27.

[28] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York:

to establish a maximum limit to wages. The statute included articles stating that 'no manner of persone or persones after the foresaide daye of September...shall reteyne or take into service...by any means or collour to worcke for any lesse tyme, or terme, then forr one hoole yere in any of the sciences craftes mysteryes or arts of clotheires, wollen clothe wevers, tuckers, fullers' and so on; that ' every person being unmarryed, and every other person being under the age of thirtie yares...and having bene brought upp in any of the saide Artes, craftes or sciences...and not having landes, Tenementes, Rentes or Heredyamentes, Copyholde or Freholde, of one estate of inherytaunce...be reetyned and shall not refuse to serve accordinge to the tenor of this statute, uppon the payne and penaltie hereafter mentioned'; that 'every artificier and labourer...shall contynewe and not departe from the same worke...before the fynyshyng of the said worke, upon payne of ymprysonment by one monethe withoute bayle'.[29] Yet, for all the rigour and complexity of this ensemble of legal measures, the sheer number of statutes against sturdy vagabonds, beggars and vagrants initiated with Henry VIII (1531, 1536) and revived by Edward VI (1547, 1450), Elizabeth I (1572, 1576, 1598, 1601) and their successors, as well as the subsequent revisions of the *Statute of Apprentices* under James I and afterwards, seems to suggest that none of them was ultimately effective.[30] On this score, then, the issue of 'masterless men' could be taken as an exemplary instance to revisit the 'canonical' debate in more or less recent Renaissance political criticism on the themes of subversion and containment.

The much stereotyped new historicist move, in this context, is that of seeing, in Carolyn Porter's words, 'masterless men's subversive resistance...as the product of the dominant culture's power'.[31] Her polemical object here is in fact an interpretative framework within which the Elizabethan lower classes are - as in Stephen Greenblatt's best-known essay 'Invisible Bullets' (1981) - substantially expropriated of their agency. This results from a model of historical interpretation that narrows down its focus to the forms in which the lower classes are represented in the theatre for the purpose of serving the Absolutist State apparatus's attempt 'to understand', 'control'

Vintage, 1979).

[29] *Tudor Economic Documents*, 2: 339-342.

[30] Cf. J. A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History 1550-1760* (London and New York: Arnold, 1987), 223-234.

and reinscribe their agency in its own hegemonic and power structure.[32] In Greenblatt's text - a study of *Henry IV, Part I* and *II* (1597-1598) and *Henry V* (1598-1599) - there is also a reference to Thomas Harman's *Caveat.* Harman's disguise, flattering, 'accurate observation,...recording' and ultimately betrayal, Greenblatt argues, is to his Elizabethan lower class characters what Prince Hal is to Falstaff and his early companions. Their position is then further associated with that of those other typical Elizabethan exotic 'others': the inhabitants of the New World portrayed in early transatlantic travel accounts ('middle- and upper-class English settlers in the New World regarded American Indians less as another race than as a version of their own lower classes');[33] and the natives (Fluellen, Macmorris and Jamy) of the 'last wild areas of the British Isles...the doomed outposts of a vanishing tribalism', whose taming for Greenblatt is symbolically represented by their recruitment to fight shoulder to shoulder with the Englishmen at Agincourt.[34]

Conversely, moving from this same set of associations, Paul Brown's home brand cultural materialist reading of *The Tempest* (1611) rearticulates them by connecting the dominant Renaissance 'class' discourse of 'masterlessness' (represented in the Shakespearean play by Stephano and Trinculo) with the 'race' discourse of 'savagism' (personified, of course, by Caliban). The confluence of the alien forces recalled by these discourses in an act of rebellion which in *The Tempest* is ultimately generated and controlled by Prospero's power, is thus presented as the essence of a colonialist project which, in order to legitimate itself, had to produce the threat of an 'other' against which 'true civil subjectivity is declared' and its victory celebrated in the triumph of the colonial master. This way, the discourse of savagism is revealed as interstitial to very idea of civility constructed against it. And at the heart of this idea Brown identifies the radical ambiguity and contradiction encapsulated in Prospero's proprietorial, but also ironically self-defining, final designation of Caliban: 'this thing of darkness / I acknowledge mine' (V. i. 275-276).[35] As regards the 'masterless other',

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[31] Carolyn Porter, 'Are We Being Historical Yet?', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87 (1988), 774.
[32] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 65.
[33] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 49.
[34] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 56.
[35] Paul Brown, '"This Thing of darkness I Acknowledge Mine": *The Tempest* and the Discourse of

Brown suggests that the dominant Renaissance discourse constructed it as a 'threat around which the governing classes might mobilise, that is, around which they might recognise their common class position, as governors, over and against the otherwise ungoverned and dangerous multitudes'.[36]

Both of these readings, therefore, identify the 'many vagabonds, rogues, idle persons, and masterless men having nothing to live on [who] daily resort to the cities of London and Westminster...and other villages and towns' of Elizabeth's decrees,[37] as a subversive threat which, all and at the same time, served the dominant political and social forces to sustain and legitimate their own position within the existing order and structure of domination. The substantial alternative here is between a historical interpretation in which the always already doomed position of the 'other' is evoked to construct dominant political and cultural power as a totality beyond which there can be no uncontained force of authentic subversion, and one in which, on the contrary, the dominant power's constant, if unconscious, need to produce the image of a disruptive other reveals the very real ambiguities and contradictions suppressed beneath the surface of power's self-legitimating discourse.

Rather than entering into this well rehearsed debate, I wish now to focus on the relation between these interpretations of the discourse of 'power' and the horizon of class relations, conflicts and ideologies. In this context, I would suggest that the dialectic of subversion and containment recalled above could be productively reinscribed in a relational or dialogical understanding of class ideology. This will thus no longer turn out to be a mere reflection of an objective social *datum* - the class *in itself* as a product of certain socioeconomic determinations - or a fixed set of values and a model of self-representation of a particular rank of society that can be analysed in isolation from the whole social ensemble. Rather, it will be constructed as a strategic formulation or operator which ordains and reorganizes a plurality of conflicting and heterogeneous social forces, tendencies and worldviews into a

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Colonialism', in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (2nd edn; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 48-71.

[36] Brown, '"This Thing of darkness I Acknowledge Mine"', 51-52.

[37] 'Enforcing Statutes Against Vagabonds and Rogues', in *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. by P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin, 3 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 2: 415-416.

dynamic and contested field of class alliances and/or oppositions.[38] This formulation, however, can be better illustrated in terms of actual textual readings.

As has been said, the ideological work that rogue literature or the cony-catching pamphlets explicitly declared themselves to be doing was first and foremost that of exposing the menace that the marginal and unsettled classes living in disorder and at the edge of civility posed to the aggregate of hierarchical class relations that constituted Elizabethan society. In other words, they presented themselves as a mode of discursive intervention that aimed to actively sustain and defend social cohesion and stability - what the Elizabethans called 'commonwealth'[39] - against the threats coming from the ungoverned margins of society. Thus, Harman introduces his *Caveat* with a dedication to the Countess of Shrewsbury which asserts the conformity of the existing hierarchy of rank and wealth distribution to a naturalised index of moral values and individual qualities:

> I well by good experience understanding and considering your most tender, pitiful, gentle and noble nature - not only having a vigilant and merciful eye to your poor, indigent and feeble parishioners; yea, not only in the parish where your honour most happily dwell, but also in others environing or near adjoining to the same; as also abundantly pouring out daily your ardent and bountiful charity upon all such as cometh for relief into your luckly gates... (81)

One would be clearly mistaken to think that this opposition between the 'poor, indigent and feeble parishioners' and the Countess's house, with its infinite disposal of material goods 'abundantly pouring out daily' through its 'luckly gates', is recalled to expose some kind of unjust or questionable structure of privilege. On the contrary, this passage is a celebration of the philanthropic generosity of the aristocratic dedicatee, which provides an individualising, depoliticised solution to the social problem of vagrancy and poverty that screens off their deep and structural causes. Harman's main concern is in fact about the distinction between the deserving and the counterfeit poor,

[38] See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), especially 83-89.

[39] 'A common wealth is called a society or common doing of a multitude of free men collected together and united by common accord and covenauntes among themselves, for the conservation of themselves aswell in peace as in warre' (Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. by L. Alston [Cambridge:

that is, about the threat posed by the vagrants' disguising of their identity in order to infiltrate the local community and abuse the munificent generosity of the aristocrat. It is actually difficult not to perceive Harman's description of the daily ritual of social communion at the Countess's gate as some kind of nostalgic transfiguration or idealised representation of reality, in other words, as a site for the reader's ideological interpellation. This idyllic scene evidently aims to bind the reader up to the defence of the harmonic and ordered space of the parish, with the aristocratic house located at its centre, and against the intrusion of outsiders that might destabilise the peaceful and secluded world supervised and safeguarded by the aristocrat's all reaching 'vigilant and merciful eye'.[40]

If we move from here to later examples of rogue literature, then, we can begin to reinscribe in the letter of their texts the decline of the cellular structure of power and the old corporative system of social and affective bonds and control represented in Harman's portrait of provincial life, and its displacement into the more articulated and mobile set of social relations, as well as ideological and moral codes, of the early modern metropolitan scenario of London. The dedication of Robert Greene's *A Notable Discovery of Cosenage*, to begin with, is not to an individual aristocratic figure, but 'To The Yong Gentlemen, Marchants, Apprentises, Farmers, and Plain Countreymen Health' (7). The commonwealth that in Harman's text was identified with the fixed and tightly ordered social chain of the self-enclosed geographical space of the parish, in Greene's later 'cony-catching' pamphlets is constituted by a whole spectrum of distinct class positions, interests and relations:

> The poor farmer simply going about his business or to his attorney's chamber is caught up and cozened of all. The servingman, sent with his lord's treasure, loseth ofttimes most part to these worms of the commonwealth. The prentice, having his master's money in charge, is spoiled by them, and from an honest servant either driven to run away or to live in discredit forever. The gentleman loseth his land, the merchant his stock, and all to these abominable cony-catchers.
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> (31)

Cambridge University Press, 1982], 62).

[40] Cf. Barry Taylor, *Vagrant Writing: Social and Semiotic Disorder in the English Renaissance* (New York and London: harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 1-24.

The criminal, outlaw 'other' here is not represented as an interloper coming from a geographical outside. It is as a member of a community within the community, of an 'underworld' that lurks beneath the surface and at the margins of urban society and whose populace of rogues, thieves and criminals stands against the very plurality of class interests that, on the other hand, it serves to unite and with which it is inextricably locked in struggle.

This marginal social space is separated from the outside world by means of the strange language, the 'canting' or jargon unintelligible to the non-initiated, that provides lower class criminals with a semiotic communication system of their own, and therefore with an autonomous subculture. This is precisely what the text sets out to lay bare and unpack. So that, in order to offer the reader a gaze into this world apart, the pamphlet has to give voice to its people and their 'Philosophie...opinions, principles, aphorismes', to interpret 'their conceipts,...decipher their qualities' (8). Though, if in Greenblatt's words Prince Hal's exploration of the life of the lower classes 'enables us to feel at moments that we are...surveying a complex new world',[41] the galleries of characters presented by Greene's pamphlets, by contrast, fare no better than coarse stereotypes. 'The two ends I aime at', one of Greene's characters says, 'is gaine and ease, but what honest gaine I may get, never comes within ye compasse of my thoughts' (35). All that such 'philosophy' and 'aphorisms' serve to do is to confirm and reproduce dominant contemporary ideas about the growing number of idlers, vagabonds and petty criminals, such as those exposed in William Harrison's *The Description of England* (1577). In the latter text these social figures are portrayed as the 'thriftless sort' who 'lick the sweat from the true labourers' brows...creaturers abhorring all labour and every honest exercise'.[42] In other words, what Greene's cony-catching pamphlets present seems to be not so much a documentary report about the life of the London slums, but a moralising discourse about it that feeds into the prevalent class anxieties and stereotyped conceptions about the life and practices of marginalised and unsettled lower class sectors of early modern urban society.

[41] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 56.
[42] Quoted in Beier, *Masterless Men*, 10.

In his notes on the early modern 'legislation against the expropriated', Marx writes that in essence this legislation 'treated them [beggars, robbers, vagabonds, etc.] as "voluntary criminals", and assumed that it depended on their good will to go on working under the old conditions that no longer existed'.[43] Indeed, this is also the guiding assumption of contemporary rogue literature and cony-catching pamphlets, in which the often overlapping discourses about vagrancy and criminality construct these social categories in terms of individual attitudes, inclinations and qualities, that is, in terms of condemnation for the lazy and thriftless vagrant or, to use Marx's phrase, 'voluntary criminal'. And this discourse intersected with another, equally individualising one. This is what Richard Halpern describes as the 'discourse of capacities', a discourse which, two centuries before Adam Smith, already conceived 'the individual as a set of given potentialities that manifested themselves in economic activities' and represent the key to upward social mobility. These potentialities, Halpern specifies, ranged 'from concepts such as intelligence, talent, creativity, or cleverness to the abilities to impose and endure various kinds of self-discipline such as industry, parsimony and persistence'.[44] Thus, in the intersection between these two discourses, the idle and cunning 'masterless men' and the lazy and degenerate rogues' way of life come to represent the deviant other of that typically 'middle-class' social ethos based on diligence, thrift, hard work and self-discipline. This ethos, as Louis B. Wright's study on this subject has highlighted, found its early Renaissance expression in the ideology of the Reformation doctrine celebrated in a long series of edifying religious sermons and pamphlets and, more relevantly here, in fictional works such as Thomas Deloney's prototypical novels and plays like Thomas Heywood's *The Four Prentices of London* (c. 1594) or Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599).[45] According to this polarisation, the tradition of rogue literature and the cony-catching pamphlets produced an image of the mutinous masterless other against which the expanding Elizabethan 'middle-class' literary public could counterpose a whole system of normative social identities and behaviours. This is what Deloney, Dekker and

[43] Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 734.
[44] Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 88.
[45] L. B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 170-200, 228-296.

Heywood's works - among others - took charge to provide to this same 'middle-class' public, that is a self-conscious worldview and positive representation of itself.[46]

In this context, Thomas Dekker's best-known comedy, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* can be usefully picked up for a closer reading. Much of the action of the play is set in the workshop of Simon Eyre - the protagonist who lends his profession to the title of the play - and is based on two tales from the first part of Thomas Deloney's collection *The Gentle Craft* (c. 1598). These interpolate the story of the social ascendancy of Simon Eyre, a shoemaker who in the mid-fifteenth century had become first the sheriff and then the Lord Mayor of London, with a comic-romantic intrigue involving his journeymen and a maid in his household.[47] In critical interpretations, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* has traditionally been read along with the grain of its own self-presentation - 'a merry conceited comedy...being indeed in no way offensive' (Induction, 2-3) - that is as a celebration of the middle-class dynamism and energy embodied by its protagonist.[48] By contrast, in recent, more sceptical neo historicist re-readings Dekker's play has been suggested to represent a social fantasy or wish-fulfilment that provides a series of artificial and overtly idealised ideological resolutions to 'the tensions and contradictions created by the nascent capitalism of the late sixteenth century'.[49] However, if so this wish-fulfilling daydream is not narrated in a monological language representing a homogeneous and fully structured dominant ideology. Instead, Dekker's play introduces a strong element of dialogism that mediates between different class discourses and their corresponding structures of values.[50]

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[46] Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, 410-464.

[47] See Anthony Parr, 'Introduction', in *The Shoemaker's Holiday,* ed. by Anthony Parr (London: Black; New York: Norton, 1990), x-xii.

[48] See, for instance, J. H. Kaplan, 'Virtue's Holiday: Thomas Dekker and Simon Eyre', *Renaissance Drama*, 2 (1969), 103-122; A. F. Kinney, 'Thomas Dekker's Twelfth Night', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 41 (1971), 63-73; Peter Mortenson, 'The Economics of Joy in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*', *Studies in English Literature*, 16 (1976), 241-252.

[49] D. S. Kastan, 'Workshop and/as Playhouse', in *Staging the Renaissance*, ed. by D. S. Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 152; see also Lawrence Venuti, *Our Halcyion Dayes: English Prerevolutionary Texts and Postmodern Culture* (Madison, Win., and London: The University of Winsconsin Press, 1989), 131-135.

[50] See L. C. Knights, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937). In this study, the ideological position of Dekker's (and Heywood's) comedies is described in terms of a 'citizen morality' that cannot be classified 'as either "medieval" or "modern". ...It is a citizen morality, but it is neither entirely individualistic nor out of touch with tradition' (232).

The conflicts that emerge throughout the play, with the social typifications that underscore them, are resolved by conflating and interpenetrating different social attitudes and ideologies, rather than by imposing one of them over the others. Indeed, more than real and full-blooded conflicts, these are actually local skirmishes that are constantly kept under control by the narrative's straight movement towards the happy ending. This includes the clash that frames the entire narrative, the one between the Lord Mayor, Oatley - a representative of the growing economic power of the new urban classes - and the economically declining aristocracy typified by Sir Hugh Lacy, the Earl of Lincoln. This clash exemplarily typifies the historical opposition between an old social outlook and value system based on inherited rank and status and what has here been defined as the emerging 'middle-class' discourse of individual qualities. Thus, while the Earl rejects the Lord Mayor's daughter, Lucy, as a suitable wife for his nephew on the basis of her 'mean birth' (21. 103), the Lord Mayor's specular objection is due to the fact that the Earl's nephew is an unrepentant, dissolute spendthrift.

In the event, the conflict finds its resolution thanks to the king's intervention in favour of the marriage, to which the two contestants fail to oppose any substantial resistance. This is an intervention that takes the form of a propitiatory speech that manages to reconcile the conflicting parties at one stroke:

> Lincoln, no more.
> Dost thou not know that love respects no blood,
> Cares not for difference of birth or state?
> The maid is young, well born, fair, virtuous,
> A worthy bride for any gentleman.
> Besides, your nephew for her sake did stoop
> To bare necessity and, as I hear,
> Forgetting honours and all courtly pleasures,
> To gain her love became a shoemaker.
> As for the honour which he lost in France,
> Thus I redeem it: Lacy, kneel thee down.
> Arise, Sir Roland Lacy. Tell me now,
> Tell me in earnest, Oatley, canst thou chide,
> Seeing thy Rose a lady and a bride?
> (21. 104-116)

In the first part of the speech, the king thoroughly deconstructs the aristocratic social

view based on the discourse of 'birth' and 'state', to replace it with a typical middle-class meritocratic discourse of individual worth. And all this, only to introduce to a final reassertion of aristocratic distinction a few lines later, when the king knights the Earl's nephew and flatters the Mayor into consenting to the wedding by referring to his daughter as a prospective 'lady'.

This rapprochement of different social discourses and value systems is foregrounded in the whole sequence of the final scene, where, on the eve of the military campaign in France, the king (Henry V) unites in celebration with his loving and loyal subjects, and the plurality of social forces represented in the play is finally forged into an all-embracing corporatist unity. This unity is portrayed as an harmonic totality bound together by the companion discourses of citizenship and nationhood, as an inside that has no real antagonistic outside, apart from the French enemy overseas, of course, which fulfils the function of strengthening social cohesion at home. Yet, for all the inclusiveness of this discourse, there is an entire stratum of the population that it forgets and edits out. Unsurprisingly, this turns out to be the lower class inhabitants of the social space located at the margins of the Elizabethan urban world.

It is therefore worth recalling once more at this point the popular contemporary writings with which I have started this discussion. For they can bear witness to some of the most troubling social and ideological tensions and contradictions that Dekker's wish fulfilling social fantasy strives to repress and iron out. As I have suggested, these texts offer themselves to interpretation less as a faithful report on the life of the lowest strata of society than as a document of the anxieties and fears that these aroused in the middle and upper classes. It also follows, then, that they say as much about the worldview and ideology by which they are informed, as about the subject on which these are projected. Indeed, as various readers have noted, the rogues and criminals' subculture exposed in Elizabethan low-life pamphlets tellingly reveals itself to be a sort of demystifying inversion or paradoxical reproduction of the dominant order, a disfigured mirror image or transgressive mimesis of the practices that one can find at the very heart of what was taken to be respectable society.[51] As the author of *The Defence of Conny-catching* (1592), one Cuthbert cony-catcher (?), puts it:

[51] See Salgado, *Cony-Catchers and Bawdy Baskets*, 13-16.

> For truth it is, that this is the Iron age, wherein iniquitie hath the upper hande, and all conditions and estates of men seeke to live by their wittes, and he is counted wisest, that hath the deepest insight into the getting of gaines: every thing now that is found profitable, is counted honest and lawfull: and men are valued by theyr wealth, not by their vertues. Hee that cannot dissemble cannot live, and men put their sonnes now a dayes apprentises, not to learn trades, but craftes and mysteries.
>
> (12-13)

The relevance of the passage just excerpted for a reading of *The Shoemaker's Holiday* becomes evident when we turn to the episode that dramatises the social and economic ascendancy of the play's protagonist. The creation of Eyre's economic fortune, which paves the way to his social advancement firstly to sheriff and immediately after, as a result of the sudden death of 'seven of the aldermen' (13. 35), to Lord Mayor, is in fact due not much to his or his employees' diligent toil, but rather to a swift and unexpected business in which he ends up buying a 'ship worth the lading of two or three hundred thousand pounds' (7. 13-14). In the event - thanks to obscure circumstances that inhibit the ship owner from daring to 'show its head' (7. 17) in town and to the shoemaker's disguise as an alderman (albeit at this point of the play he is not actually an alderman) - he gets the cargo for far below its market price. This is one of those symptomatic passages much valued by contemporary critics for the way they allow an interpretation against the apparent rationale of the text, in order to activate the ideological contradictions that are hidden behind the seemingly round cohesiveness of the narrative; that is, what in Dekker's play appears to be defined by the generic laws and conventions that govern the unfolding of the story. In fact, if *The Shoemaker's Holiday* is to be interpreted, according to the suggestion of its dedicatory epistle, as a merry comedy 'being indeed no way offensive' (6) and hence, it would have to be assumed, as a celebration of the productive energy with which the protagonist manages to 'magically revitalize a commonwealth',[52] then one must, as commentators have in fact traditionally done, seriously downplay any question about the moral implications of this episode.

As has been said, though, recent critics have been keener to read the play in a

sceptical way. In a re-reading that provides yet another rendition of the dichotomic formula subversion/containment, David Scott Kastan rewrites the narrative of the play as a series of ideological resolutions that serve to rationalise and therefore contain a range of conflicts thrown up within early modern nascent capitalism 'in a reassuring vision of coherence and community'. And, of course, for a sceptical neo historicist reading the key point is not just to suggest that, but also to unveil and open up the historical conflicts and contradictions that the play's 'strategies of idealisation' seek to resolve. So that, once properly scratched, the surface of the comic resolution will thus unwittingly reveal the social and ideological problems and tensions to which it tries to provide an idealised resolution.[53] Following this path, specific references highlighting the contextual background of the play such as the list of the exotic wares - 'sugar, civet, almonds, cambric, and a thousand things' (7. 131-132) - contained in the cargo episode are interpreted in the light of the historical conflicts and contradictions that these references may be made to recall. Thus, Kastan mentions the damage to the British economy caused by the outflow of capital to finance the increase in imports lamented both by early modern mercantilists and by contemporary religious moralists.[54] Starting from here, then, historical interpretation can be made to move further on to a larger pattern of historical contextualisation, such as in Lawrence Venuti's account, where the very insertion of the episode of the ship cargo is read as the 'darker side' of a 'glowing portrait' of the nascent urban bourgeoisie.[55] In sum, in this model of historical interpretation the play's glossing over the means of creation of wealth is x-rayed through a symptomatic reading that fills the unsaid of the text with meaning retrieved from contemporary historical accounts and documents.

As Laura Caroline Stevenson suggests in her overview of Renaissance plays on the emergent 'middle-class' estates:

> Trade, then, was considered an impediment to gentility in the Elizabethan era and over a century after it. It was viewed as an occupation which, while it might be necessary to the commonwealth as a whole, lessened the dignity and

[52] Kaplan, 'Virtue's Holiday', 117.
[53] Kastan, 'Workshop and/as Playhouse', 151-152.
[54] Kastan, 'Workshop and/as Playhouse', 154-155.
[55] Venuti, *Our Halcyion Dayes*, 131-132.

> lowered the social status of the men who participated in it. The implications of this familiar idea must be taken into account if one wishes to understand the kind of cohesion Elizabethan authors expected to find among principal citizens. They assumed that merchants were bound into a respectable social group by the simple fact that they were the most powerful inhabitants of cities and towns. Though a merchant's wealth made him a principal citizen, the way in which he obtained that wealth was only a negative importance to his status.[56]

From this perspective, the obliterations encountered in the treatment of economic affairs in *The Shoemaker's Holiday* reveal an asymmetry between early modern social and economic developments, and the set of values available to provide an ideological rationalisation able to come to terms with them. As Lawrence Stone has observed, notwithstanding the first signs of the emergence of a properly '"middle-class" culture' and a rising wave of upward social mobility by artisan, trading and merchant estates, in Elizabethan England the 'dominant value system remained that of the landed gentleman'.[57]

To leave *The Shoemaker's Holiday* there, though, would be to silence crucial elements of the theatrical and formal dimension of the play, some of which can be explored by going back to the final scene, where the king poses as a member of the common folk and invites the new Lord Mayor to be 'even as merry / As if thou wert among thy shoemakers' (21. 13-14), while Simon Eyre mockingly claims to be 'princely born' (21. 17). The play thus recalls the carnivalesque inversion of social roles and the Saturnalian pattern of release characteristic of the festive comic mode.[58] The protagonist's reiterated exhortations 'to work, to work a while' (4. 124-125), and the occasional description of the tools of the shoemakers' craft - 'a good rubbing-pin, a good stopper, a good dresser, your four sorts of awls, and your two balls of wax, your paring knife, your hand' (4. 79-81) - notwithstanding, the dominant mood of the play and particularly so of the finale, as the title itself has it, is that of a holiday. This is, specifically, Shrove Tuesday, the climax of the Carnival season; that is, in Michail

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[56] L. C. Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 88.
[57] Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641* (rev. edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 23-24.
[58] Cf. C. L. Barber's classic study *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

Bakhtin's celebration, of the 'people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter'. This was when the people abandoned the ordinary life of toil and everyday duties, of deferential respect for the official religious, political, and moral values, and 'for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance'.[59] On the other hand, if for Bakhtin carnival represents an eminently emancipatory social dimension, an uncontained rupture of dominant hegemony and ironic, humorous subversion of official culture, in Dekker's play things are definitely quite different. While Shrove Tuesday in early modern London seems to have been a pretext for lower class anarchic violence and mutiny - with 'Youths arm'd with cudgels, stones, hammers, rules, trowels and handsaws put[ing] playhouses to the sack and bawdy-houses to the spoil'[60] - in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, on the contrary, the festive celebration is a sanitised, peaceful affair: a holiday on which the London prentices, rather than riotously taking to the streets armed with improper weapons, cheer themselves up hailing to the king 'God save your Majesty' (21. 149) and 'Jesus bless your Grace' (21. 161).

Bakhtin's carnival, as a commentator has written, 'is revolution itself'. In Bakhtin's utopian vision, the 'sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church and state, but from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival'.[61] Again, this is in no way the case in Dekker's play, where Shrove Tuesday is represented as a royally patronised and well ordered diversion, in which established social hierarchies and customs are safely reinforced, not challenged. Furthermore, in Bakhtin's celebration the atmosphere of carnival trespasses its established social time to permeate the world of the fair and the marketplace, which Bakhtin defines as a symbolic, as well as literal, space for unrestrained, spontaneous popular activity:

> The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one: all 'performances' in this area, from loud

[59] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 8-9.
[60] Quoted in Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (2nd edn; Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994), 188. Burke describes these phenomena in terms of a '"switching of codes", from the language of ritual to the language of rebellion'" (203).
[61] Michael Holquist, 'Prologue', in Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, xviii.

> cursing to the organized show, had something in common and were imbued with the same atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity. ...The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained with 'the people'.[62]

Something like a reverse transfer happens in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, where it is the 'official order and official ideology' that permeates the festive and communal atmospheres of the holiday and the fair. And thus the notion of the marketplace as a social space of popular freedom and collective release is conflated with that of the marketplace as a place for commodity exchange, profit and accumulation - a 'lawful' place 'to buy and sell...two days a week' (21. 157-158) - and hence as a metaphor for the emergent middle-class, utilitarian ethos of the urban commercial world.

But this is not to say that this conflation provides just yet another ideological closure that tries to seal the play off from historical conflicts and contradictions. On the contrary, this offers a gaze straight into the conflicted borderline between pastime and holiday, the joyful image of freedom from work, and an emergent social ethic that celebrates the dignity of work and a model of industrious self-discipline that is the antithetical opposite of that image. This, historically speaking, situates *The Shoemaker's Holiday* within the early modern framework of debates about work and idleness, in which, as Christopher Hill writes, 'two modes of life, with their different needs and standards, are in conflict as England moves out of the agricultural Middle Ages into the modern industrial world'.[63] This is a world in which the Puritan attack on festivity was, so Hill argues, an ideological weapon that served to sustain the process of regulation and control of the new unbounded mass workforce. And, of course, no more congenial social dimension for the staging of this conflict could be found than that of the institution of the public theatre. An institution, that is, which from its roots in the popular, festive tradition had sprung into a profit oriented enterprise, and whose social space was therefore marked by the contested boundaries between play and work, release and control, the communal and the commercial, and so, fissured down the middle between use and exchange value, by the puzzling and

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[62] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 153-154.
[63] Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England*, 163.

arcane mystery of commodification.

3

Drama and the Logic of Accumulation: Marlowe and Jonson

I. Drama and Society

In modern studies on the social history of early modern theatre and drama, the composition of audiences at the theatre has been a matter of sustained debate. On the one hand, we have the traditional claim for a socially heterogeneous public with a majority of members, at least as regards the public playhouses, from the lower social strata.[1] This claim is supported, among other things, by contemporary commentaries and descriptions, by the playhouses' location in lower class suburbs outside the jurisdiction of the city authorities, by the low price of cheapest tickets and the high number of spectators. Between the 1570s and 1642, people living in the English capital grew from 180,000 to 350,000. And it has been calculated that during the same period - that is between the opening of the first commercial playhouse, the Red Lion, in 1567, and the shutting down of the theatres at the outset of the English revolution - well over fifty million visits were made to the London theatres.[2] Put on stage by theatrical companies claiming support from aristocratic or royal patrons, early modern drama was performed in public playhouses - as well as at Court, in the Inns of Court, in the Universities and in the apparently more exclusive private theatres - in front of an audience that according to contemporary observers was composed of 'Taylors, Tinkers, Cordwayers, Saylers, Olde Men, yong Men, Boyes, Girles, and such like'; a 'thousand townsmen, gentlemen, and whores, / Porters and servingmen together

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[1] See Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).
[2] Cf., respectively, E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 531-532; and Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (2nd edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

throng...'.[3]

However, the notion of a popular or interclassist theatre whose audience was made up of every rank and group of society has not failed to be challenged by revisionist historical counter-arguments depicting a selected audience made only of members of the educated and wealthy sectors of society. This alternative history is sometimes accompanied by the corollary of a permanence of the pivotal function of patronage outlasting - as a source of cultural legitimation and political protection, if not necessarily as a means of economic sustenance - the advent and development of a commercial circuit for theatrical entertainment.[4] The most sustained instance of this argument is notoriously to be found in Ann Jennalie Cook's attempt to restrict theatrical audience to an in-group of 'privileged playgoers' identified with those social groups and estates that 'ruled the political world, the mercantile world, and the rest of the cultural world'.[5] Of course, as Cook's book makes abundantly clear, there is a subtext to this interpretative hypothesis that goes beyond a matter of sheer historical accuracy. Cook's declared purpose is in fact that of questioning the assumption that 'commoners' were 'more worthy' of Shakespeare than the social and cultural élite, which she regards as representing a form of 'reverse snobbery'. Thus, in order to prove this assumption as wrong, she identifies the social constituency of Renaissance playgoers with a social in-group that while being 'tremendously varied', still 'stood firmly apart from mass society'. This in-group, she writes, stretched to 'bright but impoverished students, younger sons of gentry families set to a trade, and minor retainers in noble households all the way up to lords, ambassadors, merchant princes, and royalty itself...the clever, the ambitious and the newly rich'.[6] Successive commentators, though, have dismissed Cook's revisionist thesis both for its lack of

[3] Quoted in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 215, 217.
[4] Cf. David Bergeron, 'The Patronage of Dramatists: The Case of Thomas Heywood, *English Literary Renaissance*, 18 (1988): 'In the 1630s...systems of patronage, familiar in the Renaissance, remained intact; they had not been set aside by a paying theatregoing audience. ...Instead of a radical departure from systems of patronage, the dramatists represent an expansion of those systems so that even with theatres established and flourishing and with occasional support from the court of guilds, dramatists nevertheless seek and secure the patronage of noblemen, the oldest pattern of patronage' (304). For a critical revision of this argument, see Kathleen McLuskie, 'The Poets Royal Exchange: Patronage and Commerce in Early Modern Drama', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 21 (1991), 53-62.
[5] A. J. Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 272
[6] Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London*, 272.

accuracy in the handling of historical materials and its thinly disguised class bias. Indeed, the excerpt quoted above suggests that under Cook's heading 'privileged playgoers', proper social distinctions end up mingling with spurious categorisations such as 'clever' or 'ambitious'. So, it has accordingly been noted that Cook's argument for a privileged constituency of playgoers shifts 'from sociological description to advocacy for a particular etiquette of reception and for a particular definition of the political and social function of theater'.[7]

More generally, in the wake of the new Anglo-U.S. wave of theoretical readings of the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the cultural division between the learned and the popular dimension of theatre have been translated into corresponding positions about the original social, political and ideological function of this drama. Different positions in this debate have shifted from sceptical interpretations questioning the autonomy of the subaltern classes and their capacity to generate social conflict and effective opposition, to more sanguine readings of the very real threat and alternative that popular theatre represented to traditional institutions of social discipline and control. Usually, as has already been said, this polarisation has been indicated to correspond to the turf war between U.S. new historicism, on the one hand, and cultural materialist, Marxist and feminist interpretative approaches, on the other.

Thus, in Stephen Greenblatt's 'Invisible Bullets' (1981), Elizabethan theatre is enlisted in the machinery of the highly spectacular mechanisms of subjection and containment deployed by the power apparatus of the Absolutist State, which in as far as it lacked 'a standing army,...a highly developed bureaucracy,...an extensive police force', was dependant 'upon its privileged visibility'. According to Greenblatt, the theatricality of this power apparatus, which was centred on the figure of the monarch, found in the novel forms of theatrical entertainment its most appropriate aesthetic form. For, exactly as in the royal spectacle of power, in the same stroke as the

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[7] M. D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 109; see also Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 16-17. In his essay 'Shakespeare's Unprivileged Playgoers', Martin Butler demolishes Cook's thesis by pointing out that considering the capacity of London's early modern playhouses, 'virtually *every single one*' of the 52,000 people to which Cook manages to extend her notion of privileged playgoer 'would have had to go to the theatres every week to keep them full' (Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis 1632-1642* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 297).

theatrical audience of the new playhouse was 'held at a respectful distance' and 'forbidden intervention or deep intimacy', theatre invoked the audience's absorption and emphatic participation in the performance that was being presented. Thus, the emphasis here is laid on the active control, by the State, of the theatres through censorship. It 'is precisely because of the English form of absolutist theatricality', Greenblatt argues, 'that Shakespeare's drama, written for a theater subject to state censorship, can be so relentlessly subversive: the form itself, as a primary expression of Renaissance power, helps to contain the radical doubts that it provokes'.[8]

In a similar vein, another leading new historicist critic, Leonard Tennenhouse, grounds the key arguments of his study *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (1986) on the asserted collaboration between 'stagecraft' and 'statecraft'. For Tennenhouse, the official State authority's model of self-legitimation, rested on the authorisation, by the body-politic, of 'other forms of power, so that they in turn might authorize that body'. Thus, while he acknowledges the presence of a significant popular constituency as part of the audience of the commercial public theatre, Tennenhouse dispenses with any autonomous agency of this social sector by assuming its subaltern and fully subservient relation to the material interests and cultural hegemony of the ruling group. Many 'in Shakespeare's audience', he maintains, 'though outside the immediate parameters of the empowered community...were part of the same nation whose welfare was inextricably linked to that of the aristocracy'.[9]

By contrast, for the British cultural materialist Jonathan Dollimore, as the corporatist social and political unity of the nation actually collapsed in the revolutionary upheaval of the 1640s, then it is more than legitimate to try to retrace in pre-revolutionary drama the seeds of the denunciation and subversion of that political and religious orthodoxy which a few decades later would crumble in the face of the opening up of a new age.[10] The emphasis of Dollimore's argument, however, is mainly

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[8] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 64-65.
[9] Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 15-16, 39-40.
[10] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (2nd edn; New York and London: Harvester, 1989) 3-4.

on the erosion and decentring of hegemonic culture and power from within, that is on the encoding and inscription of a subversive 'subordinate viewpoint' within the 'dominant one'.[11] Therefore, in order to find a full-scale interpretation of the role of subaltern and lower class culture in the formation and development of Renaissance drama we must turn to an older Marxist study such as Robert Weimann's *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (1978). Here we find a reading of the social history of Renaissance theatre that moves from the recognition that this theatre emerged in an eminently transitional historical conjuncture. This form of theatre, Weimann maintains, was caught in between the medieval corporatist social structure, with its popular tradition of collective rituals and festivities, and an emerging social formation that, with the incipient rise of capitalism and the corresponding division of labour, had assumed the aspect of an extremely fluid social milieu; a social formation, that is, in which the old hierarchical index of values had been challenged, but not yet replaced, by the ascendant acquisitive and individualistic ethos of the new market system. In this context, Weimann finds a key relation between the 'specific sociological conditions upon which the Elizabethan theater, its audience and their tastes were based', and Shakespearean drama's capacity to 'accommodate and synthesise differing cultural perspectives' into a 'multiple unity based on contradiction'. The newly established commercial theatre, which was itself a product of the new entrepreneurial attitudes, is thus reconstructed by Weimann as a privileged arena to represent and test the social and ideological compromise at work in society at large. The drama performed in this theatre embraced - so he summarises - folk, popular, humanist and courtly elements fused 'in the light of a unifying and exalting experience of nationhood', thanks to which this drama could appeal to a large part, if not all, of the sectors of early modern English society.[12]

However, Weimann's interpretation of Shakespearean drama as a synthesis and reconciliation of popular and learned humanist elements, as well as of the social perspectives to which these corresponded, has been subjected to sharp political

[11] Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, 28.
[12] Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. by Robert Schwartz (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 169-174.

qualification in some more recent leftist approaches. Among these, it is worth mentioning Annabel Patterson's powerfully argued *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (1989). In this study the notion that Shakespearean drama represented an harmonic unity between popular and high culture stands accused of silencing the independent and fully conflictual role played in it by popular culture and its political interests, and thus of failing to recognise Shakespeare's radicalism. This study, hence, moves on to construct a sort of 'Shakespeare from below' that goes entirely against the grain of what Patterson sees as the unholy alliance of conservative and progressive criticism in portraying an image of Shakespearean drama that celebrates 'social order and stability'.[13] So, in order to remove and replace these sedimented interpretative habits, Patterson interrogates Shakespearean drama in the light of the impact on it of the Renaissance tradition of popular protest and rebellion. The social and political demands that gave rise to mass insurrections and revolts such as the London 1595 riots or the 1607 Midland Rising are thus made to reverberate in Shakespeare's tuning in with 'the messages sent by the popular voice to those responsible for leadership'.[14] Thus, for Patterson the voice of the urban middle and lower ranks that packed the groundlings of the Elizabethan and Jacobean public playhouse - whether this is intermittingly ventriloquised by Hamlet or emerges in its collective political dimension in *Coriolanus* (1607-1608) - saturates Shakespeare's plays with an 'abrasion from below' which, if properly recovered, could still allow us to challenge Shakespeare's incorporation in the canon of 'culture from above'.[15]

Not all Marxists, it must be said, are inclined to see Shakespearean or, more generally, Renaissance drama as synonymous with unity and harmony. In her Marxist feminist reading of the impact on the early modern stage of contemporary social conflicts, and the other way round, Jean E. Howard interprets the early modern theatrical 'juxtaposition of diverse discourses and performance traditions' as corresponding to a plurality of 'ideological positions...interpellating subjects in

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[13] Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 5. For a similar interpretative perspective, see M. D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

[14] Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 95. For another sustained interpretation of Renaissance drama and theatre 'from below', see M. D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* New York and London: Routledge, 1989).

contradictory ways that open space for change'.[16] Also, in what is perhaps the boldest historical materialist attempt to outline a synthetic overview of the social dimension of English Renaissance public theatre to date - Walter Cohen's *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (1985) - these same tensions are seen as coterminous with the overlapping and conflict of broad and diverse historical forces and determinations:

> An emphasis on effective control of the stage - on patronage, licensing, censorship, and the like - points to the nobility and monarchy, as do the thematic preoccupations of most of the plays. One might reasonably speak in this sense of a neofeudal theater. Yet the large sums of money, the evident quest for profit, and the array of financial instruments integral to the operation of the public stage seem to indicate the dominance of the capitalist mode of production.[17]

For Cohen, the dominant 'neofeudal' thematic preoccupations of English Renaissance drama are a symptom of the momentary social and political compromise - with the aristocracy in a dominant, hegemonic position - achieved under the Absolutist State, but then progressively undermined in the phase leading to the social and political conflict, which also led to the closing down of theatres, of the 1640s. In Cohen's own words, his 'entire study pursues a single and simple hypothesis: that the absolutist state, by its inherent dynamism and contradictions, first fostered and then undermined the public theater'.[18] Behind this hypothesis, there is of course the key influence of Perry Anderson's study on the Absolutist State, according to which the rise of Western Absolutism is coincident with 'the slow reconversion of the landed ruling class to the necessary form of its own political power, despite and against most of its previous instincts'.[19] Accordingly, for Cohen the parable of Renaissance theatre is firstly marked by a process of aristocratic 'adaptation' to the new socioeconomic circumstances, and then by the failure of this class to sustain this process in the long

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[15] Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 153.
[16] J. E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.
[17] Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 151.
[18] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 19-20.
[19] Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), 48.

run.

To sum up, all these different positions and interpretative models highlight a series of social, political and cultural tensions and conflicts that I wish to move from, rather than foreclose, in the readings that follow. However, the ground that I am trying to cover is delimited by a specific trajectory, that is by a focus on those historical tendencies and elements that are associated with an increasingly pervasive process of commodification of social and cultural life in the early modern period. Therefore, my attention is less on the political conflicts inscribed in the working of the Absolutist State apparatus, than on the dynamics of change in civil society. In this context, one may immediately note that notwithstanding the dominant neofeudal thematic preoccupations indicated by Cohen, there are quite a few exponents of emergent social groups and estates who are thrown on stage by English Renaissance dramatists: merchants, traders, entrepreneurs, officers, retailers and shopkeepers, burghers, ordinary citizens and the like. A quick glance at the index of *dramatis personae* in the plays, especially the comedies, of Dekker, Heywood, Jonson, Marston, Massinger, Middleton, among others, would immediately show that a full list here would extend for quite a while.[20] In short, the idea that kings, queens, princes, knights, cavaliers and nobles steal the show in English Renaissance drama provides an image of it that focuses on a selected range of texts, authors and genres. This has of course much to do with the extraordinary fame and reputation posthumously acquired by Shakespearean tragedy.

The history of the role played by cultural and education apparatuses in the construction of Shakespeare as the pivot of the English literary canon has been dissected in great detail and with no shortage of theoretical sophistication.[21] Though, the point here is, why has Shakespearean tragedy, rather than some other author or genre, been chosen? Franco Moretti has provided a convincing - if, as I shall argue, slightly overstated - answer. The reason why tragedy, and in particular Shakespearean

[20] For an ample catalogue, see L. C. Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). '[I]n Renaissance dramatists, including Jonson, there is some sharp observation of the rising power of money and the sort of ruling class it is building up' (Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957], 165).

[21] See Chapter 1, footnote 19.

tragedy, has assumed the importance it has for us, he contends, is that it looks at the key distinctive political and cultural element of its age, the power of the absolute sovereign, 'straight in the face', and so it brings into view, if only to deconsecrate and destroy it, the fundamental paradigm of dominant absolutist culture. In other words, tragedy singles out in a 'concentrated' form, 'the cultural and historical specificity of the age of absolutism' and thus, by selecting the distinctive cultural features of the age squeezed in between the decaying ruins of feudalism and the advent of modern liberal democracies, stands out as a 'specific object of study' and interest 'different from others'. [22]

As it is, Franco Moretti's hypothesis is not only a suggestive, but also a necessary one to explore. Particularly so, if one wants to try to account for the temporal boundaries that segment the history of this dramatic genre from ancient times to modernity. Yet I take exception to the idea that a whole cultural period can be subsumed under the heading of a single artistic or literary form or genre, central or exemplary though it might be to that age and its posthumous understanding. Moretti himself admits this much in a successive critical revision of his early studies. 'Although from time to time moments of extraordinary intellectual and formal compactness occur', he ponders, 'as a rule the opposite happens in history, and no system of values has ever been able to represent a *Zeitgeist* without being challenged by rival systems'.[23] We are thus back, once again, to a notion of cultural periodisation that can be ultimately assimilated to Raymond Williams's dynamic theorisation of the way in which a cultural dominant always exists in cohabitation and conflict with a host of integrated, alternative or oppositional formations and tendencies inherited from the past or prefiguring future developments.[24]

Along with the ideological interpellation of the dominant culture of absolutism, there is a plurality of other cultural discourses, traditions and ideological positions that saturate the dramatic *corpus* of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Some of these, as

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[22] Franco Moretti, '"A Huge Eclipse": Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty', in *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1982), 7-14.

[23] Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Form*, trans. by Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London and New York: Verso, 1983), 25.

[24] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

I will try to further substantiate in the following pages, may find a renewed relevance in the context of the new critical and theoretical preoccupations that I have highlighted in Chapter 1.

II. Commentaries

If Renaissance tragedy dramatises the political sphere and prefigures the incipient crisis of the of the Absolutist State, then Christopher Marlowe's plays are one of the most notable exceptions.[25] In contemporary historicist criticism, figures such as Tamburlaine and Barabas, to take the best examples, have in fact been variously interpreted as metaphors or allegories for those colonialist and proto-capitalist projects and processes of commodification that were shaking the foundations of early modern English society. Thus, Tamburlaine's 'restlessness, aesthetic sensitivity, appetite and violence' have been suggested to be a figuration not so much of the 'power-hunger' of the Absolutist State, but rather of 'the acquisitive energies of English merchants, entrepreneurs, and adventurers'; of the 'idea of Empire'; of the first manifestations of an 'orientalist discourse' in the West; or, finally, of the violence invested in the global 'processes of primitive accumulation - colonialism, trade expansion, vagrancy due to dispossession, and so on'.[26] On the other hand, the puzzling figure of Barabas has been interpreted as giving voice to Marlowe's own contempt for 'a society hag-ridden by the power of money and given over to the slave market'; to stand for 'a site of struggle for profit and power' located at the crossroads between early colonialism and capitalism; and hence to embody the 'principle of surplus and unrestricted expenditure'.[27]

From this interpretative perspective, the thematic correspondences between Christopher Marlowe's plays and Ben Bonson's comedies - in particular *Volpone*

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[25] Cf. Moretti, '"A Huge Eclipse"', 38.

[26] See, respectively, Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 194; Stephen X Mead, 'Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and the Idea of Empire', *Works and Days*, 7.2 (1989), 91-103; E. C. Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 53-81; and Crystal Bartolovich, 'Putting *Tamburlaine* on a (Cognitive) Map', *Renaissance Drama*, 38 (1997), 32.

[27] Cf. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 205; Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness*, 88; D. H. Thurn, 'Economic and Ideological Exchange in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*', *Theatre Journal*, 46.2 (1994), 161.

(1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610), but also *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* (1609-1610), *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) or *The Staple of News* (1626) - should be transparent enough. For the latter have long been taken, in the words of L. C. Knights's classic *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (1937), as the expression of an 'anti-acquisitive tradition inherited from the Middle Ages' that was brought to bear on the moral and ethic attitudes of Jacobean commercial society. [28] For Knights, Jonson is the champion of a vital 'popular tradition of individual and social morality'. He is both the epitome of neo-classical learned humanism decorously following Aristotle's book of rules and, at the same time, the true heir of the native folk heritage. In his reading, Jonson's comedies are a satirical response and demystification of the seismic historical movement leading to the definitive loss of a native 'natural' world '*in which "human problems can be truly perceived*" - an organization, then, that was not merely "economic" - not merely determined by "economic" motives'.[29] While he notes that Renaissance drama did not actually address what he conceives as genuinely economic issues, such as the problem of monopolies, his selection of dramatists is based on a criterion of relevance related to the handling of truly 'social themes', which he individuates in 'the movements, the significant figures of contemporary life' portrayed in 'the satire on usurers, the profiteers and the newly rich...[on] social ambition and the greed for money'.[30] Thus Knights elaborates a rearrangement of the Jacobean dramatic canon in which we have on the one hand lesser figures such as Dekker, Heywood, Middleton and Massinger, who are attributed the status of 'transitional' writers fully immersed in the pattern of change of their age and as such incapable of setting themselves at critical distance from their own world; and on the other Ben Jonson's penetrating critique of contemporary times. Apart from their instinctive rejection of the rampant and immorally materialistic social classes emerging in the early modern increasingly commercialised urban scenario, according Knights the former have 'nothing to set against their standards, neither an aristocratic code nor a popular tradition'.[31] Ben Jonson, on the contrary, by drawing on popular

[28] L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937), 190
[29] Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, 8.
[30] Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, 6.
[31] Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, 269.

sources that provided him with the living force of his satirical comedies, recreated a moral code inherited from a pre-capitalist outlook that served him to successfully dissect and castigate the ascendant middle-class and proto-bourgeois individualism.

As a number of commentaries have successively pointed out, behind this rediscovery, via Ben Jonson, of the pre-capitalist organic community and its anti-acquisitive popular culture lay Knights's concerns with his own times. The writing of *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* was in fact an organic part of his commitment with the project of *Scrutiny*. This project that entailed an ambitious programme for the elaboration and reconstruction of a set of values, cultural forms and discourses that should have contributed to the cultural regeneration of a society that, in the turmoil of the inter-war period, was perceived as being under the strain of a profound historical crisis. As Don E. Wayne has pointed out, 'Knights, F. R. Leavis, and the other Cambridge intellectuals who founded *Scrutiny* in the 1930s could imagine themselves as part of an independent "critical minority", whose task it was to oppose the alienation of life and language in modern commercial and industrial society by bearing witness to the moral, "organic community of the past"'.[32]

In the present instance, I have recalled Knights's study here not so much because I wish to dust it off as an alternative to successive critical developments. But rather, in so far as it brings into view a basic interpretative grid that may still be used as a key to access the contradictory impulses that shape the undecidable, unstable and unclassifiable position of Ben Jonson's drama. My suggestion is that the 'embarrassment to the tidy mind' - in John Arden's fine phrase[33] - represented by Jonson's confounding and overlapping of opposite cultural locations - high and low, classic and popular, traditional and emergent - as well as authorial subject positions - élitist and populist, sophisticated and boisterous, conservative and innovator - can be read not only as an idiosyncratic element, but also as a product and mediation of a plurality of larger historical tensions. Tensions that in more recent criticism have been fragmented into a multiplicity of social, political and cultural drives and motifs.

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[32] D. E. Wayne, 'Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson: An alternative view', *Renaissance Drama*, 13 (1982), 128-129. See also Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: New Left Books, 1979).

[33] John Arden, 'Ben Jonson and the Plumb-Line', in *To Present the Pretence: Essays on Theatre and its*

In the social history of cultural production, Ben Jonson has been made to embody a sustained theoretico-practical engagement with the construction of an original model of textual authority within the commercial circuits of professional theatre and the print market.[34] Hence what might be called the performative contradiction between the 'anti-acquisitive attitude' of his comedies and his own position within 'the emerging commodity system of economic and social exchange'. This has in turn been taken as the mark of an as yet immature stage of capitalism still lacking 'a large-scale educational apparatus' to sustain the role of a proper cultural élite.[35] At the same time, Ben Jonson's engagement with dramatic and literary genres such as the court masque and classical translation, as well as his long-lasting search for patronage, have been interpreted as the marks of a sustained programme to merge and thus reinvent the public roles of the 'poet laureate' and the court poet.[36]

At the level of content and referential dimension of his plays, Ben Jonson's artistic engagement has offered the occasion for alternative readings of current political affairs. In Stephen Orgel's elegant account, the Jonsonian masque is read as a celebration of 'the triumph of an aristocratic community...hierarchy and...faith in the power of idealization'.[37] While in more ambivalent recent re-readings of Jonson's tragedies, these are made to interrogate absolutism in the light of the emerging Republican ideas.[38] On the other hand and at a higher level of historical abstraction,

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Public (London: Methuen, 1977), 26.

[34] R. C. Newton, 'Jonson and the (Re-)invention of the Book', in *Classic and Cavalier*, ed. By C. J. Summers and T. L. Pebworth (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 31-58; Timothy Murray, 'From Full Sheets to Legitimate Model: Antitheater, Text, Ben Jonson', *New Literary History*, 3 (1983), 641-664; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1987), 66-79; Joseph Lowenstein, 'The Script in the Marketplace', in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 265-278; Kathleen McLuskie, 'Making and Buying: Ben Jonson and the Commercial Theatre Audience', in *Refashioning Ben Jonson*, ed. by Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy and Susan Wiseman (London: Macmillan, 1998), 134-154.

[35] D. E. Wayne, 'Drama and the Market in the Age of Jonson: *An Alternative View*', *Renaissance Drama*, 13 (1982), 128.

[36] See Richard Helgerson, 'The Elizabethan Laureate: Self-Presentation and the Literary System', *English Literary History*, 46 (1979), 193-220; and Joseph Loewenstein, 'Printing and "The Multitudinous Presse"', in *Ben Jonson's Folio 1616*, ed. by Jennifer Brady and W. H. Herendeen (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), 168-191.

[37] Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 40.

[38] See Susan Sanders, *Ben Jonson's Theatrical Republics* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998); R. C. Evans, '*Sejanus*: Ethics and Politics in the Reign of James', in *Refashioning Ben Jonson*, 71-92; Susan Wiseman, '"The Eccho of Uncertaintie": Jonson, Classical Drama and the English Civil War', in

the world of Jonson's satirical comedies has been interpreted as responding to and representing the massive transformations enacted by the rising predominance of the commodity-form and the corresponding pattern of reification of social life.[39]

Moving from the dense combination of historical and interpretative motifs that I have just recalled, the textual readings that follow will be trying to move simultaneously in two opposite, if complementary, directions: one which looks at what contemporary materialist theory and criticism has to say about Marlowe and Jonson's plays; and one which questions what they have to tell us about our own conceptions. So, in this two way process, the cultural object will be on the one hand constructed as a site of interest in its own right and at the same time as a reflexive interrogation of the very insight thrown on it. The additional suggestion here is that interpretative choices and investments, rather than some kind of privileged historical reality built into the cultural material, is to be accounted for the present (re)construction of that particular cultural material. Although it is up to this cultural material itself to afford or oppose resistance to a particular set of interpretative investments by releasing, as I will further discuss in the next chapter, a surplus of meaning that throws into sharp relief the partial or even misplaced interpretative procedures with which it has been invested. But to do this, that is to disqualify a previous interpretation and reveal its faults or exclusions, this material will need to be visited and supported, so to speak, by another, more powerful and persuasive interpretative act.

III. Marlowe, Jonson and the Logic of Accumulation

According to T. S. Eliot, 'Jonson is the legitimate heir of Marlowe'. 'If Marlowe is a poet', he arbitrates, 'Jonson is also'. The peculiar character and greatness of Marlowe's best dramatic poetry, which for Eliot is to be found in *The Jew of Malta* (1589-1590), according to him lies in its 'terribly serious, even savage comic humour' that hesitates

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Refashioning Ben Jonson, 208-229.

[39] See Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 292-301; Karen Newman, 'City Talks: Women and Commodification in Jonson's *Epicoene*', *English Literary History*, 56 (1989), 503-518; D. E. Wayne, 'Drama and the Market in the Age of Jonson: *An Alternative View*'; and 'The "Exchange of Letters". Early Modern Contradictions and Postmodern Conundrums', in *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800*, ed. by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London: Routledge, 1995), 143-165.

'on the edge of caricature at the right moment'. In what appears to be Jonson's more heavy-handed approach, by contrast, this elusive transfiguring touch is commonly taken to be intensified by 'typical exaggerations, or exaggerations of types' that uncompromisingly break away from any pretence of psychological realism. And Eliot, in line with his aesthetic doctrine, finds Jonson's poetic greatness precisely in the considered and self-conscious artificiality of his overtly caricatured characterisations. In comparison to Marlowe, he notes, Jonson's transfiguration of language and character is 'more deliberate, more mature'. Something gets lost along the way in 'inspiration', but is in turn gained in terms of measure and control.[40] To check the validity of these value judgements, Eliot directs the reader to the beginning of *Volpone*. Here we find the protagonists, Volpone and Mosca, who 'hail' the 'world's soul' (I. i. 3), that is the gold that they have piled up behind a curtain in Volpone's bedroom:

> Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is
> The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
> Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,
> Am I, to view thy splendour darkening his;
> That lying here, amongst my other hoards,
> Show'st like a flame by night, or like the day
> Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled
> Unto the centre. O, thou son of Sol
> (But brighter than thy father) let me kiss,
> With adoration, thee, and every relic
> Of sacred treasure in this blessèd room.
> Well did wise poets by thy glorious name
> Title that age which they would have the best,
> Thou being the best of things, and far transcending
> All style of joy in children, parents, friends,
> Or any other waking dream on earth.
> Thy looks when they to Venus did ascribe,
> They should have giv'n her twenty thousand Cupids,
> Such are thy beauties and our loves! Dear saint,
> Riches, the dumb god that giv'st all men tongues,
> That canst do nought, and yet mak'st men do all things;
> The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,
> Is made worth heaven! Thou art virtue, fame,
> Honour, and all things else. Who can get thee,

[40] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (3rd edn; London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1951), 123-125, 153-154.

He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise -
(I. i. 3-27)

This is what is usually taken to be Ben Jonson's comedic language at its best: an orgiastic explosion of blasphemous and perverse images, hyperboles and excited speech that flows breathtakingly in a vertiginous swirl. But for T.S. Eliot the real power of Jonson's poetry, which in the case in question he suggests that we can only perceive after we have passed under review the whole play, is revealed by 'the shocking and terrifying directness' that is hidden behind the protagonists' apparent 'verbosity' and 'forced and flagitious bombast'. This bombast for him is not free-flowing rhetoric, but a measured and carefully controlled device that serves the author to construct a world apart: the small, self-contained world, secluded by the larger one, that 'artists create'. [41]

Now, the fact that T. S. Eliot was reluctant to give his sensitive formal and rhetorical analyses of poetry an explicitly social and ideological content is well known. Yet, it is still quite striking to re-read his notes on Jonson's comedies and find out that he neglects to mention the very social objects and materials that make them up. At best, Eliot concedes that the 'emotions' which inhabit Ben Jonson's artistic world 'are not a fancy, because they have a logic of their own; and this logic illuminates the actual world, because it gives us a new point of view from which to inspect it'.[42] However, he never bothers to push this point further. Furthermore, as I will try to outline (after others) in my comparative reading of Marlowe and Jonson, there is a more strict connection between the rhetorical, social and historical dimensions of their texts than Eliot's turn of phrase seems to suggest.

In *Volpone*, to begin with, the baroque rhetorical devices of the poetry and the flourishing of an opulent language chiefly serve to express a disproportionate longing for money and gold, a relentless mania for possession and conspicuous consumption. The ultimate scope of most characters' activities is sublimated into what Marx defined as 'the god among commodities...*the* object of greed. ...Greed as such, as a particular form of the drive...not only the object but the fountainhead of greed. Hedonism

[41] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 154-158.

[*Genussucht*] in its general form'.[43] Indeed, it would not be that easy to find a rhetorically richer celebration of the 'god among commodities' than Volpone's initial speech. In what Alvin B. Kernan has described as Volpone's 'new cosmology', 'a round gold of coin, and the shining, yellow piece of metal, the "son of Sol"...replaces the sun...driving the primal darkness to the lowest place of creation, the center of heart'.[44] For Volpone, the power of gold transcends any natural limit, 'It transforms / The most deformèd, and restores 'em lovely', 'It is the thing / Makes all the world her grace, her youth, her beauty' (V. i. 100-105).

The obvious intertextual reference here is to Barabas's opening soliloquy. In the same guise as Volpone and Mosca, Barabas is intent in accumulating 'Infinite riches in a little room' (I. i. 37). But there is actually a key difference. As one comes progressively to realise, Volpone's riches are not infinite at all. For all the rhetorical luxury of his self-aggrandising dreams of subsidiary acquisition of 'virtue, fame, / Honour, and all things else' (I. i. 25-26), in comparison to Barabas he operates on a preciously small scale. When Mosca, his servant, reads the inventory of the objects and items included in Volpone's testament, the detailed precision of his accounting only serves to reveal the very limited nature of the master's trade: nine Turkish carpets; two suits of bedding; two cloths of gold; eight velvets; eight chests of linen; six chests of diaper, four of damask (V. iii. 1-14). On the other hand, Volpone's self-description is eloquent enough on this score:

> ...I gain
> No common way: I use no trade, no venture;
> I wound no earth with ploughshares; fat no beasts
> To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron.
> Oil, corn, or men, to grind 'em into powder;
> I blow no subtle glass; expose no ships
> To threat'nings of the furrow-facèd sea;
> I turn no moneys in the public bank,
> No usure private -
> (I. i. 33-40)

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[42] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 156.
[43] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 221-222.
[44] A. B. Kernan, 'Introduction', *Volpone*, ed. by A. B. Kernan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), i.

Volpone and Mosca's business, as that of their colleagues in *The Alchemist*, is a face to face local affair, at best akin to that of the local shopkeeper, small trader or, perhaps more appropriately, the petty thief. In line with the conventions of Plautine comedy, most of the action takes place in the enclosed space of the master's house. This is a microcosm that with its barters, small-scale robberies and unimportant traffics testifies to a most circumscribed social dimension. If *Volpone* presents a critique of an emerging 'acquisitive attitude', then as dissected in the play the actual social import of such an attitude is quite unremarkable and parochial. Particularly so, if compared with the range of action of Marlowe's great characters, from Tamburlaine and Faustus to Barabas.

If one were to set out to find a dramatic figuration or a poetics of the massive social and economic changes and dislocation that underscored the primitive accumulation and the emergence of a global colonialist enterprise, it would seem to be grossly inappropriate to look for them in the petty traffics of a Volpone or a Subtle. One would be much better off looking, for a start, at Tamburlaine's insatiable thirst for new conquests and domination, at the ruthless determination to 'triumph over all the world' (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1*, I. ii. 173) which materialises in his relentlessly brutal march from the Mongol region:

> towards Persia,
> Along Armenia and the Caspian Sea,
> And thence unto Bythinia...
> Then...into Egypt and Arabia,...
> From thence to Nubia, near Borno lake,
> And so along the Ethiopian sea,
> Cutting the tropic line of Capricon,
> ...as far as Zanzibar.
> Then by the northern part of Africa
> ...at last to Graecia, and from thence to Asia...
> Backward and forwards, near five thousand leagues.
> (*Part 2*, V. iii. 126-144)

When, at the approaching of death, Marlowe's hero finally traces, standing in front of a map, the limits of his long series of territorial conquests, he indicates his unfinished

march to lead further 'westward from the midst of Cancer's line' (*Part 2*, V. iii. 146). 'And shall I die and this unconquered?' (*Part 2*, V. iii. 150), demands Tamburlaine, not at all satisfied with the five thousand leagues covered. This project of total domination can indeed be taken as an allegorical prefiguration of the historical march of the social class that will dominate in the world economic system that had its genesis in early modern Europe.[45] As Marx and Engels write, with only slightly less rhetorical relish than the Elizabethan playwright, when the bourgeoisie appears on the scene of history armed 'with the heavy artillery' of the 'cheap prices of its commodities', it 'batters down all Chinese walls', forces 'the barbarians' obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate' and compels 'all nations, on pain of extinction', to reshape themselves in its 'own image'.[46] If Tamburlaine cannot be satisfied until he or his progeny will have conquered all the remaining 'world of ground' that 'Lies westward from the Midst of the Cancer's line' (V. iii. 146-147) and 'from the Antarctic Pole eastward' (V. iii. 154); so the 'need of a constantly expanding market for its products' will chase 'the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe'. Much as, to turn to another one of Marlowe's great figures, one could hardly find a more suggestive metaphor for the historical trajectory of this social class than Faustus's unlimited appetite for knowledge and desire to break all the existing limits of human nature. Again, still according to Marx and Engels's eulogy, just as in Faustus's flights of ambition, the bourgeoisie will sweep away 'all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions', and by creating 'more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations' will finally succeed in subjecting 'Nature to man'.[47] But, obviously, among Marlowe's great characters the most literal figuration of the mercantile and commercial expansion of early capitalism and empire is to be found

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[45] See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1980). In her brilliant essay on the spatial significance of Marlowe's play, Crystal Bartholovich has noted that if we consider the specific geographical location in which *Tamburlaine* was originally devised and put on stage, the unaccomplished project of going further westward 'underwrites England's own colonial aspirations in the New World, particularly in its competition with Spain throughout the early modern period', so that England can be seen 'as the inheritor of just such project of conquest' (Crystal Bartolovich, 'Putting *Tamburlaine* on a [Cognitive] Map', 40).

[46] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Selected Works*, English trans. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968), 39.

[47] Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 38-39.

in Barabas and his obsessive preoccupation with accumulation of wealth. As he begins the play in his counting house, waiting for his shiploads of money and precious metals and stones to come back from Egypt, he describes his wealth not by itemising it with the meticulous zeal of the accountant, as Volpone's servant, but by randomly adding up signs of material wealth that stand for a truly imposing fortune:

> Bags of fiery opals, sapphires, amethysts,
> Jacinths, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds,
> Beauteous rubies, sparkling diamonds,
> And seld-seen costly stones of so great price,
> As one of them indifferently rated,
> And of a caract of this quantity,
> May serve in peril of calamity
> To ransom great kings from captivity.
> This is the ware wherein consists my wealth.
> (I. i. 25-32)

Of course, Barabas's characterisation could also be read in the light of the specificity of the 'Jewish question', that is as a grotesquely racialised stereotype. Although, as we will see in the next chapter, in this case our understanding of this question would need to be subjected to radical historicisation. Marlowe's play, however, promptly deconstructs the notion that Barabas is a Jewish stereotype. It is Barabas himself who detaches his own position from that of the other members of the Malta's Jewish community - 'Barabas is born to better chance' (I. iii. 222) - and dismisses them as 'base slaves' and 'villains' who 'have no wit themselves' (I. iii. 118-119). And when a commonplace description of Barabas as a mean and avaricious Jew is put forward by his servant, he himself takes charge to inform the audience that this corresponds to an utter misrepresentation:

> *Ithamore:* 'Tis a strange thing of that Jew, he lives upon pickled grasshopers, and sauced mushcrumbs.
>
> *Barabas [aside]:* What a slave's this! The Governor feeds not as I do.
>
> *Ithamore:* He never put on clean shirt since he was circumcised.

Barabas [aside]: Oh rascal! I change myself twice a day.

Ithamore: The hat he wears, Judas left under the elder when he hanged himself.

Barabas [aside]: 'Twas sent to me for a present from the Great Cham. (V. i. 58-65)

After all Barabas is a wealthy merchant, a representative of an ascendant and increasingly hegemonic social estate, not a stereotypical Jewish usurer. Indeed, he incorporates in an extreme form the characteristics of the whole society represented in Marlowe's play. This is a society in which everything is moved by 'The wind that bloweth all the world besides, / Desire of gold' (III. v. 3-4). Indeed, he seems to be well integrated with the other social forces that inhabit Malta and 'the world besides'. As Stephen Greenblatt has summarised: 'the Turks exacting money from the Christians, the Christians expropriating money from the Jews, the convent profiting from these expropriations, religious orders competing for wealthy converts, the prostitute plying her trade and the blackmailer his'.[48]

For any ascendant class in history, economic advancement goes hand in hand with seeking to seize political power. Accordingly, before the end of the play Barabas will, albeit under fortuitous circumstances, be made the governor of Malta. Though, one should not make too much of this, for as Greenblatt has appropriately remarked, in effect Barabas is also 'the quintessential alien: at one point his house is seized and turned into a nunnery, at another he is thrown over the walls of the city, only to rise with the words, "What, all alone?"'.[49] He is *the* Jew of Malta, the archetype of the foreigner and the religious Other. As soon as he announces 'I am the Governor of Malta', by the end of the same line he comes to realise, 'true, / But Malta hates me, and in hating me / My life's in danger' (V. ii. 30-32). Still, Barabas is a public figure, a conspicuous, if exceptional, exponent of the social élite. The same, to be sure, goes for all of Marlowe's most celebrated heroes. Tamburlaine and Edward II are, respectively, the emperor of half of the world - from the Scythian shepherd that Tamburlaine originally was - and a king, that is the very centres of their own worlds. Faustus, for

[48] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 203-204.

his part, is a highly respected intellectual, with a school of disciples of his own at Wittemberg. If all of these characters are ultimately undone, this is because of the unbounded nature of their ambition and the unaccountability of their desires, certainly not because of lack of actual resources.

For the protagonists of Jonson's main comedies, the case is radically different. They do not have the same kind of unrestrained ambitions or urges as Marlowe's characters. Even Epicure Mammon's gigantic 'dream of what he would do with the philosopher's stone', as Northrop Frye has noted, makes him at best a minor 'ironic parody of Faustus'.[50] Jonson's most famous comic figures are to different degrees - quite more so in *The Alchemist* than in *Volpone* - marginal social types that just try to have a go once in a lifetime. But let us take another speech, this time from *The Alchemist*, quoted by T. S. Eliot in his comparative evaluation of Marlowe and Jonson's poetry: Epicure Mammon's monologue, which presents another image and celebration of endless multiplication of wealth:

> I will have my beds blown up, not stuffed:
> Down is too hard; and then, mine oval room
> Filled with such pictures as Tiberius took
> From Elephantis, and dull Aretine
> But coldly imitated. Then, my glasses
> Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse
> And multiply the figures, as I walk
> Naked between my *succubae*. My mists
> I'll have of perfume, vapoured 'bout the room,
> To lose our selves in; and my baths, like pits
> To fall into, from whence we will come forth,
> And roll us dry in gossamer and roses.
> (II. ii. 41-52)

As a later commentator has sensitively noted, here the 'inflatable beds, the up-market pornography, and the tick mirrors are at once too minutely imagined and too nearly feasible for their hyperbolic function'. So that these peculiarly quaint and eccentric items actually fail to provide a convincing 'generalized image of infinite wealth'.[51]

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[49] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 196.
[50] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 180.
[51] Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 4.

Mammon's incongruous symbols of conspicuous consumption appear to stand less for an abundance of actual riches, than for the compulsion to list and amass bizarre and extravagant fantasies devised to compensate for a bursting surplus of irrepressible and ungratified desire. This compensation includes, among other things, the description of banquets made of 'tongues of carps, dormice, and camels' heels' boiled in gold and pearl, 'beards of barbels', 'Oiled mushrooms' and 'swelling unctuous paps / Of fat pregnant sow' (II. ii. 75-76, 83-85). All this, of course, hardly amounts to what would constitute a remotely edible, let alone pleasurable, meal. But that is not the point. The mouth-filling satisfaction, as it were, provided by such extravagances is in their naming, not swallowing. Mammon's speeches are not really projected towards an ontologisation of desire located outside the discursive dimension, pleasure for him lies in the verbal expenditure of his extraordinarily luxuriant fancies, not in the most unrealistic prospect of their realisation. The transmutation promised by the philosopher's stone is nothing more than a fictional device that serves him to sustain his unrestrained fantasies. The material fulfilment of his gargantuan desire is displaced onto a sequence of linguistic eruptions that spin on themselves to construct an absurd and implausible imaginary object world. In fact, as he gets anywhere near some kind of actual material gratification, in the form of the acquaintance with a female companion, he takes this as an opportunity to 'talk to her all in gold' (IV. i. 25).

As the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has it about language, it is what 'hollows being into desire'. Language aims to designate the 'real', of which, on the other hand, it can only provide a metonymical surrogate, a 'presence in absence'. Language places being onto a chain of signifiers that, in the same stroke as they name and designate a particular instance of that real, certify its actual absence from the realm of signification. And this absence, or lack, is precisely what makes linguistic signifiers spring into the gap in the attempt to fill it.[52] Epicure Mammon seems to be well aware of this non-identity between language and the real. He appears to know all too clearly that in order to sustain his appetitive compulsion he has to carry on moving from one signifier to another, to keep unrolling the signifying chain. Again, as a

[52] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), especially 30-113 and 146-178. The other analogy here is that, as in Lacan, in Ben Jonson's comedy the only desiring subject turns out to be the male subject.

disturbance to his self-fulfilling verbal stream comes in the guise of having the genuine identity of the woman that he pretends to take for a great lady revealed to him as a prostitute, he just adds another fitting ring to the chain and, albeit he has never seen her before, denies such an insinuation by declaring her an old acquaintance of his (II. ii. 266-272).

Mammon's misfortune does not lie in the fact that there is no transubstantiation, no materialisation of the wealth that he rapturously talks about. For if that was a real possibility, it would have resulted in confronting the limits, and hence the bypassing of them by his unrestrained imagination, of what material wealth can actually offer. Rather, for Mammon the failure of transubstantiation represents the shutting down of the fabric that provides him with the raw materials for his daydreams and imaginary constructions. This is what his self-appointed advisor, Surly, is mistaken about:

> 'Heart! Can it be
> That a grave sir, a rich, that has no need,
> A wise sir, too, at other times, should thus,
> With his own oaths and arguments make hard means
> To gull himself?
> (II. ii. 278-282)

What Surly fails to realise is that the point is precisely that for Mammon it is all about oaths and arguments. What Surly calls gulling oneself is in fact a deliberate attempt to transcend contingent material limits in order to get some kind of pleasure or gratification to be instantly consumed in the realm of signification.

It should have become abundantly clear by now that this form of sublimated conspicuous consumption is hardly a metaphor for or an image of the early manifestations of capitalist economy and its drive to infinitely expand productive forces and maximise profits. Still, one objection that might be raised to this is that if Epicure Mammon's verbal incontinence is a matter of consumption, it is not so for the chief characters of the play, Subtle, Face and Dol Common. Marginal though they may well be - a failed trickster, a servant and a prostitute - they no doubt show a remarkably robust and sharp accumulative instinct. One could actually push this point even further. The web of activities and interactions involved in their enterprise

embodies the organic composition of capital. Subtle possesses the know-how, Face provides landed property and capital to acquire and develop the means of production, while Dol Common puts in her labour power. Thus Face to Subtle:

> When all your alchemy, and your algebra,
> Your minerals, vegetals, and animals,
> Your conjuring, coz'ning, and your dozens of trades,
> Could not relieve your corpse with so much linen
> Would make you tinder, but to see a fire;
> I ga' you count'nance, credit for your coals,
> Your stills, your glasses, your materials;
> Built you a furnace, drew you customers,
> Advanced all your black arts; lent you, beside,
> A house to practise in -
>
> (I. i. 38-47)

And thus Dol Common:

> You will insult,
> And claim a primacy in the divisions?
> You must be chief? As if you only had
> The powder to project with? And the work
> Were not begun out of equality?
> The venture tripartite?
>
> (I. i. 130-135)

Still, even in this case to talk about a metaphor for capitalist commodity production appears slightly problematic. The only real productive force that the three actually possess is their rhetorical dexterity. Subtle's - the bogus alchemist - real productive power is what today's literary theory would call 'textual productivity': his capacity to produce an incessant and riotous discursive outburst. At the end of the play, when the secrets of his laboratory are finally revealed, all that is there is 'empty walls', a few 'cracked pots', 'glasses, and a furnace', and, needless to say, no philosopher stone in sight (V. v. 39-40). The only alchemic projections and transubstantiations from one material to another take place in Subtle's speeches:

> *Subtle:* Infuse vinegar,

To draw his volatile substance and his tincture
And let the water in glass E. be filtered,
And put into the gripe's eggs. Lute him well;
And leave him closed *in balneo.*

Face [within]: I will, sir.

Surly [aside]: What a brave language here is! Next to canting!

Subtle: I have another work you never saw, son,
That three days since passed the Philosopher's Wheel,
In the lent heat of Athanor, and 's become
Sulphur o' Nature.
(II. iii. 37-45)

As there is nothing in his laboratory, Subtle's only production is production of signifiers severed from the 'real' world of signifieds, of language cut loose from reality and as such capable to bend to the will and desires of his victims. All Subtle's alchemic discourse does is to 'project' and 'transubstantiate' these desires into a meta-signifier, gold, embodying the promise of their fulfilment. There is actually a deep relation between language and alchemy; or better between language and the product of alchemic magical distillations: the pure metal of which, according to the alchemic doctrine, all the other minerals are supposed to be lower states in descending degrees of perfection, and which, in turn, can be changed into any good that human desire might project itself upon. This is what has allowed Jean-Joseph Goux to identify the semiotic and the economic (as well as the psychoanalytical) 'as part of a unified process' that he subsumes under the heading 'symbolic economies'. All symbolic economies are based on a system of substitution and correlation kept together by a general equivalent. Within the semiotic horizon, language is the general equivalent of signs and in the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytical model the phallus is the general equivalent of objects. In the economic system this equivalent is money and gold. Thus, in the money economy, the 'expression of value, transforming diverse products of labour into identical *sublimates*, is a language of alchemy, of essence and quintessence, of distillation and sublimation'.[53]

[53] Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. by J. C. Gage (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 2-4, 19.

Just like the post-structuralist signifier, which unfixes and detaches meaning from the referent to relocate it in the internal relations of difference between one signifier and another, money, the universal equivalent, is the self-referential signifier of sheer abstract value. Through the levelling dint of its magical distillation, money erases the material differences between objects to permutate each of them, at one stroke, into any other object. What alchemy promises, money achieves:

> Gold is a wonderful thing! Its owner is master of all he desires. Gold can even enable souls to enter Paradise'. (Columbus, in his letter from Jamaica 1503). Since money does not reveal what has been transformed into it, everything, commodity or not, is convertible into money. Everything becomes saleable and purchaseable. Circulation becomes the great social resort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as the money crystal. Nothing is immune from this alchemy, the bones of saints cannot withstand it, let alone more delicate *res sacrosantae, extra commercium hominum*. Just as in money every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too for its part, as a radical leveller, it extinguishes all distinctions.[54]

As a measure and a medium of exchange, money is the attribute of every commodity and through its mediation all products of human labour are exchangeable for one another. In the market economy, if a product cannot be transformed into price, into money, it has no value. A commodity does not need simply demand, but demand that pays in money. It is money that which quantifies and petrifies value, which realises the price of the commodity and transfers its title into the hands of the buyer. Money itself, thus, has a circulation of its own. For money circulates not as commodities, but as their price. Hence the two cycles of exchange that Marx turns into a historical narrative. The cycle of exchange C(ommodity)-M(oney)-C(ommodity) is that which characterises the most elemental process of commercial exchange: 'the simple circulation of commodities begins with a sale and ends with a purchase'. This process, in which the money received from the sale of a commodity serves to buy another commodity, entails 'the transformation of commodities into money and the change of the money back into commodities'. Here the driving force of the economic process is the

[54] Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 131-132.

differential between the price paid for the same commodity in the different phases of circulation, that is the merchant's attempt to buy cheap and sell dear in order to buy cheap again and so on. However, as Marx moves on to analyse 'the transformation of money into capital' proper, the basic formula of commerce is dialectically reverted - in that which is both a historical and logical development - into M-C-M. Here money is invested not just to buy commodities, but, more specifically, in commodity production, from which the investor hopes to be returned an increased amount of money: M'.[55]

But if the outline here briefly abridged provides us with a theoretical model to historicise the transformation of commerce into capital accumulation proper, there is also a parallel and yet non-coterminous history to glance at. This is the history of the theories of money and economic value. 'Money', in Fernand Braudel's phrase, 'has never ceased to surprise humanity'. Particularly so, during the mercantilist period, when it 'was considered as wealth in its own right, like a river whose force alone could stimulate and complete exchanges, and whose mass could accelerate or slow them down'.[56] In the Renaissance, the massive expansion of commodity and money markets on a world scale notwithstanding, there is no fully developed theory to explain the process of creation of wealth; or, more correctly, there is no economic theory that would satisfy us. As Michel Foucault has highlighted, at this point in history 'there is no political economy, because, in the order of knowledge, production does not exist'.[57] Foucault's point here is to warn against interpreting a previous period of the history of ideas in the light of future developments, that is, as an imperfect, shadowy anticipation of what, on the contrary, could not be known as it was yet to come. Instead, he proposes an interrogation of the epistemological break that divides the understanding of economic factors in the age prior to the emergence of the modern science of political economy from that of the subsequent period. More specifically, if we go back (so to speak) to the sixteenth century, we find that the economic debate was restricted to a set of questions that shifted from moral contentions on 'profit and income (theory of fair price, justification of or condemnation of interest)', to the controversy on

[55] Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 146-155.
[56] Fernand Braudel, *Civilization & Capitalism: 15th-18th Century. Volume 1: The Structure of Everyday Life* (London: Collins, 1981), 436.
[57] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, English trans. (London:

'prices' and 'monetary substance', which had been stirred by the influx of American metals upon prices and the effects of successive devaluations. In this context, the discussion hinged on the need to re-standardise the *valor impositus* - *impositus* by the sovereign - of money to its material reality. In other words, it was asserted that the value of money should correspond to the amount of metal contained in coins, so that money could effectively function as a common measure between commodities in the increasingly complex system of national and international market exchange. In this respect, the great transformation witnessed in the seventeenth century - which successively has been identified with the emergence of mercantilism - was the passage from a conception of the 'two *functions* of coinage (measure and substitution)', based on the 'nature of its intrinsic *character* (the fact that it was precious)', to one which turned it upside down: for the mercantilists 'it is the exchanging function that serves as a foundation for the other two characters (its ability to measure and its capacity to receive a price thus appearing as *qualities* deriving from that *function*)'.[58] Thus, for Foucault all of these debates belong to what he calls 'the analysis of wealth'. This was distinguished from the 'theory of value' brought about by classical political economy in that it tried to answer to and therefore sprang from a radically diverse set of questions. The analysis of wealth addressed the problem of how money, and therefore the prices assigned to commodities in the circuit of exchange, could characterise, quantify and provide a system of signs that designates wealth. The theory of value, by contrast, would question why certain things have more value than others, how this relates to their relative utility and therefore how value is posited onto an object.[59]

In order to witness the birth of what we have learned to know as political economy proper, that is of an economic field of inquiry that moves from the problem of production of value and thus of the creation of a surplus, we have to wait for the Physiocrats and nineteenth century classical economists, Adam Smith and David Ricardo, then critically revisited by Marx. It is at this point that the search for the solution to the enigma of the actual source and creation of wealth moves outside the 'noisy' sphere of circulation and commerce, trade and exchange, selling and buying, to

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Routledge, 1970), 166.

[58] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 167-174.

[59] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 189-200.

the more secluded and discrete world of production. In the eighteenth century the Physiocratic school first begins to recognise that in agricultural production the land is capable of providing a surplus of goods that exceeds the needs of the labourer that works on it. And subsequently the early Adam Smith extends this point to note that 'the real measure of exchangeable value of all commodities' is ultimately to be found in the labour directly employed in their production and crystallised in their means of production.[60] Hence we arrive, by way of the distinction between actual 'labour' and labour power - the living worker himself or herself, whose cost of production and reproduction *qua* living worker, rather than his or her labour, is that which is paid by the employer - at Marx's theory of surplus value. To put it in Marx's own words, surplus value is to be found there where 'Mr. Moneybag' is so lucky that he discovers a commodity, labour power, whose 'actual consumption' is capable of creating value.[61] 'In the form of money', Ricardo had already noted, 'capital is productive of no profit'.[62] Moving from this, then, classical economists and their critics would turn their attention to the organisation and social division of labour and technological innovation; to the differential between the cost of labour - or production and reproduction of labour power - actually paid by capital and the surplus of value that capital obtains through the use of such labour, or labour power.

As we have seen, before then economic analysts had been tentatively looking elsewhere. Mercantilists looked at foreign trade. There were, on the other hand, precise historical reasons for this. As 'soon as the precious metals become objects of commerce', glossed the eighteenth century British economist Sir James Steuart, 'a universal equivalent for everything, they also become the measure of power between nations. Hence the mercantilist system'.[63] And in effect, the economic problems that lie at the root of the doctrine that was to be posthumously known as mercantilism are inextricably related to the construction of the nation-state. In E. F. Heckscher's canonical study on this subject, mercantilism is defined as 'a phase in the history of economic policy', that is as a series of monetary, protectionist measures essential to

[60] Quoted in Eric Roll, *A History of Economic Thought* (rev. edn; London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1973), 158.
[61] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 167.
[62] David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (London: J. Murray, 1817), 267.

the strengthening and unification of the nation-state under the absolutist power.[64] The whole debate about mercantilism unfolds in terms of national interest, of the advantages and disadvantages of foreign commerce to the native country and to the building of its nation-state. Thus, as he exposes the core of his economic theory, the Elizabethan State official and trader Gerald Malynes complains that the 'overbalancing of forraine commodities with our home commodities...draweth away our treasure and readie monie, to the great losse of the commonweale'.[65] In the same guise, Thomas Mun, the best known mercantilist theorist, would defend his famous doctrine of the 'balance of trade' by appealing to the national interest: 'The ordinary means therefore to encrease our wealth and treasure is by *Forraigne Trade*, wherein wee must ever observe this rule; to sell more to strangers yearly than we consume of theirs in value,

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[63] Sir James Steuart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1770) I: 327.
[64] E. F. Heckscher, *Mercantilism*, ed. and trans. by Mendel Shapiro, 2 vols (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934), 1: 19. See also B. E. Supple, *Commercial Crisis and Change in England, 1600-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); D. C. Coleman, *The Economy of England 1450-1750* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University press, 1977), 48-77; Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially 3-50. As regards the different explanatory paradigms for the commercial transformations in early modern English foreign trade - with reference to the historico-theoretical debate on the 'primitive accumulation' and the 'commercialisation model' outlined in the previous chapter - see Coleman's and Brenner's accounts:

> In the second half of the sixteenth century...change was rapid and often violent. It was a product of political, religious, and economic forces in so explosive a mixture that economic abstraction is meaningless. War between Spain and France and its attendant financial problems came to a head with the bankruptcies of both states in 1557, with drastic consequences for the money market of Antwerp. To difficulties in Spanish-American trade were added European harvest failures and grain crises. ...Such events did not in themselves cause the first big phase of English maritime expansion which, in the course of a century, was to lay the foundations of the first British empire. But they went far to influence its timing and form. ...Amongst the economic arguments, hopes for greater self-sufficiency loomed high, as did the merits of colonies as devices for promoting the much desired exchange of imported raw materials or precious metals against exports of domestic manufacture. Thus would national wealth be increased and employment encouraged.
>
> (Coleman, *The Economy of England 1450-1750*, 55-57)

> English cloth exports diminished as they came up against declining European markets for cloths, the result of the secular crisis of production, above all in agriculture, that gripped seventeenth-century Europe. In contrast, English import rose, partly in connection with the growing re-export market, but especially because of a growing domestic market, conditioned by the breakthrough in England in this period to ongoing economic development, rooted ultimately in the sociotechnical transformation of agriculture.
>
> (Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 33)

[65] *Tudor Economic Documents*, ed. by R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1935), 3: 395.

...because that part of our stock which is not returned to us in wares must necessarily be bought in treasure'.[66]

As has been said, there were precise historical and economic reasons why merchants had every reason to link their interests with those of the nation state and its government. International merchants' business involved the fairly simple process of carrying goods between import and export customers. The main complication that could arise in this context was that of an increase in competition, so that due to a growing number of merchants or merchant companies trading in the same wares, offer would overcome demand, thus causing a drop in prices and a resulting fall in profits. Or, alternatively, there could be a competition for the wares purchased abroad that would lead to a rise in their prices that, again, would bring down the rate of profit when goods were sold in the home market. To protect themselves from these risks, as Robert Brenner summarises, the merchants 'sought government backed monopolies in order to restrict trade to members of their companies and to bar those who were not exclusively overseas traders'. And on this basis they tried 'to regulate the shipments of the company traders, with the goal of manipulating markets for purchases as well as for sales'. The government, as well, had clear cut motives to support the merchants' demands for company privileges, particularly so 'given its historic difficulty in taxing the land - a difficulty that only became greater during the Tudor-Stuart period - as well as its secularly increasing expenses'. For a 'prosperous merchant community could offer an unrivalled source of financial support. Merchants could grant loans to the monarchy and pay taxes on trade'.[67] But, of course, for individual merchants and their companies the real drive was the pursuing of their own profit. The merchants' identification of their benefit with national good and the power of the monarchy was the dressing with which they covered up the economic interests that governed their activities. This dressing, however, in as much as a strong state was in effect needed to regulate competing economic interests was nonetheless quintessential to the success of the mercantilist enterprise. The absolutist monarchy and the merchant companies, while they pursued their own particular and ultimately antagonistic interests, were

[66] Thomas Mun, *England's Treasure by Forraign Trade* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1895), 7-8.
[67] Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 54.

inextricably locked in a political and economic exchange - namely, the granting of lucrative privileges to London's overseas companies in exchange for political and financial support - on which the survival of both was dependant.[68]

In constructing the conflict between Barabas and the government of Malta, to go back to the textual readings, Marlowe offers a remarkably rigorous and precise demystification of mercantilist ideology. He unveils the real nature of the reciprocal dependence of the great merchant estates and absolutist power. The reason why Barabas, the great merchant of Malta, is undone, is precisely that he severs his own interests from those of the State: 'If anything shall...concern our state / Assure yourselves I'll look unto *(aside)* myself' (I. i. 175-176). In the event, the State seizes Barabas's fortune to pay its overdue tribute to Malta's enemy, the Turks. And, as a result of this, Barabas turns to seek revenge against the representatives of State power - he plots the assassination of Lodowick, the governor's son - until he finally commits his ultimate act of betrayal: conniving with the Turkish enemy for the overthrowing of Malta's government. In turn, as soon as, in compensation for his betrayal, the Turks make Barabas the governor of Malta, he hands back political power in exchange for gold and money. And so he shows himself as a faithful representation of a social group, the early modern merchant estate, which while it was progressively gaining economic power, was not yet ready to seize power directly in its own hands.[69]

Barabas's understanding of money and trade is entirely consistent with the economic doctrine of English mercantilists. Apart from the differences in their respective arguments, all of them - from Gerald Malynes and Edward Misselden to Thomas Mun - shared a common belief in the power of money and therefore in the need to accumulate treasure, as opposed to piling up goods and commodities. If 'Money be wanting, Traffic doth decrease, though commodities be abundant and good

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[68] Perry Anderson writes that there is a 'potential *field of compatibility*', at the end of the sixteenth century, 'between the programme of the Absolutist State and the operations of mercantile and manufacturing capital' (*Lineages of the Absolutist State* [London: Verso, 1974], 41). However he insists that at bottom the 'history of Western Absolutism is largely the history of the slow reconversion of the landed ruling class to the necessary form of its own political power, despite and against most of its previous experience and instincts' (48).

[69] Merchant capitalism will become the driving force in English politics only after, and through, the revolutionary upheaval. Cf. Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (London: Routledge, 1972), especially 73-76.

cheap', remarked Malynes. [70] Mercantilists identified wealth with money and gold. And so does Barabas. As he defines the proper 'ware wherein consists...wealth', which he distinguishes 'from the vulgar trade' (I. i. 33-35), he identifies it above all with wedges of gold (I. i. 9), 'metal of the purest mould' (I. i. 20) and 'costly stones' (I. i. 28). And then again, as he describes his riches later on, we have 'Whole chests of gold, in bullion and in coin' (IV. i. 65), 'debts owning' and 'great sums of money' lying in banks in 'Florence, Venice, Antwerp, London, Seville, / Frankfort, Lubeck, Moscow, and where not' (IV. i. 71-74). If the industrial capitalist is 'capital personified', whose existence is subordinated to the drive of accumulation through the constant expansion of productive forces and increase in the extraction of surplus value, then Barabas is *merchant capital* personified. When the governor of Malta and his officers seize his wealth, they tell him, 'Live still; and if you canst, get more' (I. ii. 105). But Barabas begs them:

> ...you can request no more;
> Unless your unrelenting flinty hearts
> Suppress all pity in your stony breasts
> And now shall move you to bereave my life.
> (I. ii. 143-146)

The force and vital energy that make him so restless are the force and energy that drive the movement of accumulation. And Barabas, like the mercantilists, knows only one way of making profits and accumulating wealth. This is embodied in the early modern conception of gold and money as a protean, self-reproductive power: 'Christians; what or how can I multiply? / Of nought is nothing made' (I. ii. 106-107).

But, surprisingly enough, it is Ben Jonson who, for all the conservatism of his reputed 'anti-acquisitive attitude' inherited from the small local community of the Middle Ages - or perhaps precisely because of it[71] - offers some of the sharpest insights into the modern phenomena of reification and commodity fetishism. To fully grasp this point, however, the originality of Ben Jonson needs to be specified not just

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[70] Quoted in Roll, *A History of Economic Thought*, 65.

[71] 'Writing near the start of capitalist development, Jonson could penetrate the veil of reification. The great ideological advantage of his satiric comedies is precisely a point of reference in a prior mode of production, a historically determined possibility of insight' (Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 300).

in terms of textual hermeneutic, but also in the light of the relation between the social situation of his working conditions and his response to it. Jonson's literary and dramatic career has often been characterised as an attempt to negotiate his own authorial position within the emergent literary and dramatic marketplace; that is, as a sustained struggle to refashion the poet and playwright's role as one that determines the norms of fruition of his poetic and dramatic artefact, rather than having to accommodate himself to the existing ones. Hence the well-known dichotomies and contradictions inscribed in Ben Jonson's authorial position. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have synthetically put it, Jonson's 'authorial investiture - for that is what it aspired to be - was only locatable, "groundable", through its symbolic relation to existing hierarchies, existing languages, symbols and practices of high and low'.[72] At the 'low' side of this spectrum, the recurrent problematic addressed by Jonson is the kind of social and intellectual exchanges that characterise the commercial framework of cultural production and consumption: a framework to which, for a substantial part of Jonson's career, patronage did not seem to represent a viable material alternative.[73]

In the first of his *Epigrams* (1612), Ben Jonson addresses his reader in the following way: 'Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book in hand, / To reade it well: that is, to understand' (1-2). As the second epigram, 'To my Booke-seller', makes even more explicit - 'Call'st a booke good, or bad, as it doth sell' (27) - the kind of exchange outlined here is one that can be usefully qualified with the concept of alienation: to part with, to make another's, making external to oneself.[74] This is an alienation, that is, from the fruits of one's labour as they are turned into marketable products and made available to anyone who can afford to buy them, and this process sets the buyer free to do with them whatever the buyer wants. So that in the specific case in question to sell a script as a commodity means to alienate the control over the conditions of its fruition. It follows that the praying invocation to the reader to read well and

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[72] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*, 74.

[73] Ben Jonson would be given a Royal pension only in 1616. This allowed him to abandon commercial theatre for a period of nine years. See David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 240-260.

[74] This is one of the two German meanings that are translated in English with 'alienation': '*entäusserung*'. The other meaning, '*entfremdung*' is translated as 'estrangement'. For a useful outline of this issue, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (rev. edn; London: Fontana, 1988), 33-36.

understand is in fact an acknowledgement that this control has in fact been surrendered through the process of commodification. In the *Discoveries* (first published in 1640), he adds: 'What a deal of cold business doth a man mis-spend the better part of life in! In scattering compliments, tendering visits, gathering and venting news, following Feasts and Plays, making a little winter-love in a darke corner' (56-59). Later on this complaint is reinforced by the critique of the subordination of poetic art to professional interests:

> There be some men are born only to suck out the poison of bookes: *habent venenum pro victu*: *imo, pro deliciis*. And such are they that only relish the obscene, and foul things in Poets, which makes the profession taxed. But by whom? Men, that watch for it, and - had they not had this hint - are so unjust valuers of letters as they think no learning good, but what brings in gain. It shows they themselves would never have been of the professions they are, but for the profits and fees.
>
> (1031-1039)

The theme of commodification of poetry and drama is further and most famously analysed by Ben Jonson in the satirical 'Induction on the Stage' of *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), in which the contractual nature of commodified exchange that defines the relation between the playwright and his public in commercial theatre is defined by the list of 'articles of agreement' read on stage by the scrivener. In the event, these articles appear quite puzzling. For a start, the first request to the public cannot fail to strike one as preciously superfluous: 'to remain in the places their money or friends have put them in, with patience, for the space of two hours and an half, and somewhat more' (Induction, 77-80). This request is then followed by the paradoxical assertion that the judgement of the individual members of the audience should be measured by the price of their tickets: 'it shall bee lawful for any man to judge his six pen'orth, his twelve pen'orth, so to his eighteen pence, two shillings, half a crown, to the value of his place: provided always his place get not above his wit' (Induction, 87-92). Of course, the paradox here lies in the asymmetry of the two elements of the exchange, economic value and literary and dramatic taste: the first a merely quantitative matter and the second a quality incommensurable with it, unless through a metamorphosis whose nature creates the subject for the paradox itself.

In a well-known study, Jonas Barish has read these remarks as a symptom of Jonson's impatience in front of the 'gaudiness and bustle', 'licentious ways with time and space', 'verbal as well as visual luxuriance' that, in Jonson's vision, constituted the horizon of expectation of Jacobean theatrical audiences.[75] As the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* says of its author, 'He is loth to make Nature afraid in his plays, like those that beget *Tales*, *Tempests*, and such like drolleries, to mix his head with other men's heels' (130-132). The reference here is obviously to Shakespeare's late works. Commercial theatre and culture, the reduction of artistic use value to the degree zero of commodity value, for Ben Jonson always goes hand in hand with degraded aesthetic populism. Thus in another passage from *The Discoveries*:

> Expectation of the vulgar is more drawn and held with newness than goodness: we see it in fencers, in players, in poets, in preachers, in all where fame promiseth anything.
>
> (411-414)

'Newnesse' is the mark of the criteria superimposed by the mechanism of commodified consumption, the illusion of novelty through which the commodification process reproduces itself. So that, forced to subject himself to these criteria, the commodity producer becomes an appendix of the external mechanism put into motion by the cultural market. In other words, what seems to be addressed here is a process of expropriation and dispersal of textual authority, whose threatening after-effect is the decentring of the author's subjectivity. This is, in turn, the background against which Ben Jonson elaborates his defensive and recuperative authorial strategies.

These strategies rest on the dislocation of the authorial voice into a milieu of classical authorities that come to provide a source of ideological purity and durable validation. George Chapman, in the verses prefixed to the Quarto edition of Jonson's *Sejanus* (1603), describes the relation between the poet and his classic sources comparing the poet with a jeweller who brings 'Pearls and dear stones, from richest shores and streams', in order to enchase them 'in amelled gold', so that his new creation 'cut[s] and adorn[s]' them 'beyond their native merits' (6-11). As these lines

[75] Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 136.

suggest, then, in Ben Jonson the references to the classics are to be read less as merely a scholastic exercise than in terms of an original re-elaboration and actualisation. In the words of a modern commentator, Ben Jonson's use of classical authorities throughout his career highlights, in Evelin Tribble's words, 'the contested nature of authority in the early modern period, the competing claims of external authorities and of an emergent notion of internal authority'.[76] A crucial role, within this context, is of course to be attributed to the publication of the Folio edition of his *Works* (1616). In the Folio, to begin with, the Latin glosses that were inserted in the Quarto edition of plays such as *Sejanus* are removed. For here the function of classical sources of authority is replaced by the signs of value and legitimation conferred by the quality of the edition itself. Devised 'in imitation of a classical Opera', this 'is a large, imposing, well printed volume and as such sufficiently attests to Jonson's place in the tradition of classical learning and letters'.[77]

Whereas commodity-culture inhabits the ephemeral time of novelty and fashion, Jonson's counter-claim for lasting cultural value is positioned in a *longue durée* that stretches both backward, striving to reach a continuity with the classical tradition, and forward, in the quest for permanence and durable value. By way of this claim for transcendence, Jonson's collected works aim to relocate themselves outside the cyclical, fast time of the commodity market. And yet, they can display this claim only through a self-referential, commodity-value enhancing gesture. Their disavowal of the ephemeral appeal of frivolous cultural novelty, their very display of cultural authority objectifies this very authority as a mark of distinction that feeds into a higher repositioning of the cultural commodity in the hierarchy of social and cultural divisions. The claim for transcendence and the weight of classical literature are thus made to work as fetishising elements, as use values that are in turn reinscribed into a whole new set of exchange values.[78] Hence, at its root, the duplicity of Ben Jonson's - 'anti-acquisitive', if one likes - social critique. On the one hand this critique is unflinchingly directed at a changing society in which the established social hierarchies

[76] E. B. Tribble, *Margins and Marginality: The Printed Page in Early Modern England* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 130.
[77] Tribble, *Margins and Marginality*, 156.
[78] Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. by Randal Johnson, English trans.

are overwhelmed by the structure of the market economy; and on the other, it must come to terms with the fact that any act of critique and unmasking uses the tools of, and is thus subsumed by, the very social and economic structure it exposes.

IV. Epilogue

Traditionally, the moral approach of a play such as *The Alchemist* has been defined in terms of the 'anti-acquisitive' attitude described by L. C. Knight or, alternatively, as a sort of utterly amoral notion of intelligence at a premium. But this play is actually more complex and ultimately more troubling than the unilateral approach that either of these interpretations suggests. It is true that Subtle and Face are the self-conscious exploiters of their victims' weaknesses, appetites and desires. Yet in the last instance the only difference between them is that Subtle and Face are less hypocritical than the victims of their schemes, who presume the two to be governed by different drives from their own manias. So, as in the finale Subtle is (as it must of course happen) overcome by his own machinations, whose effects he can no longer control, there is no real moral or edifying content in the dénouement. The ending is just the one inscribed in the dynamics - and thus in the social structure and relations that govern these - which put the story into motion. After Subtle finally disappears from the scene, the last word of the play is left to his ex-accomplice, who has just betrayed him, much as he had previously betrayed his master. Face, by way of conclusion, addresses the audience:

> I put myself
> On you, that are my country; and this pelf
> Which I have got, if you do quit me, rests,
> To feast you often, and invite new guests.
> (V. ii. 162-165)

This is an invitation to celebrate, that is to connive, with him: and to celebrate, and connive with, what? That is said in the prologue, which describes the play as an eminently 'realist' representation: 'Our scene is London...' (5). Jonson, so he claims,

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 115 ff..

has no lesson to teach, just a social and historical reality to represent. By comparison Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, might seem to propose a more edifying epilogue. In the final scene, the Governor of Malta allies with his arch-enemy, the Turkish commander Calymath, to kill Barabas, the diabolical schemer and ruthless accumulator, who is finally properly compensated and let to die, 'pinched with intolerable pangs' in the 'extremity of heat' (V. v. 89-90). But then, this occurs only for the cycle of betrayal fuelled by conflictual self-interests to restart a few lines later, when the two leaders end up imprisoning and locking each other and their people in a bond of perennial, claustrophobic estrangement:

> *Governor:* Content thee, Calymath, here thou must stay,
> And Live in Malta prisoner; for come all the world
> To rescue thee, so will we guard us now,
> As sooner shall they drink the ocean dry,
> Than conquer Malta, or endanger us.
> So march away, and let due praise be given
> Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven.
> (V. v. 122-128)

To heaven? Well, at any rate, throughout the play we perceive the emergence of a force that has escaped people's control and come to dominate them.

Chapter 4
Economics, Law and Alienation:
The Merchant of Venice and the Question of History

I. Historical Criticism and its Dilemmas

Few, if any, English Renaissance plays remind us more sharply of the dilemmas of historical interpretation - of its being caught in between the claim for historical difference of past texts and the irrepressible intrusion of our own interpretative habits and preoccupations - than William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1597). For one thing, no contemporary appropriation of this play, in critical practice as well as in performance, can avoid dealing, in one way or another, with the uncomfortable historical reverberations of the role of Shylock, the spat-upon, baited Jewish usurer. How should we take him? Is Shylock a grotesque caricature that has by now, in our post-Holocaust world, become an intolerable historical document? Or does this character, ultimately spoiled of his dearest affection, as well as of his wealth and religious beliefs, call for our sympathetic response to his tormented endorsing of the role of pre-destined victim? Is the suppression of Shylock the necessary course of an action in which the *peripeteia* univocally hinges on goodness suppressing evil? Or does Shylock's sick resignation as he leaves the stage, 'I pray you give me leave from hence. I am not well' (IV. i. 392-393), reverberate throughout the final act and the supposedly happy ending, casting on them a disturbing shadow? In short, is *The Merchant of Venice* a comedy or a problem play? If for the editors of the First Folio it was the former case, 'for *us*', as Harold Bloom has opportunely remarked, '*it had better be* a problem play'.[1]

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[1] Harold Bloom, 'Introduction', in *William Shakespeare*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea

Or, one might ask, is it the 'problem' that has replaced the 'play'? Is it that, to put it in the words of Terence Hawkes's important contribution to contemporary Shakespearean criticism, it is always 'we' who 'mean by Shakespeare'? For, as post-structuralism has come to expose, at the base of the thick layer of meanings deposited on the text by the history of its appropriations, lies the unfixed, iterable nature of the textual signifier itself. From a radical post-structuralist perspective such as the one I have just mentioned, there is no extra-textual authority or signified to which we can appeal in order to establish what the text actually *means*. For all the text certifies about such an authority - say, an authorial intention or a referent in extra discursive reality - is in fact its absence. It is *we* who fill the text with our own meaning. Only, this is just a matter of waiting for the next reading that will displace our own fixing of meaning. And it is of course even more so when we deal with the dimension of dramatic production, where there is actually a company of actors who, literally, 'mean by Shakespeare'. For no performance is identical with another. And as such it is not just a more or less correct realisation or reflection of the text, but a brand new *production* which transforms the text's raw material into an irreducibly unique entity 'only to a limited degree constrained by the indication of the written text', as Keir Elam remarks.[2] In each stage production, *meaning* is made anew and disseminated through the relationship between the specific qualities of the *mise-en-scene*, the circumstances of production and the plurality of the audience's responses. So the further question that arises here is with regard to the way in which we validate one particular appropriation of the text, that is the basis on which we claim it to afford a particular set of meanings or another. For if the answer provided is an olympian acknowledgement of the fact that there 'is only and always the business of "meaning by"',[3] one would have to ask why a particular text has been called into play in the first place. If all that is at stake in the production of meaning is a given interpretative investment, then there would be no need for any text to certify a particular meaning - say, a specific position on anti-Semitism - for this would have accordingly to be posited as always already there, independently from the specific textual object of its investment.

House, 1986), 5.

[2] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 209.

[3] Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.

Thus, to highlight some of the ways in which the text may determine, or oppose resistance to, the set of meanings with which it is invested in the interpretative act, I wish to re-interrogate *The Merchant of Venice* by locating it in the specific space of the historical formation from which it sprang. For if this play undoubtedly calls us to readdress its ethical and political implications in the light of a diachronic trajectory that has made one of its key themes an extremely troublesome issue; on the other hand, to acknowledge the historicity of the text is to recognise that it interpellates us from the standpoint of its historical and therefore cultural and ideological specificity and difference. This is not to say that, to take the best example, the conflict between Shylock and the Venetians does not mean to us, or that we cannot mean by it in our own terms. There is no doubt, for instance, that this conflict can be suggestively translated into a dehistoricised cipher for the opposition between universal human values and attitudes: generosity and selfishness, forgiveness and revenge, justice and mercy; or, at the opposite pole, that it can, equally effectively, be turned into an interrogation of our own contemporary identity politics.[4] Only, I would argue, the text responds to these rewritings by offering a surplus of meaning, an element of resistance to its present appropriations that a sensitive historicist reading will recognise as the distinguishing mark of an irreducible *impermanence* which, in Bertolt Brecht's words, can in turn reveal our own present and therefore our position in front of the text as impermanent too.[5]

To be sure, there is actually a host of historically minded critical studies that have highlighted the fact that the economic and ideological conflicts presented by *The*

[4] Cf., respectively, Frank Kermode, 'The Mature Comedies', in *Early Shakespeare*, ed. by J. R. Brown (London: Arnold, 1961), 211-217; and Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 299-302. Though, on the relation between the figure of Shylock and contemporary identity politics, with specific reference to the 'racialist' discourse based on the identification of physical and biological characteristics as the essence of race that we have inherited from the nineteenth century, see A. K. Appiah's call for attention to the historical specificity of this discourse in his entry on 'Race' in *Critical Terms for Literary Studies*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 274-287. Appiah, however, erases the specific Renaissance discourses on the dichotomy whiteness/blackness by subsuming it to a religious discourse. For a reappraisal of this argument, see the two path-breaking studies by Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989); and K. F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995). On the Jewish question, see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[5] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett

Merchant of Venice are a mediated representation of the social, economic, moral and political preoccupations which were haunting Shakespeare's society. What tends to happen to Shylock, in these studies, is that he is alternatively taken as the embodiment of the emergence of capitalism and bourgeois utilitarianism;[6] or as a representation of an old 'quasi-feudal fiscalism', and of the discredited practice of usury and its controversial relation with the rising power of merchant-capitalism.[7] Even in this kind of historical reading, then, the crucial question that arises has to do with the referential relevance of Shylock's Jewish identity. There are two historical episodes that are usually mentioned in this context to lend topicality to Shylock's characterisation. One is the execution of Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew outwardly converted to Christianity who became a physician first to the Earl of Leicester and then to Queen Elizabeth. He was eventually executed for high treason in 1594, after he was denounced for supposedly having plotted to poison the Queen and Don Antonio, a claimant to the Portuguese crown, during his visit to London in 1592. Having 'scarcely any other Jew on whom to vent their wrath', writes Lesley Fiedler, Londoners 'demanded on stage a scapegoat'.[8] The other episode is the wave of anti-foreign riots that exploded in London in 1588, 1593 and 1595. However, there is of course preciously little resemblance between Shylock's social position as an outcast usurer and that of Roderigo Lopez, the royal physician. In addition, the contemporary anti-alien riots were not specifically anti-semitic. In fact, in the main these historical connections are raised as hypotheses to be downplayed by the conclusion that, to quote John Russel Brown's introduction to the Arden edition of the text, 'as a play on the

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(London: Methuen, 1978), 190.

[6] See, among others, E. D. Pettet, '*The Merchant of Venice* and the Problem of Usury', *Essays and Studies*, 31 (1945), 19-33; J. W. Draper, 'Usury and *The Merchant of Venice*', *Modern Philology*, 33 (1935), 37-47; Elliot Krieger, *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 8-36; Frank Whigham, 'Ideology and Class Conduct in *The Merchant of Venice*', in *Shakespeare's Comedies*, ed. by Gary Waller (London and New York: Longman, 1991), 108-128.

[7] Cf. Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in England and Spain* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 195-218; Thomas Moisan, '"Which is the Merchant Here? And Which the Jew?": Subversion and Recuperation in *The Merchant of Venice*', in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History & Ideology*, ed. by J. E. Howard and Marion O'Connor (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 188-206; Nick Potter, '*The Merchant of Venice*' in Graham Holderness, Nick Potter and John Turner, *Shakespeare: The Play of History* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 160-179.

[8] Lesley Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (London: Crom Helm, 1973), 86; for another detailed, but more sceptical, discussion of the relation between these two figures, see Steven Mullaney, 'Brothers and Others, or the Art of Alienation' in *Cannibals, Witches and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*,

Jewish question, *The Merchant* is very equivocal and has many irrelevances'.[9] To the north of the English Channel, where the play was originally written and performed, Jews had been expelled since the Reign of Edward I and could only stay if they converted to Christianity.[10] Conversely, for Shakespeare and his original audience, it was Shylock's professional activity, usury, as practised by Christians themselves, that was a crucial matter of concern and debate. As R. H. Tawney writes in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), in Elizabethan and Tudor England:

> the issue over which the struggle between the new economic movements of the age and the scheme of economic ethics expounded by churchmen was most definitely joined, and continued longest, was not, as the modern reader might be disposed to expect, that of wages, but that of credit, money-lending, and prices. The centre of the controversy - the mystery of iniquity in which a host of minor scandals were conveniently, if inaccurately, epitomized - was the problem which contemporaries described by the word usury.[11]

Notwithstanding the impact of the Reformation, in the sixteenth century, the official social outlook of the Church of England does not seem to have changed that much. As it persisted in reasserting an interpretation of the Bible canonised by the Medieval Schoolmen, the authorised religious orthodoxy found its message going increasingly against the grain of contemporary social and economic transformations and the criteria of economic pragmatism and expediency that these were introducing. According to Tawney, there is in fact a visible temporal gap that separates the development of a network of increasingly impersonal and abstract mechanisms of the national and international market, with their complex systems of trade and finance institutions and practices, and the elaboration of an 'objective' conceptual apparatus apt to come to terms with these processes. And so, as the traditional social teaching and the prescriptions about individual conduct of traditional Christian morality become

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ed. by Marjorie Garber (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 74-79.

[9] J. R. Brown, 'Introduction', *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by J. R. Brown (Walton-on-Thames: Nelson, 1997), xxiv; see also, Moelwyn Merchant, 'Introduction', in *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by Moelwyn Merchant (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 9; Potter, '*The Merchant of Venice*', 161.

[10] Though according to James Shapiro quite a few of them managed to stay and practice their faith in secret, particularly because in the age of the Inquisition, some of the alternatives abroad were not particularly appealing. See Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*.

[11] R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 1990), 155.

increasingly diverted from economic reality, a theoretical vacuum marked the time span that stood in between its supervened obsolescence and its replacement by new explanatory and ethical paradigms.[12]

'Usury', states Thomas Wilson in *A Discourse upon Usury* (1572), is 'against nature'. The 'detestable and hurtefull synne of usurie' is 'makinge the lone of monye a kinde of merchandise, a thinge directlye against all lawe, against nature, and against god...to lyve by lending upon the onely sweate and labour of others'.[13] The difference between ethically acceptable forms of profit making and sinful activities, within this context, was eventually made by the risk taken by the capital holder in trading. In the dialogue that opens Wilson's treatise, we have the Preacher who asserts that 'Lawfull tradyng and adventuring to bring in our want or to carry out our plenty hathe ever beene allowed, and wythout such traffique no countreye nor kyngdome can flouryshe'.[14] The usurer's unforgivable sin, by contrast, is 'to lyve by lending upon the onely sweate and labour of others. Whereas god willeth everye man to lyve in hys vocation, and hee that will not laboure eyther with body or minde according to his callyng rightly should not eate at al, forbidding men to make lending a kinde of living'.[15] Differently from 'the merchant that crosse the seas' and 'adventure[s]', reproaches the anonymous writer of *The Death of Usury, or the Disgrace of Usurers* (1594; sig. E1v),[16] the usurer does not take any risk for his profit. 'Where men esteeme more of mony then of God', reads the Prophet Oseas's harangue in Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene's *A Looking Glasse for London and England* (1590):

> Let that land looke to feele his wrathfull rod.
> For there is no sin more odious in his sight
> Then where usurie defraudes the poore of his right.
> London, take heed, these sinnes abound in thee:
> The poore complaine, the widowes wronged bee.
> The gentlemen by sutiltie are spoilde,
> The plough-men loose the crop for which they toild.

[12] For an updated, but on this point substantially convergent, revision of Tawney's arguments, see J. O. Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
[13] Thomas Wilson, *A Discourse upon Usury*, ed., by R. H. Tawney (London: Bell, 1925), 177-178.
[14] Wilson, *A Discourse upon Usury*, 203.
[15] Wilson, *A Discourse upon Usury*, 178.
[16] Quoted in Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 198.

In Martin Luther's words, usury 'lays burdens upon all lands, cities, lords, and people, sucks them dry, and brings them to ruin'.[17] For Lutheranism the social horizon was the natural subsistence economy of Middle Ages rural society, from whose standpoint profit made from money dealing and financial transactions were addressed in terms of downright and unequivocal condemnation. Besides, Luther did not deem it fit for a religious doctrine to provide practical guidance and thus corrupt its principles with the provision of specific directions dealing with the constraints society imposed on its secular application: 'The preacher shall preach only the Gospel rule, and leave it to each man to follow his conscience'.[18] But Protestantism also nurtured another line of thought, itself an offspring of Lutheranism, that is Calvin's theological system and social ethics. Largely an urban product and as such unavoidably concerned with the need to address the worldview and material interests of the increasingly powerful mercantile estates, Calvinism took the existence of an advanced commercial and financial system and their practical necessities as an ineluctable reality to come to terms with. Hence Calvin's famous statements on this subject, in which unconditional moral condemnation of money lending and the financier's trade is replaced with workable pragmatic rules such as the establishment of a maximum in the rate of interest and the exemption of payment of interest for the poor: rules which were inspired by the principle that usury is to be denounced only in those cases in which 'the creditor becomes rich by the sweat of the debtor, and the debtor does not reap the reward of his labour'.[19] In this line of thought, as reiterated in England by Sir Robert Filmer half way through the seventeenth century, its possible effects, that is idleness, not usury itself, was the evil: 'If many men who are fit for Callings live idly on Usury, they sinne, but no therwise than those that ley their lands'.[20]

Calvin's was in fact going to be, in the post-Reformation world, the most influential and effective form of Protestantism, at least in practice. For all the passionate

[17] Martin Luther, *Works: The Christian in Society*, 6 vols (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 2: 297.
[18] Quoted in Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 109.
[19] Quoted in Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 115.
[20] Robert Filmer, *Quaestio Quodlibetica* (London, 1653; Harvard, Mass.: Kress Library Catalogue, 877)

invectives that usury was still subjected to, in Elizabethan England, as well as in Calvin's Geneva, it was a pragmatic approach that was ultimately to prevail. In 1571 a statute was passed which, while confirming the moral condemnation of usury as 'forbidden by the Law of God', actually legalised lending at interest rates of 10% or less.[21] By then, the increasing need of liquid assets by merchant companies, new types of enterprises and the Government itself had contributed to transform 'usury' from the 'casual and intermittent transactions' that 'had supplied material to moralists and legislators since the early middle ages' into 'something like a regular system'.[22] Further ideological rationalisation was thus urgently required. And, unsurprisingly, one of the first to take charge to provide it would be Sir Francis Bacon, the 'father of experimental philosophy'. 'Few have spoken of *Usury* usefully', with this straight statement Bacon joined in the debate. After the reiteration of the traditional condemnation of usury - 'the *Usurer* breaketh the First Law, that was made for Mankinde, after the Fall: which was, *In sudore Vultus tui comedes Panem tuum*; Not, *In sudore Vultus alieni*' - Bacon then moves on to compare 'the *Incommodities*, and *commodities* of *Usury*'. Among the 'incommodities', he includes the withdrawal of money from trade and enterprising, consequent to the lower level of risk involved with lending money at interest, as opposed to these activities; the impoverishment of merchants who have to borrow money at high rates of interest; the fact that usury drives many men into ruin; the consequent 'Decay of Customes of Kings or States'; and finally the concentration of wealth in a few hands. On the other hand, he adds, if usury can damage the market economy, it is also inextricable from it. Money can only be put into motion through lending at interest, and without it 'men' would be completely dependent on 'their Meanes (be it Lands or Goods)', so that in periods of crisis 'Bad Markets would Swallow them quite up'. It follows that for Bacon the opinion that usury can be abolished 'must be sent to *Utopia*'. 'It is a Vanitie to conceive', he states, 'that there would be Ordinary Borrowing without Profit'. Like Calvin, Bacon is by no means an apologist for usury. On the contrary, he insists on its

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[21] *Tudor Economic Documents*, ed. by R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1935), 2: 162.

[22] R. H. Tawney, 'Introduction', in Thomas Wilson, *A Discourse upon Usury*, 43.

damages, beginning with inducing people's dependence on money not earned. For him the point is just that, as he writes at the conclusion of his essay, 'it is better to mitigate usury by declaration, than to suffer it to rage by connivance'.[23] Not that this intervention brought the debate on the subject to a halt, far from it. Still in 1634, John Baxton was complaining that the 'biting worme of usury hath corrupted all England...Usury turned charity into self love'.[24] Still, a leading mercantilist such as Thomas Mun was now ready to freely admit that trade and usury rise and fall together, for, he questions:

> How many Merchants, and Shopkeepers have begun with little or nothing of their own, and yet are grown very rich by trading with other mens money? do we not know, that when trading is quick and good, many men, by means of their experience, and having credit to take up money at interest, do trade for much more than they are worth of their own stock? by which diligence of the industrious, the affairs of the Common-wealth are increased, the moneys of Widows, Orphans, Lawyers, Gentlemen and others, are employed in the course of Forraign Trade, which themselves have no skill to perform.[25]

Once located in this historical environment, then, the motivation provided by the Venetians for their scornful claim of moral superiority over Shylock - in Antonio's words, 'I neither lend nor borrow / By taking nor by giving of excess' (I. iii. 59-60) - sounds like the traditional arguments against usury that were superseded by Calvin and Bacon: that is, something like a manifestation of ethical and ideological conservatism incapable of coming to grips with contemporary socioeconomic reality. In fact, those studies that have interpreted *The Merchant of Venice* against the English historical background have accordingly tended to make it represent the conflict between an agonising feudal aristocracy and the economic forces at work to overthrow its power.[26] The action, however, is set in Venice. And, as Walter Cohen has persuasively argued, there seem to be good reasons to take this location seriously. For

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[23] Francis Bacon, *Essays*, ed. by M. J. Hawkins (London: Dent, 1994), 107-109.
[24] John Baxton, *The English Usurer* (London: 1634; Harvard, Mass.: Kress Library Catalogue, 492), 9-10.
[25] Thomas Mun, *England's Treasure by Forraign Trade* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1895), 79.
[26] Cf. E. D. Pettet, '*The Merchant of Venice* and the Problem of Usury': '...by the time Shakespeare was writing his plays the feudal aristocracy had come to feel the full pinch of the century's momentous economic developments...there was only one way out - the usurer' (19).

its specific geographical setting allows the conflict between Shylock and the Venetians to be turned into 'a special instance of the struggle, widespread in Europe, between Jewish quasi-feudal fiscalism and native bourgeois mercantilism, in which the indigenous forces usually prevailed'.[27] Venice represented a successful model of commercial capitalism, in which the old ruling aristocracy had been incorporated and maintained its ruling class position in the new social formation through an alliance with the ascendant economic power of merchant capital.[28] This is in fact the alliance that constitutes the social basis of the finale of the play, in which the landed aristocracy (Portia) reasserts its hegemony by successfully integrating with the commercial bourgeoisie (Antonio and Bassanio). Venice, in other words, provided Shakespeare with a historical scenario that could diffuse the spectres haunting contemporary English aristocratic, artisanal and small holding estates alike: 'the rise of banking; the increasing need for credit in industrial enterprises; and the growing threat of indebtedness facing both aristocratic landlords and, above all, small independent producers, who could easily decline to working-class status'.[29] The key point, in this respect, is that it is not Shylock who embodies the values of the emerging economic powers - 'stipulation for a pound of flesh, after all, is hardly what one expects from *homo economicus*. ...Shylock is a figure from the past: marginal, diabolical, irrational, archaic, medieval' - but Antonio: 'the characterization and the outcome of *The Merchant of Venice* mark Antonio as the harbinger of modern capitalism'. And if this is so, then this does of course turn out to be a 'quite obviously pro-capitalist' play, that is a representation of how the development of this social formation could foster an ideal interclass compromise and therefore provide a desirable solution to the conflicts of Elizabethan society.[30]

Now, if this reading intelligently interrogates the historical dimension in which the play is rooted, the social and ideological tensions and the contradictions to which the play provides an imaginary solution, what follows is an attempt to walk along the same track in the opposite direction: from history back to the play itself. That is to say

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[27] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 202.
[28] See Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), 164-172.
[29] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 197-198.
[30] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 202.

that the guiding assumption here is that the imprint of the specific historical circumstances and social context from which *The Merchant of Venice* sprang are, to use a semiotic parlance, encoded onto its textual surface and can therefore be decoded by reading the context within the text, as well as the other way round.[31] The interpretative relevance of the historical dimension from which the play emerged does not imply that what *The Merchant of Venice* really means corresponds to a recoverable subtext, to a more substantial and palpable history to be found outside its textual surface. More problematically, if the material basis of the play's vision lies in the historical dimension which provides it with its social and ideological raw materials and content, still the theatrical and literary dimension of the text turns this extra-textual reality in a linguistic construction proposing to afford a pleasurable aesthetic experience. In trying to find my way with this play, then, I will seek to approach some of the elements that cut across its historical and aesthetic dimension. For, it seems to me, it is in the complex relation between the social and historical weight carried by the referential dimension of the text and its release in a play devised for entertainment that its most disturbing force appears to lie, even, or perhaps particularly, now.

II. Economics, Law and Alienation in Venice

Right at the beginning of the play Antonio, the merchant of Venice, is inexplicably melancholic - 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad' (I. i. 1). There is no reason he can provide for the state of mind he is in. His complexion, he claims, is just the part he has been assigned to play. The world, he ponders, is a 'stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one' (I. i. 78-79). Solanio and Salerio try to suggest - in speeches that, incidentally, echo Barabas's evocations of his ships at sea, but without the latter's articulation of the Mediterranean trading geography - that 'Antonio / Is sad to think upon his merchandise' (I. i. 39-40). It will be Shylock who will map for the audience the coordinates of Antonio's trades later on in the same scene: 'he hath an

[31] For a broader discussion, see Nicolò Pasero's fine essay, 'Critica e materialismo: note a margine di teorie letterarie recenti', *L'Asino d'oro*, 2 (1990), 99-110; as well as Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), especially chapter 1, 'On Interpretation: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act'.

argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies, I understand moreover upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath squandered abroad' (I. i. 15-19). Antonio, conversely, refers to his trade in the most cursory terms. 'Your mind is tossing on the ocean', begins Salerio, 'There where your argosies with portly sail / Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood' (I. i. 8-10). To which he adds, not without what appears as genuine relish, a description of a variety of ways in which Antonio could have lost his shiploads of silk and spices (I. i. 22-40). And yet Antonio is completely unmoved and, what is more, not particularly interested in this subject for conversation:

> Believe me no, I thank my fortune for it -
> My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
> Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
> Upon the fortune of this present year:
> Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.
> (I. i. 41-45)

As we will soon find out, this reassuring assessment is far from accurate. For by the end of the third act Antonio's ships will 'have all miscarried', his creditors grown 'cruel' and his estate revealed to be 'very low' (III. ii. 314-315). As one commentator has noted, no 'merchant can admit to be at risk, of course', and 'limiting others' knowledge of one's finances is a professional necessity'.[32] This is surely so. As Timon of Athens will learn at his own cost, in the money economy it is only wealth, that is solvency, or at least its appearance, which can prop up credit. Indeed, when Antonio informs his closer friend Bassanio about his assets, his financial position seems rather more precarious than he had his first interlocutors to believe: 'Thou know'st all my fortunes are at sea, / Neither have I money, nor commodity / To raise a present sum' (I. i. 177-179). And just a couple of scenes later, Shylock will observe, reporting what is said 'upon the Rialto', that Antonio's 'means are in supposition' (I. iii. 15).

And yet, it seems that in effect this explanation is somewhat inadequate to express and make sense of Antonio's emotional disturbance, which appears in excess of the

[32] Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 80.

manifest clues offered by the text. There is definitely a seemingly inexplicable feeling of unfulfillment about this character. In Shakespeare's main source, a story from Ser Giovanni's collection of tales *Il Pecorone* (1558), the counterpart of Antonio, Ansaldo, ends up marrying a damsel from Belmonte.[33] Antonio just cannot conceive the idea of being in love. 'Fie, fie!' (I. i. 46), he answers once interrogated on this issue, so to add up to the mismatch between the scene's ostensible structure of feeling and the terms of its dramatisation, that is to what has turned out to be another one of the cruxes of modern criticism of *The Merchant of Venice*. W. H. Auden, in the attempt to fill this signifying gap famously hinted at Antonio's homoerotic attachment to Bassanio - he is 'a man whose emotional life, though his conduct may be chaste, is concentrated upon a member of his own sex' - while more recently Marc Shell has indicated Antonio's sterility.[34] Both of these, as well as other analogous suggestions, are suggestive and, in their own terms, perfectly adequate interpretative hypotheses. Here, however, I wish to reconfigure these individualising explanations by shifting the focus to such questions as the social, economic and ideological determinations that frame and enlighten Antonio's and the other Venetians' worldly conduct. And the category that seems useful to mobilise in this context is that of alienation. As Bertell Ollman has written on this subject, the individual who relates to the object as just something to sell, something to make a profit with, is placed 'in a state of alienation'. For, 'he [*sic*] is as indifferent to what it is actually used for and who will eventually use it as he is to the process by which it came into being'.[35] Hence a possible explanation for Antonio's utter lack of interest in the merchandises in which he trades: they are nothing for him but the price attached to them, the economic value that they embody. To him, his own wealth is separated from the substance of the things that embody it. He does not need or desire them, it is others' needs and desires that they have to satisfy for him to realise their value. The merchant, to put it in Marx's words, 'only buys in order to sell and

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[33] Cf. 'Appendix I: Translation from the 4th Day of Ser Giovanni, *Il Pecorone*' in Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by J. R. Brown, 140-152.

[34] See, respectively, W. H. Auden, 'Brothers and Others', in *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice. A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. by John Wilders (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1969), 236; and Marc Shell, 'The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*', in *Money, Language and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 73.

[35] Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (2nd edn; Cambridge:

only sells in order to buy again, and [the] aim in this operation is not the possession of the commodities as products but merely the obtaining of exchange values as such, of money'.[36] In a way, this seems to affect the whole spectrum of Antonio's relations with the world at large. He seems to have fully internalised the economic instrumentality that he embodies. As Antonio will consider under the strain of his bond with Shylock, he is a man who is 'wretched' without his 'wealth' (IV. i. 265). Throughout the play, though he is right at the centre of the action, Antonio remains a puzzling, purely passive, odd presence, whose wishes are vicariously displaced in others', that is Bassanio's, pleasure and desires.

When Bassanio arrives on the scene, his presence seems finally to offer Antonio a way out of his gloomy mood in the guise of emotional compensation. It is with morbid curiosity that Antonio starts interrogating Bassanio about the lady to whom he 'swore a secret pilgrimage' (I. i. 120). But, yet again, the world in which Bassanio is himself entrapped seems no less claustrophobic than Antonio's one. It is itself a world in which the transcendental dimension of romantic love, the projection of one's persona into a mutuality of affections is constrained by all too powerful material determinants. For all the passion that may fire in him, Bassanio's immediate worries are about the 'debts' from which he hopes that he will ultimately 'get clear' (I. i. 134). For, we apprehend, he owes to Antonio not just in fraternal affection, but also in money, and he still needs more of it. Portia, the object of Bassanio's desire, is presented by him as 'a lady richly left' (I. i. 161), whose wealth is offered as a warrant for Antonio's next loan. To be sure, Bassanio declares that Portia is fair and virtuous and for his part, as he expresses his wishes to help Bassanio, Antonio claims and no doubt fully proves friendly disinterestedness. Only, if Antonio and Bassanio's feelings and wishes are indeed genuine, they are flawed in that they remain utterly ambiguous, if not deceiving, with respect to the material conditions that would enable their expression and realisation.

It is precisely this apparent ambiguity that provides Shylock with the very weapon that he will threateningly brandish against them. 'My purse, my person, my extremest means' (I. i. 138): it is Antonio who, with his alliterative association, provides the

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Cambridge University Press, 1976), 154.

[36] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, tr. by

rationale for Shylock's iconoclast assault on him.[37] For his own part, Shylock will just specify the price, one pound of flesh per three thousands ducats. 'Therefore go forth/ Try what my credit can in Venice do', (I. i. 179-180), it is Antonio, again, and then Bassanio who open up the semantic space of indeterminacy in which Shylock will slip in:

> *Shylock:* Antonio is a good man.
>
> *Bassanio:* Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
>
> *Shylock:* Ho, no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man, is to have you understand me that he is sufficient.
>
> (I. iii. 12-15)

'Credit' and 'good' - as well as, repeatedly, 'worth' (I. i. 35, 36, 61, 118) - here are the slippery signifiers that reveal Bassanio and Antonio's equivocal appeals to a taxonomy of values that aims to transcend the material dimension of the money economy. From Shylock's standpoint, though, this appears to be a gross fabrication. As far as he is concerned, the Venetians' pretences of disinterestedness are boldly self-serving. As he poignantly remarks, the very basis for Antonio's disregard for him, which is summarised in the Venetian's claim of lending out 'money gratis', is itself an instrumental device to bring 'down/ The rate of usance here with us in Venice' (I. iii. 39-40) and thus to serve the interests of Antonio's mercantile estate. Hence Shylock's extreme subversive gesture, his plea for a pound of Antonio's flesh, which appears to be striving to expose in the starkest possible way the performative contradiction between what the Venetians say and what they actually do. Shylock aims to become Antonio's, and through him the Venetians', bad conscience, the mirror of their own deformities: 'The villainy you teach me I will execute' (III. i. 65). Furthermore, it is the Venetians' contractual law that Shylock actually appeals to in his grotesque request. According to the Jewish law, money lending fell into two categories. Differently from

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Martin Nicholaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 148.

[37] The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, incidentally, that in Elizabethan English one of the meanings of 'purse' was 'scrotum', which would add to Auden's interpretation a salacious overtone. Cf. John Drakakis, 'Historical Difference and Venetian Patriarchy', in *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by Nigel Wood (Buckingam, Phil.: Open University Press, 1996),172, footnote 5.

the universalising Christian doctrine, the Jewish one distinguishes between brothers, the descendants of Jacob to whom they lent money gratis, as Tubal punctually does with Shylock, and the other human beings, to whom they lent at interest.[38] It is in fact precisely to the implication of this in the interpretation of the Deuteronomy - 'Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother...Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury' (xxiii: 19-20) - that Antonio seems to appeal in his request for money:

> If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
> As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
> A breed for barren metal of his friend?
> But lend it rather to thine enemy,
> Who if he break, thou may'st with better face
> Exact the penalty.
>
> (I. iii. 128-132)

Antonio's words, though, are in vain. For Shylock refuses to act according to his own law, which would have prescribed that the non-Jew Antonio should pay him interest. On the contrary, he asks for a pledge, a pound of Antonio's flesh, 'not so estimable, profitable neither / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats' (I. iii. 162-163). Shylock's commitment is to conceive and execute an act of ideological unmasking. The same act of unmasking, to be sure, performed in his most famous speech, which offers the most accomplished expression of Christian humanism in the play:

> Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? - if you prick us do we not bleed? if you tickle us do we not laugh? if you poison us do we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge? - if you are like us in the rest, we will resemble you in that.
>
> (III. i. 52-62)

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[38] This is the point that Shylock tries to explain with the digression on the discussion of the *Genesis* that is impatiently interrupted by Antonio (I. iii. 66-91). For a dense discussion of this issue, see Shell, *Money, Language and Thought*, 47-83. Shell here adds that Antonio's implicit reference to the Aristotelian objection to the identification of monetary offspring and natural offspring is utterly misplaced: 'Antonio tries to argue against Shylock's position by suggesting that "gold and silver" differ from "ewes and rams" (I. iii. 91). Yet Shylock did not argue that metals are generative (as did alchemists). But rather that, as Saint Bernardino of Siena says, "money as capital has a creative power [*quandam seminalem rationem*] ' (50).

Shylock appropriates the dominant discourse of Venetian universalising humanism to demistify it and expose all that it serves to cover up. This is therefore what amounts to an instance of what Jonathan Dollimore has called 'a trangressive reinscription': that is, 'a mode of transgression which seeks not an escape from existing structures, but rather a subversive reinscription within them - and in the process a dislocation of them'.[39] This is, in effect, what Shylock does with the structure of the Venetian legal system. For he grounds his bond in the enforcing power of Venetian law, the abstract formalism of which he thus reveals to be the very essence of Venetian society. In Venice law is the instrument that warrants 'the trade and profit of the city', a reified, self-validating mechanism that has no other superior meaning, legitimacy or justification but its economic instrumentality, the expansion and reproduction of the economic system that it safeguards. And, as such, it has turned into a social power that has come to assume the form of an autonomous force that determines women and men's conditions of existence. This is what Georg Lukács defines as the inner logic of modern capitalist societies, that is, their tendency to develop a movement towards the construction of social structures - beginning with the economy and the state - which can 'be understood at once as the product of men themselves and of forces that arise from their relation with each other and which have escaped their control'.[40] Unsurprisingly, it is Antonio who makes this point.

> The Duke cannot deny the course of law:
> For the commodity that strangers have
> With us in Venice, if it be denied,
> Will much impeach the justice of the state,
> Since that the trade and profit of the city
> Consisteth of all nations.
>
> (III. iii. 26-31)

[39] Jonathan Dollimore, 'Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression: The Jacobean Connection', *Renaissance Drama*, 17 (1986), 57. Conversely, for a leftist humanist reading which takes Shylock's words at face value, see Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (2nd edn; London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995): 'With this speech there erupts into the play an irresistible egalitarian attitude, whose basis in the shared faculties and needs of our physical nature indicts all forms of inhuman discrimination' (19).

[40] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1968), 15.

For Antonio's own existential malaise seems to be the malaise of the entire Venetian society, though apparently he is the only one who is overtly affected by it. Venice is a place in which an abstract and elusive force has come to dictate and regulate personal and community life. Shylock's trick is simply that of turning the alien legal power that the Venetians themselves have created against them, which he does by splitting the letter of the law from its logical underpinning, that is from the smooth pragmatic logic that his defiant and preciously gratuitous demand for a worthless piece of human flesh cuts straight through. And because of that, when Antonio fails to fulfil his pledge, Shylock's demand turns out to be what seems an intractable problem.

In a way, Shylock's bond appears to be geared to reveal to the Venetians what he considers their own self-deception, the contradictions in which he perceives them to be caught. And it is by this very assumption that he ultimately fails. For one thing, he is mistaken about the Venetians' self-deception. On the contrary, he is outplayed by their conscious transgression. The enterprise in which Antonio and Bassanio embark, after all, is precisely grounded in the disjunction between semblance and reality. Bassanio needs the money he does not have in order to cover up his actual financial conditions at Belmont. His whole plan for marriage is based on endorsing a misleading appearance, and he instructs Gratiano in the same manner:

> ...pray thee take pain
> To allay some cold drops of modesty
> Thy skipping spirit, lest through thy wild behaviour
> I be misconst'red in the place I go to,
> And lose my hopes.
>
> (II. ii. 176-179)

This is a piece of advice that is taken by Gratiano with the appropriate irony:

> Signior Bassanio, hear me, -
> If I do not put a sober habit,
> Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
> Wear prayer-books in my pocket, look demurely,
> Nay more, while grace is saying hood mine eyes
> Thus with my hat, and sigh and say "amen":

> Use all the observance of civility
> Like one well studied in a sad ostent
> To please his grandam, never trust me more.
> (II. ii. 180-188)

And no less ironical is the image of Bassanio who, having introduced himself in Belmont with his affected speech and dressed up in fanciful clothes, as he hears Portia's song warning that love is deeper than outward fancy, begins to philosophise about the world being 'still deceiv'd with ornament' (III. ii. 74). All the world is a stage, as Antonio had initially considered rehearsing the recurrent Shakespearean trope. If so, Shylock is a misguided interpreter of plots and characters. What he perceives as inconsistency is conscious play-acting. Invited for dinner by the Christians, he assumes this to be another occasion for pointing at and disclosing their false-consciousness:

> I am not bid for love, they flatter me,
> But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon
> The prodigal Christians.
> (II. v. 13-15)

And as a result, he has his casket of ducats and his daughter taken away.

This is also the point at which Shylock emerges in his fully tragic dimension, for he comes to perceive the inadequacy of his own understanding of the Venetians' world. And so, first his speech becomes increasingly broken and repetitive, erupting in a sequence of alliterative reiterations, 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!' (II. vii. 15), and then, as he comes progressively to realise his failure in opening a space for communication, Shylock's demystifying operation is displaced onto the enforcing power of Venetian law:

> You have among you many a purchas'd slave,
> Which (like your asses, and your dogs and mules)
> You use in abject and in slavish parts,
> Because you bought them,- shall I say to you,
> Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
> Why sweat they under burthens?...
> ...you will answer

"The slaves are ours", - so do I answer you:
The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it:
If you deny me, fie upon your law!
There is no force in the decrees of Venice:
I stand for judgement, - answer, shall I have it?
(IV. i. 90-103)

In this operation Shylock exposes the legal code to unforeseeable implications:

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh, than to receive
Three thousand ducats: I'll not answer that!
But say it is my humour,- is it answer'd?
(IV. i. 40-44)

Shylock's dislocation of the Venetian legal structure is, in effect, quite successful. The relation between justice and the law is replaced by the identity between law and its letter. Justice is transposed in its formal embodiment in the Venetian legal code, but ruled out as a legitimising value. During the trial, Shylock's only argumentative strategy is simply the refusal to accord to the Venetians' denial of his pledge and their belated appeal, through Portia/Balthazar, to 'the quality of mercy' (IV. i. 180) any consistency from the standpoint of their own law ('...I crave the law', IV. i. 202; '...I charge you by the law', IV. i. 234). Now the play is at a standstill. The Venetians are stuck in the conundrum with which Shylock has managed to trap them. And even the *coup de theatre* of having Portia coming from Belmont disguised as Balthazar to rescue her marriage seems bound to be resolved in a desperately unfruitful attempt to break this gridlock. For, as Marc Shell suggests, in Venetian society both the state political economy represented by the Duke and the marriage which Portia is striving to defend are bound 'to contracts that are qualitatively similar to that of Shylock with Antonio'. The freedom to contract argued by Shylock is the same principle on which Venetian commerce and Portia's marriage are grounded. And in the case of marriage this resemblance is further underscored by the analogy between Antonio's alienation of his own body first to Shylock and then to Portia (V. i. 249-253), and Bassanio and Portia's alienation of their own individualities into the familial bondage. 'The

uncomforting but inescapable connections of the retaliation that Shylock seeks with both the marriage that Portia seeks and the commercial freedom that Venice seeks make Shylock's revenge on Antonio, or on the Christians in general, the most unsettling aspect of the play. Only a miracle or a revolution', Shell concludes, 'of family and state could avert disaster'.[41]

This 'miracle' will turn out be Portia/Balthazar's all too meticulous reading of the legal code. 'Portia's reading of the bond', as Terry Eagleton has put it, 'is "true to the text" but therefore lamentably false to its meaning. There is nothing "false" about her reading in itself, which the text, taken in isolation, will certainly bear out; it is just that her interpretation is too true, too crassly literal, and so ironically a flagrant distortion'.[42] On the other hand, notes Marc Shell, Portia/Balthazar 'uses a law that discriminates between citizens and aliens', that is a law which glaringly contradicts the 'universal humanist ethics proposed by Christianity':[43]

> It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
> If it be proved against an alien,
> That by direct, or indirect attempts
> He seek the life of any citizen,
> The party 'gainst which he doth contrive,
> Shall seize one half of his goods, the other half
> Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
> And the offender's life lies in the mercy
> Of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voices.
> (IV. I. 343-352)

So, now the roles have reversed, the prosecutor has become the defendant. Shylock has of course called for it. The beginning of Portia's famous speech in the court appeals to the 'quality of mercy' dropping 'as gentle rain from heaven' to bless both 'him that gives, and him that takes' (IV. i. 180-183). Yet, due to the rather inflated value that such a quality holds in Venice, actual mercy is presented as a mitigatory concept that serves Portia's bid to Shylock to accept three times his money. A commonsensical approach to business would have sufficed to justify the acceptance of

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[41] Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought*, 68-69.
[42] Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 37.
[43] Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought*,71.

the offer. Shylock, before giving in under threat of losing his life, initially refuses. Of course, were he a truly tragic hero he would have stuck to the initial decision and killed Antonio. But he does not. And yet, as for Marlowe's Barabas, the Christians threaten to confiscate his wealth, and then, after the Duke's pardon, Antonio keeps half of it 'in use' (IV. i. 379).[44]

In his reinscription of the play into an historical allegory, Walter Cohen goes back to Marx's discussion of usury in the third volume of *Capital* (1894), where, as Cohen summarises, the usurer's capital is singled out as a pre-capitalist economic formation, whose 'parasitic action' weakens the 'precapitalist mode of production off which it lives. But unassisted it cannot generate a transition to capitalism. When that transition does occur, however, usury inevitably declines, partly as a result of the determined opposition of mercantile capital'.[45] Furthermore, Marx also argues that 'usury centralizes monetary wealth' and contributes to make its formation 'independent of landed property'.[46] As such it is both a precondition, in that it contributes to dissolve older socioeconomic relations, and, at least in an initial phase, in that it provides the much needed financial assets, a necessary support to merchant capitalism. As we have seen, at least on this last point Thomas Mun, the leading English mercantilist, was in full agreement. Hence the usurer's conflicting position as something like the evil necessity that emerges in contemporary debate and in arguments on this subject such as Mun's or Bacon's ones. And hence, also, the broader historical import of Shylock's demystification of the contradictions of mercantilism.

However, as we have seen, in the end the Venetians manage to have it both ways. And this does not apply just to the play. While in Venice 'the main victims of ecclesiastical action against usury in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries increasingly consisted of immigrant Jews', Jewish moneylenders provided the Venetian republic with 'a reliable, lucrative source of tax revenues and forced loans to finance the state's military preparations'.[47] In 1516, the first ghetto was instituted there:

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[44] As he refers to Shylock's conversion, in the Arden edition John Russel Brown mentions a passage in *Coryat's Crudities* 'to the effect that the goods of a Jew were usually confiscated as soon as he became a Christian' (119, footnote 383).
[45] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 203-204.
[46] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. by David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 731-733.
[47] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 201.

> Sadly slated for notoriety, this institution probably got its name from the Venetian neighborhood to which Jews were confined, i.e., *ghetto*, or foundry, so named because the foundries of Venice military industry were located there. The introduction of the ghetto signalled a positive departure from the Serenissima's traditional policies towards the Jews, for previously the republic had repeatedly prohibited Jews from maintaining stable residence in the city of Venice.[48]

III. The Law of the Father and Social Change in Belmont

From the point of view of the historical perspective outlined here, Belmont represents the social alliance and successful compromise between the old landed aristocracy and the emergent urban bourgeoisie.[49] Formally, when it moves there the play signals an apparent change of tone, which corresponds to a seemingly alternative world: 'the second world [that] takes the form of Portia's mysterious house..., with its magic caskets and the wonderful cosmological harmonies that proceed from it in the fifth act', in Northrop Frye's words.[50] As the popular proverb that the golden casket exhibits to the deluded suitor suggests: 'All that glisters is not gold' (II. ii. 65). It is a different index of relations between signifiers and signifieds that the caskets and their sign system ostensibly refer to, an alternative socioeconomic order from the one involved in the commodity system, in which the contract sealed between seller and buyer is defined by the quantifiable value refracted by the smooth surface which the commodity offers to the consumer. It would therefore seem that the casket trial has the function of preventing the contamination of this microcosm with the materialistic vision predominant in Venice, the normal world, still according to Frye's opposition. So that Portia's luxurious residence, the music filled *locus amoenus* situated somewhere about the Forest of Arden and Oberon's Wood, as W. H. Auden locates

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[48] Robert Bonfil, 'Aliens within: The Jews and Antijudaism', in *Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation: Structures and Assertions*, ed. by T. A. Brady Jr. *et alii* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 291.

[49] Here I follow again Cohen's historical reading of the play (*Drama of a Nation*, 203). Although I take his suggestion that the 'aristocratic fantasy of act 5 is unusually sustained and unironic even for Shakespearean romantic comedy' (208) as one of the rare oversights of his excellent study.

[50] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 182-183.

it,[51] can become the site where the possibility of an utopian, regenerative dimension, governed by non-alienated, reconciled human relations, is explored. In Belmont, material wealth, of which Portia's mansion offers an endless plenitude, is not the source of competition and conflict, but something which springs from no apparent source to afford its unrestricted expenditure. In G. Wilson Knights's classic reading of the play, Venice and Belmont are counterpoised in terms of the opposition between 'the tempests of tragedy' experienced in Venice, 'and the music of romance', which belongs to Belmont, love's 'magic land'. The former is the sea-world plagued by turbulent conflicts, the latter is the aerial, enchanted dimension in which these conflicts are allayed. Conceived in terms of this opposition, the play enacts a regenerative movement led by Portia, 'the love's queen [who] descends from the fairyland of music and love, Belmont, into the turmoil and dust of human conflict and cruelty at Venice', and finally brings us back to Belmont, 'where again we find romance and music'.[52] This romance achieves its zenith in act five, when the victorious forces, preceded by Lorenzo and Jessica, come back from Venice after Shylock's defeat. Bathed in the bright shining light of the moon, Lorenzo instructs musicians to 'wake Diana with a hymn' (V. i. 66). This is done so that at Portia's return her mansion might be filled with a harmony resembling, in Neo-Platonic fashion, the symphony of the spheres in the sky:

> ...look how the floor of heaven
> Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold,
> There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
> But in his motion like an angel sings,
> Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;
> (V. i. 58-62)

Still, for all the fairy-tale-like atmosphere of this second 'green' world, the world that Frye describes as 'the dream world that we create out of our own desires...not as an escape from "reality", but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to

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[51] Auden, 'Brothers and Others', 228.

[52] G. W. Knights, 'Tempest and Music', in *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice. A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. by John Wilders, 81-90.

imitate',[53] the 'normal' dimension of early modern sexual hierarchies has marked its stamp even here, in guise of the harsh law of Portia's dead father. Though, apparently, this will is not, like Venetian law, the instrument devised by men to regulate their own world according to transparently utilitarian criteria: those criteria that Shylock, appealing in his oath for revenge to the 'holy Sabbath' (VI. i. 36), refuses to recognise, so putting the entire Venetian legal system into momentary disarray. Portia's father's will has the compelling force of the absolute, unquestionable authority that does not rely on manifest rational motivations. Its binding force lies in the 'holy', consecrated power by which the word of the father-patriarch is invested:

> *Nerissa:* Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations, - therefore the lott'ry that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt ever be chosen by any rightly, but one you shall rightly love.
>
> (I. ii. 27-32)

Even in this arrangement there is, surely, an element of fatalistic determinism, a transcendental dimension that initially seems to radically break with the pragmatist worldview of the Venetian mercantile society. The holiness and sacred power of Portia's father are inscribed in a superior inscrutable design which she is compelled to serve and in which her own desires shall, at least outwardly, harmoniously reconcile. According to the will, the husband should be decided by the pretender's right choice of one among the three caskets, and the choice will be wise, so that the law of the father will accommodate itself to Portia's will, as much as the other way round, of course.

Yet, as it might be expected, recent feminist readings of this play have been less than inclined to subscribe to the idealisation of Belmont, claiming that on the contrary this is also a site of contestation for hegemony and social power.[54] For they have

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[53] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 183-184.

[54] See, among others, Catherine Belsey, 'Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies', in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. by John Drakakis (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 166-190; Carol Leventen, 'Patrimony and Patriarchy in *The Merchant of Venice*', in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. by Valerie Wayne (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 153-180; J. E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 116-118; Karen Newman, 'Reprise:

attributed to Portia's active agency in bending the course of the father's design and bringing her marriage to its positive conclusion the role of a radical critique and undermining of the unequal power relations underlying Belmont's utopian idyll. Indeed, her very first speech is precisely to lament the authoritarian act to which she has been unwillingly subjected:

> I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father: is it not hard Nerissa, that I cannot refuse one, nor choose one?
>
> (I. ii. 22-26)

And from hence onward, she processes a counteracting movement that leads to the autonomous assertion of her own free will, which encompasses the ingenious stratagem of the song rhymes - 'Tell me where is Fancy bred, / Or in the heart, or in the head? / How begot, how nourished?' (III. ii. 63-65) - with which she manages to direct Bassanio towards the right casket without violating the letter of the will by which she is curbed.[55]

From this standpoint, Portia's role is identified with a transformative element within the pattern of change in familial and affective relations of Shakespeare's time that breaks down 'the ideology of male dominance'.[56] She is, along with, in different circumstances, Jessica, a focus of resistance that by offering an instance of justifiable, if partial, rebellion, operates a division in the established order of the law of the father.[57] In Lawrence Stone's authoritative study, in the sixteenth century upper-class patriarchal family, marriage was an endogamous economic business in which the

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Gender, Sexuality and Theories of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*', in *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by Nigel Wood, 102-123.

[55] However, it has also been noted that in her choice of a suitable husband, in order to elect the one which has best pleased her 'foolish eyes' (I. ii. 113), she dismisses the other foreign suitors, including a Moroccan Prince, on the ground of their complexion. So that her assertion of free will in turn reveals a racist subtext: 'Portia...voices unmistakably racist views in her wish that Morocco and "all of his complexion" (IV. vii. 79) fail in their attempt to woo her. And she is fully complicit with the Venetian state in its effective destruction of the alien, Shylock's, identity and in its appropriation of property. In short, while Portia seizes power for herself within and against a patriarchal society, she does so at the expenses of, rather than in alliance with, other marginalized figures' (Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 118).

[56] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 117.

[57] See Leventen, 'Patrimony and Patriarchy in *The Merchant of Venice*': 'where Portia was initially "scanted", and where Jessica endowed herself, so to speak, they have virtually changed places by the

contractors were accustomed to keeping together and increasing the familial patrimony. When it came to marriage, rather than romantic love and affection, at issue were primarily considerations about primogeniture and dowry: a 'pragmatic calculation of family interests was the accepted viewpoint of the sixteenth century, and the one upon which the approach to marriage in real life was normally based'.[58] However, whereas Lawrence Stone associates sixteenth and seventeenth century Puritanism with an intensification of patriarchal power, feminist studies have individuated a counter-hegemonic movement through which the idea of marriage based on property and kinship was being challenged, according to Juliet Dusinberre, by a redefinition of marriage replacing the legal union of the arranged marriage with a union born of spirit.[59] This is what Catherine Belsey has described as 'a contest for the meaning of the family in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries...that...momentarily unfixed the existing system of differences'.[60] This contest will eventually turn into the displacement of the absolutist ideal version of marriage, in which 'women are objects of exchange and the guarantee of dynastic continuity', with a liberal model centred on a notion of women as 'autonomous subjects freely exercising their power to choose a husband and becoming partners in the affective family which is the seminary of good citizens'. Such a model would fully develop only after the mid-century social upheaval, but it can be seen as emergent in Renaissance drama, where we can recognise the coming out of an idea of affective autonomy of the individual female subject. The cement of liberal marriage would provide women with a freely chosen place, continues Belsey, in the intimate, private relationships of the familial, domestic sphere, where love finds its most intense and ideal form: a sphere, that is, and here is the downbeat side of the story, which will be constructed in opposition to, and be secluded from, the public, political, privilegedly male one.[61] What adds to Portia's

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end of Act V, where Portia is unequivocally empowered, and Jessica equivocally circumscribed' (76).

[58] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (rev. edn; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 128.

[59] Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

[60] Belsey, 'Disrupting Sexual Difference', 190.

[61] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 192-207. To be sure, in order to unravel the material basis for this division, we must add to this the sexual division of labour in modern capitalist societies, in which the work responsible for the entire process of social reproduction - beginning with giving birth, to continue with the unwaged work in the home and the community - that is done mostly by women, is unpaid and

Page 129 was not included in the bound thesis.

'gentle spirit' who 'Commits herself to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king' (III. ii. 163-165),[66] Jessica, as she gives herself to Lorenzo, brings with her the casket full of her father's ducats (II. vi. 33). In this, both Portia and Jessica are aligned with Shylock: forces in diverse ways alien to the Venetian mercantile world, which are reinscribed in it through the Venetians' appropriation of their material wealth. As the action progresses, Jessica manifests her resistance to be seduced by the sweetness of the music of Belmont (V. i. 69), and Portia and Nerissa, after the initial rapture which marks their immersion in the lunar, surreally romanticised landscape of this place (V. i. 89-109), find themselves recalled to the world of Venice by the quarrel over the missing rings, which is resolved by Antonio's pledge to put himself forward as a surety for Bassanio. And this episode turns out to be a symmetric reproduction of the structure of the bond with Shylock, this time with Portia in Shylock's position:

> I once did lend my body for his wealth,
> Which but for him that had your husband's ring
> Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
> My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
> Will never more break faith advisedly.
> (V. I. 249-253)

Various commentators have noted how Launcelot Gobbo, the clown - that is, in Robert Weimann's analysis of the formal structure of Shakespearean drama, the character inherited from the folk tradition that 'bridges the gap between illusion and reality...so as to include the perspective of the audience'[67] - gives voice to 'an alternative perspective on the related matters of Christian orthodoxy and social hierarchy'.[68] This is perhaps nowhere more so than in the little exchange in the third act, just before Shylock's trial, when Gobbo questions Jessica's flight from her father, which on the other hand he had earlier forerun, legitimated and forecast (II. iii. 1-14): 'this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs, - if we grow all to be pork-

[66] See, Newman, 'Reprise: Gender, Sexuality and Theories of Exchange', 110-111.
[67] Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. by Robert Schwartz (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 45.
[68] Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of the Merchant of Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 97. See also Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 210-211; Moisan, '"Which is the Merchant Here? And Which the Jew?": Subversion and Recuperation in *The Merchant of Venice*', 202-203; and Ryan,

eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money' (III. v. 21-23). This is an apparently inconsequential aside. Yet in its mixing and overlapping of sacred and material reasons, it cuts straight through the ongoing religious debate so as to flash behind the Christians' rhetoric the image of all too mundane economic considerations, in a fashion that a later materialism will know as the doctrine of base and superstructure. Here, of course, as Lorenzo glosses a few lines later - 'How every fool can play upon the world!' (III. v. 40) - this is just the nonsensical jest of a licensed fool, who, so the convention has it, dispels and mystifies these thoughts in the same stroke as he voices them.

Shakespeare, 21-22.

Chapter 5

Desire and Reification in Thomas Middleton's Comedy:

A Chaste Maid in Cheapside

I. City Comedy and the Limits of *Mimesis*

Thomas Middleton's comedy has long been associated with the category of *realism.* This is, for instance, the received wisdom embraced by T. S. Eliot, that is the established consensus on the fact that 'Middleton is the greatest "realist" in Jacobean comedy', in that he concentrates 'on the spectacle of the interplay of different classes' and 'introduces us to the low life of the time far better than anything in the comedy of Shakespeare or the comedy of Jonson'. Eliot's endorsemenent, though, came with the qualification that - with the exception of *The Roaring Girl* (1611), where in Moll we find a truly successful, that is, in line with Eliot's position on the aesthetic, 'dispassionate' representation of a more abstract and therefore more real and deeper notion of 'human nature' - Middleton's comedy is realist in as much as it is 'photographic'.[1] In turn, in his revision of this argument L. C. Knights displaced the notion of Middleton's realism as mimesis or accurate reflection of social life onto something like the embodiment of a basic concept of typification. The background that Middleton's stylised characterisations, Knights argues, 'implicitly asks his audience to accept is a world of thriving citizens, needy gallants and landed gentlemen'. This is a world which assumes and finds its historical reference in 'a major social movement - the transference of land from the older gentry to the citizen middle class'.[2]

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[1] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (3rd edn; London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1951), 167-169.
[2] L. C. Knights, *Drama & Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937), 261-262.

Conversely, in more recent criticism plays like *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605), *Michaelmas Term* (1606), *A Mad World, My Masters* (1606) or *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) have been associated, along with their subject of representation, with other characterising tracts which have been put under the heading of a generic marker embracing a whole set of dramatic conventions. Hence the canonisation of Thomas Middleton, as well as Ben Jonson and John Marston's comedies as the core of a posthumous subgenre, city comedy, whose specimen 'may be distinguished from other kinds of Jacobean comedy by their critical and satiric design, their urban setting, their exclusion of material appropriate to romance, fairy tale, sentimental legend or patriotic chronicle'.[3] According to this generic definition, the label city comedy turns out to be identified with the coalescence of a well defined set of dramatic and literary influences - verse satire, social pamphlet, comedy of humours, the Morality Play, Roman New Comedy and *commedia dell'arte* - and an empirical concern, as the label itself is of course there to suggest, with the geographical and social referent of the object of representation.

Thus, for Leonard Tennenhouse 'Jacobean city comedy acquires its peculiar character by virtue of the fact that it excludes the courtly figures found in romantic comedy and absent monarch plays, as well as the rural laboring poor of the pastorals'. And, so, with its focus on the urban middle-classes it intervenes in the contemporary ideological struggles by confronting the 'dominant class' with the representation 'of various practices that authorized a different basis for political authority'.[4] Susan Wells, in turn, describes this dramatic body as 'a compact subgenre' in which 'two contradictory aspects of the marketplace, a central urban institution of the preindustrial city - commerce and celebration - confront each other dramatically'.[5] An analogous contradiction is dissected in Lawrence Venuti, for whom Elizabethan and Jacobean city comedies are shown to 'exhibit an approving interest in the rise of capitalism by applauding its high energy and calculation, but they still cling to the feudal order and

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[3] Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy: A Study of Satiric Plays by Jonson, Marston and Middleton* (2nd edn; London: Methuen, 1980), 11.
[4] Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (London: Methuen, 1986), 160, 171.
[5] Susan Wells, 'Jacobean City Comedy and the Ideology of the City', *English Literary History*, 48 (1981), 37.

the moral values that uphold it'.[6] While for Gail Kern Paster city comedy reveals the salient tracts of a dominant early modern discourse of gender, whose *doxa* constructed women as naturally incontinent and inconstant.[7] To Mary Beth Rose, as well, the genre of city comedy is singled out by its treatment of gender and sexuality. For, she writes, whereas Elizabethan, and particularly Shakespearean, romantic comedy 'concentrates on the complexities of eros, dramatized as sexual desire seeking and finding fulfillment in the heroes' successful resolution of the process of courtship'; by contrast, 'Jacobean city comedy brings into the light of representation precisely those dissociations of Renaissance sexual ideology which romantic comedy evokes but seeks to reconcile and constrain'.[8] These are dissociations that punctuated the social and ideological conflicts brought on by the formation of a new urban environment whose corruption city comedy took charge to expose by means of its portrayal of sexual relations as degraded lust and material self-interest.

As this quick overview highlights, city comedy has come to be defined by a main line of investigation that has designated it to represent and variously respond to the social transformations thrown up by the emergence of a post-traditional urban scenario whose life was marked by a whole new ensemble of class and gender relations and conflicts. This generic marker, thus, has come to be defined by the referent of a disenchanted, conflict ridden and irredeemably secularised metropolitan new world that has displaced not only the romantic, festive, pastoral or courtly scenarios of Elizabethan, and particularly Shakespearean, comedy, but also the idealised urban landscape depicted in earlier plays such as Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599). As such, city comedy continues to designate a mode of representation that forbids any intrusion of romantic, magical or utopian elements, and whose raw narrative materials are largely retrievable in the extra-textual socioeconomic reality of Jacobean London. And if this seems to remind us of the older category of realism, as

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[6] Lawerence Venuti, *Our Halcyon Dayes: English Prerevolutionary Texts and Postmodern Culture* (Madison and London: The University of Winsconsin Press, 1989), 136.

[7] G. K. Paster, 'Leaky Vessels: The Incontinent Women of City Comedy', *Renaissance Drama*, 18 (1987), 43-65.

[8] M. B. Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 43. Among other studies of city comedy, see Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); and T. B. Leinwand, *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy, 1603-1613* (Madison, Win.: The University of

we have just seen recent historical criticism has taken care to variously inflect it with redefinitions of city comedy such as: 'the first instance of the modern use of "representation", in the modern sense of the term'; 'a response to specific contradictions within the hegemonic ideology concerning the City of London'; a dramatisation of 'the complex process of conducting economic and social relations in a newly forming urban environment'.[9]

The *newer* historical criticism, as one of the manifestos of the new historicism reads, 'is *new* in its refusal of unproblematized distinctions between "literature" and "history", between "text" and "context"'.[10] In this sense, the critical debate recalled above seems to suggest that this applies to a broader constituency than the recognised practitioners of this critical school. Indeed, the kind of interpretation that I am going to propose in this chapter is an attempt to problematise the notion of Middleton's realism pretty much in the way indicated by the statement above, as far as that goes. For my partial terminological reservation towards such a category, and the cognate one of *mimesis*, is that it tends to lead towards an interpretative model in which the text is called to *reflect* the social environment from which it sprang. So that, once the laborious research work aimed at constructing them as two distinct and separate entities is finally done, the act of interpretation turns out to consist in verifying how accurate the text is in providing a mirror image of real life or what is commonly named as the social context.

Now, of the fact that in the case of Middleton's *city* comedies this context saturates their content or raw narrative materials there can actually be little question. The world they represent is indeed the very setting in which they were originally written and performed: Jacobean London, with its streets, shops, brothels, marketplaces and houses; its complex layer of social strata; the topical events - Lent or Michaelmas term, the beginning of the legal year - marking the scansion of its life. Still, by keeping the rudder of interpretation too firmly in the direction line of the mimetic referent, the risk is that of allowing the texture of the content to overshadow the form of its

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Winsconsin Press, 1986); Rose, *The Expense of Spirit*, 43.

[9] See, respectively, Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*, 165; Wells, 'Jacobean City Comedy and the Ideology of the City', 37; Rose, *The Expense of Spirit*, 43.

[10] L. A. Montrose, 'Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture', in *The New*

expression and transfiguration operated by the textual medium, and thus to erase the mediation operated both by *intertextual* factors - such as the generic system and cultural and literary traditions and conventions - and the immanent formal structure of the individual work. A dramatic text, after all, is not meant to create a more or less faithful portrait of social reality, to which, once we have individuated and scraped away its eventual textual distortions, we are finally free to go back to in all its tangible immediacy. This, as it will be clear at this point, is not meant as a removal or abandonment of the historical dimension as a locus for foregrounding textual meaning. It is rather an attempt to concur with Fredric Jameson's proposal that the 'traditional notion of "context" familiar in older social or historical criticism' can be more satisfactorily displaced by:

> the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being understood that that 'subtext' is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narrative of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact.[11]

From this perspective, then, the category of *mimesis* and its metaphorical correlate of reflection, as well as the notion of a privileged realist mode of representation, are thus at once done away with. For the historical dimension internalised in the letter of the text is now no longer inert material that texts appropriate in variable quantities. But it is indeed the very substance that all texts mould and objectify into their own linguistic body. And this is as true of those texts such as, say, the utopian projection of Shakespearean late romance or the more recent dystopian constructions of science fiction, in which the 'Real' constitutes a more or less invisible term of reference, as of those canonical *realist* texts in which this substance seems to appear immediately visible. So that the historical subtext becomes the hidden side of the object of representation, that which the imaginative projection strives to transcend while, according to the process of *Aufhebung*, conserving it as its very intrpretative key and

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Historicism, ed. by H. A. Veeser (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 15-36.

[11] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 81.

referential system. This is, if one likes, what in a radically different, albeit not totally alien, theoretical framework Stephen Greenblatt has suggestively called 'the cunning of representation', its 'resiliency, brilliance and resourcefulness'.[12] And in line with these considerations, my point in the reading which follows will not be to attempt to decide if Thomas Middleton's comedy provides us with a more or less biased reflection of Jacobean urban society, as to try to see how the text articulates and mediates it in an imaginary and fictional construction that still finds in the historical subtext the *complementary* dimension through which the text realises its full conditions of intelligibility.

II. City Comedy and the Ideology of Form

In readdressing these general considerations in terms of actual interpretative practice, I now wish to turn to Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, first played by the Lady Elizabeth's Men at the Swan in 1613. In terms of narrative structure, the play presents five parallel plots that bring together: the Yellowhammers and their son and daughter, Moll and Tim, who are engaged with the suitably named Sir Walter Whorehound and his 'whore', who is disguised for the occasion as a Welsh gentlewoman; Mrs and Mr Allwit, that is Whorehound's other mistress and her husband and pimp; the Touchwoods, a down-at-heel gentleman and his wife, who forcibly separated because of the husband's extraordinary, and therefore unaffordable, fertility; Mr Touchwood's brother, Touchwood Junior, who is the other, in his case corresponded, suitor to Moll; and finally, the Knixes, a family related to Whorehound, whose conjugal life is first plagued by Sir Knix's sterility and then relieved by the purchase of Touchwood Senior's services.

In the opening scene we find Master Yellowhammer, a goldsmith, and his wife, Maudlin, who from the moment they appear provide the full measure of the ridicule that separates their ambitions from the means for their fulfillment. As judicious middle class social climbers, they are intent on providing their daughter and son with a good

[12] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Introduction', in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), ix.

match for their marriages.[13] And in this enterprise they look at those most traditional marks of social status: land and nobility. As soon as the play begins, the goldsmith's wife exhorts her daughter Moll, who is anemic, 'dull' and dances 'like a plumber's daughter' (I. i. 17-18), to deal with her complexion and mundane skills in order to improve her appeal to a prospective husband. Through her generous use of *double entendre*, Maudlin immediately attempts to establish a complicity with the audience, which is called to recognise the sexual innuendo in the recalling of her own youthful 'delight to learn' from her dance teacher, a 'pretty brown gentleman' (I. i. 3, 20). As the action develops, though, this initial focus shifts to a perspective from which the Yellowhammers undergo a quick metamorphosis that turns them from the subject to the object of laughter. For their ambition to social promotion into the landed gentry in the event materialises in the association with the trivial, depraved figure of Sir Walter Whorehound and his 'whore', who is disguised as an heir of nothing less than 'some nineteen mountains' (I. i. 132).

As the play moves to the second scene, then, the Yellowhammers leave the stage to the Allwits. One step down from the Yellowhammers in the social hierarchy - they not only lack land and aristocratic titles, but also proper means of subsistence - the Allwits are their symmetrical comical counterpart. The Yellowhammers make a laughing stock of a common contemporary ambition to social promotion by way of mistaking a couple of 'disreputable' individuals for genuine and respectable pieces of landed gentry,[14] whereas the Allwits' household, as one commentator has noted, turns out to be 'a *reductio ad absurdum* of the values of the Yellowhammers and their middle-class

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[13] I use the term middle-class here in a broad sense, to characterise a social attitude. Strictly speaking, in contemporary descriptions the Yellowhammers would have been catalogued as 'citizens' or 'burgesses': 'we in England divide our men commonly into foure sortes, gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen artificiers, and laborers' (Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. by L. Alston [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906], 65). See also William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. by G. E. Edelen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 115.

[14] 'That a "middle-class culture" of educated artisans, small shopkeepers, and merchants grew up in Elizabethan England cannot be doubted, but the dominant value system remained that of the landed gentleman. Except for the yeomen, none of the new men had acquired their fortunes from their profits from land, and yet as soon as the opportunity offered all hastened to turn their wealth into a landed estate' (Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of The Aristocracy 1558-1641* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967], 23-24). 'In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the purchase of a landed estate continued to be the ultimate aim of every ambitious trader or entrepreneur' (Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution* [London: Penguin, 1992], 242).

world'.[15] In fact, as the Allwits debase the institution of marriage to the meretricious enterprise of trading in the wife's sexual value, the veil of public decorum covering up the real drives of this middle-class world is grotesquely torn apart. Thus, when Master Allwit introduces himself, he delivers a speech that translates the virtues of sober domestic economic conduct into an obscene farce in which he glorifies his own role of pimp as the perfect condition of the *pater familiae*:

> I thank him, h'as maintained my house this ten years,
> Not only keeps my wife, but a keeps me,
> And all my family; I am at his table,
> He gets me all my children, and pays the nurse,
> Monthly, or weekly, puts me to nothing,
> Rent, nor church duties, not so much as the scavenger:
> The happiest state that ever man was born to.
> (I. i. 16-22)

The reference here is of course to the wife's extramarital affair with the astonishingly hideous figure of Sir Walter Whorehound. And then again, when the latter finally finds himself contrite for his vile conduct:

> *Sir Walter:* Thou know'st me to be wicked, for thy baseness
> Kept the eyes open still on all my sins,
> None knew the dear account my soul stood charged with
> So well as thou, yet like Hell's flattering angel
> Would'st never tell me on't, let'st me go on,
> And join with death in sleep, that if had not waked
> Now by chance, even by a stranger's pity,
> I had everlasting slept out all hope
> Of grace and mercy.
>
> *Allwit:* Now he is worse and worse,
> Wife, to him wife, thou wast wont to do good on him.
> (V. I. 26-35)

This is a characteristic Middleton's anticlimactic comic apex, in which the villain's repentance is bathetically punctuated by the second character's pun on his wife 'doing

[15] Richard Levin, *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 201.

good', or copulating, 'on him', that sarcastically glosses over any possibility of true pathos. This is an impossibility that manifests itself first and foremost as a stylistic occlusion, that is as a linguistic monochromatism which, if turned to express the inward sphere of emotions, it can only do so by creating artificially mannered, affected and parodic effects.[16] As such, it converts everything it touches into a farcical and sordid transfiguration which finds its privileged satirical target in the emergent materialist and utilitarian middle-class social outlook.

In this sense, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* seems in effect to *mirror* a phase of radical expansion and rise to economic prominence of London's commercial classes. For their satiric slandering offers us a point of entry to measure the distance between the increasingly pivotal social and economic role of these estates and the still immature position that they held in terms of what Antonio Gramsci called 'hegemony': that is, that which in a different historical context the Italian intellectual defined as the struggle between old and ascendant social forces to impose not only their political and economic power, but also their values within the spheres of morality, manners, religion, philosophy, language, culture and the like.[17] As Lawrence Stone has remarked, while the development and increase of mercantilism and commerce home and abroad, and the related phenomenon of urbanisation corresponded to the rise of a brand new stratum of trading and entrepreneurial estates, in terms of status '[a]ctive personal occupation in a trade or profession was generally thought to be humiliating. The man of business was inferior to the gentleman of leisure who lived off his rent'.[18] Therefore a satire directed against this social actor could rest on a dominant outlook and ideology that still held him in genuine contempt. However, the problem with this kind of interpretation of city comedies arises when we shift from what they seem to reflect to what they actually do, that is to their theatrical function. For, as Walter

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[16] As Middleton has the Prologous saying in *The Roaring Girl* (1611), the play he co-authored with Thomas Dekker: 'Only we entreat you think our scene / Cannot speak high (the subject being but mean); / ...tragic passion, / And such grave stuff, is today out of fashion' (7-12).

[17] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and G. N. Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 206-208, 228-229, 238-239, 261-264, 271-272, 275-276.

[18] Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641* (rev. edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 24. See also Lawrence Stone, 'Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700: Conference Paper', *Past and Present*, 33 (1966), 16-55; and David Cressy, 'Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England', *Literature and History*, 3 (1976), 29-44.

Cohen has remarked, 'by definition the critiques they offer are also directed at the very audience whose approbation the playwrights and actors seek'.[19]

To be sure, the culminating moment of Middleton's comedy in effect coincides with the first symptoms and beginning of the crisis of Renaissance public theatre,[20] a crisis that was ultimately precipitated by exogenous factors such as the overall economic slump that marked the second decade of the seventeenth century, and by the contemporary endogenous crisis of overproduction determined by the proliferation of theatres and acting companies.[21] However, it would seem at the very least counterintuitive to suggest that contemporary playwrights and theatrical companies would have actively encouraged the desertion of public theatres by the increasingly powerful urban commercial and trading classes through indulging in their satiric vilification on the stage.[22] Albeit, this pattern of explanation could perhaps be corroborated by the observation that city comedy, before being transplanted onto the public stage, saw its emergence in the more secluded and selective environment of private theatres, where its social outlook could feed into the upper class position of the audience.[23] At any rate, Walter Cohen usefully hints at a more articulate interpretation of this dramatic genre by pointing out that its 'vigor derives from the disjunction between the social assumptions and resolution of the plot, on the one hand, and the implicit moral judgement by the author, on the other. An audience may, for instance, admire a character's mastery of society while simultaneously faulting her or his deviation from social norms. The more pronounced the disjunction, the more satiric

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[19] Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 291.

[20] See, for instance, Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions in the Theatre* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 27-28; David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 294-295; and Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 264-281.

[21] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 273.

[22] Although this is precisely the position held in G. R. Hibbard, 'The Tragedies of Thomas Middleton and the Decadence of the Drama', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 1 (1957), 35-64.

[23] On the relation between the social composition of the audience and dramatic form in public and private theatre see Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions in the Theatre*. More recent studies, however, have suggested that Harbage's clear-cut opposition between a popular, working-class public theatre and an aristocratic private theatre was overemphasised. Still, the perception of social division is usually maintained. See, for instance, Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229-231.

the work'.[24] And the possible outcomes of this ambivalence are on the one hand a universally negative social vision; on the other, though, the universality of this negative vision can also be seen as bringing into existence its very opposite. For if these plays certainly invited their original audience to castigate the characters that they threw on stage, the moral force of this castigation was probably to a large extent undermined by the very theatrical entertainment that these same characters offered to the public. So, in the present instance, I wish to take on board this interpretative suggestion as a point of departure to try to problematise the relation between social content and form in Middleton's comedies. For if these comedies undoubtedly present a sharp satirical take on contemporary society, they also strive to offer a comic entertainment, that is a fictional space in which to release the very social, moral and ideological tensions that they brought into view. This is, of course, not to say that this space is to be regarded as somehow void of broader social or ideological significance, but, quite the contrary, that it allows the unfolding of the very tensions and contradictions that irreverently trouble and unfix the meaning of the plays.

III. Desire and Reification in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*

As we have begun to see, one of the key formal traits of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is the complexity of its narrative structure. Indeed, if one wanted to arrange its intricate set of motifs and montage of plots into a well-ordered series of diagrams and geometrical constructions, this play would provide an array of opportunities. The interaction between the four familial groups that appear in the play, to begin with, could be inscribed in a combination of key motifs – sex, marriage, economic exchange and biological reproduction - built around a central narrative line, or *isotopy*,[25] that culminates with the marriages of the young Yellowhammers. As for the reciprocal relations among these groups of characters, we could detect two main *combinatoires*: the first one - marriage-economic exchange-sex - corresponding to the relation between the Yellowhammers, the Allwits, Whorehound and the fake Welsh

[24] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 291.
[25] A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at Method*, English trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), especially chap. 6.

Gentlewoman; the second - (marital)sex-economic exchange-biological reproduction - materialised by the subplot involving the Knixes and the Touchwoods. In both cases economic exchange is inserted between the two opposite elements of the triad as a structural operator that disrupts the socially validated connections marriage-sex and (marital)sex-biological reproduction. If one was to follow this interpretative line, then, it could reasonably be expected that the game of symmetries that the play so skillfully creates would lead to a dénouement in which the disruptive element catalogued under the heading 'economic exchange' will either triumph – and this would correspond to the negative outcome of the universal dissolution of cohesive social values – or be ultimately expunged – and in this case we could talk of a happy ending that reconciles such values with the moral position of the play. The latter is, as a matter of fact, the resolution of the plot involving Moll, the Yellowhammerss daughter, and Touchwood Junior, who, against the misplaced economic interest driven opposition of her parents, will end up, after not a little trouble, marrying each other.

Interestingly enough, though, a closer examination would reveal that at its comic best Middleton's comedy tends to force its way out of the straightjacket of such binary oppositions. Let us assume as a key point in question the pivotal moment of the finale. In *A Mad World, My Masters*, a young gallant, Richard Follywit, attempts to rob his rich and dissolute grandfather, Bounteous Progress, of his fortune before it is legally passed down to him as inheritance. As a result, the young gallant is made to fall in love and marry the grandfather's courtesan. At first glance, this might in fact seem to produce a strict symmetrical logic of fault (the attempted violation of the principle of patrilineal genealogy) and punishment. In Middleton's comedy, this is a recurrent motif: men's socially and morally reproachable conduct is typically remunerated with the castigation of getting a 'whore' as a wife. Accordingly, as a gloss on the whole affair, the young gallant dispiritedly notes that 'Tricks are repaid' (V. ii. 272). Yet, this remark is delivered only for him to conclude, five lines later, that after all his prospective consort 'is as good a cup of nectar as any bachelor needs to sip in' (V. ii. 277). In the same apparent symmetric line relating fault and punishment, in *Michaelmas Term* (1606) we have another young gallant in search of social promotion, Lethe, who is castigated for his amoral endeavors by being forced to marry

the country wench that he had previously drawn into prostitution. Here, the initial protest of the gallant, 'Oh intolerable! ' (V. iii. 109), is immediately reverted into a much rejoicing aside, 'Marry a harlot, why not? 'Tis an honest man's fortune. ...Why, well then, if none should be married but those that are honest, where should a man seek a wife after Christmas? ' (V. iii. 122-125). *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, as well, presents a stereotypical gentry prodigal, Witgood, who, after having been spoiled of his inheritance, recovers his fortune by pretending to be courting a rich widow, in reality a 'whore', in order to delude the uncle with the prospect of sharing the future gains from the widow's assets. Here the ending has the prostitute marrying the uncle's arch-enemy, Hoard, and the prodigal marrying Hoard's niece, glossed by Witgood's final pun, which facetiously plays with the *double entendre* 'aunt-whore': 'She's mine aunt now, by my faith, and there's no meddling with my aunt, you know - a sin against my uncle' (V. ii. 153-154).

So, in all of these finales the very moral underpinning the rationale for the dénouement is punctuated with a commentary that reduces it to much ado about nothing. As moral retribution finally seems to be dispensed, with a dialectical twist what seemed fool reveals itself to be fair after all. The punitive quality of punishment is undone and the ground under the moral position that the play seems to take is suddenly removed. So that, as the plot comes to resolution, it enacts a final turn in which the satire of the play's life world turns into a liberating, festive celebration. This festive celebration finds its catalyst in the bodily delight incarnated by the woman's sexual prowess, which the recurring figure of the 'whore' is of course called to represent. In the upside down morals of this celebration, thus, the real object of satire shifts to that most obsessive concern of official, public morality, the obsession with female chastity.

According to Ruth Kelso's *Doctrine for the Lady in the Renaissance* (1956), this doctrine could be summarised in one epigrammatic sentence: 'let a woman have chastity, she is all. Let her lack chastity and she has nothing'.[26] In reality, though, for a woman in Renaissance England to have 'nothing' was still in a way to have something.

[26] Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 24.

For apparently this word indicated, among other things, the female genitalia.[27] And it is precisely the use that the woman made of this 'nothing' that decided the dominant masculinist perception for the construction of her gendered identity: virgin, wife or whore, that is, what in the reified vision of the individual subject pervading Middleton's comedies corresponds to the dichotomy of social forms in which the value of the woman's 'nothing' is objectified. Just as the commodity realises its value only if put into the circuit of exchange, so in Middleton's grotesquely literalised 'libidinal economy', the value of the woman's sexuality is materialised only in relation to real or potential male consumption.

On her arrival to London the country wench of *Michaelmas Term* is immediately given the advice that 'Virginity is no city trade' (I. ii. 42). On this, her father indirectly comments, 'I know the price of ill too well / ...how soon maids are to their ruins won; / One minute, and eternally undone' (II. ii. 29-32). Taken literally, these remarks are both equally true, for they refer to the two circuits of exchange in which the sexed object 'woman' is alternatively forced: prostitution, in which virginity is in fact 'no trade', and the institution of marriage, in which on the contrary it is. As opposed as they might superficially appear to be, the discourse of the pander and the discourse of the father share a common ground, the exchange of women that sustains the social, cultural and economic order of patriarchal society, an exchange which is acted out by men, among men, and in which the woman's desire is an absent factor. As Luce Irigaray has theorised, the 'economy - in both the narrow and broad sense - that is in place in our societies...requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate'.[28] In these exchanges, 'woman' is constituted as a passive object that materialises 'hom(m)osexual' relations between men. She is an article for exchange, that is a commodity, an objectified inscription of value whose worth lies outside herself: that is in men's desires and productive investments objectified in the Woman-as-a-commodity. From the dominant, normative, which is to say masculinist, perspective, virginity stands for the

[27] See David Wilberns, 'Shakespeare's Nothing', in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. M. M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 244-269.

[28] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University

promise of permanent possession of the unpossessed, it is an *ad hominem* address to the acquisition of the exclusive. Hence its function as the depository figure of the contradiction of the commodity, which despite its universal availability addresses the potential buyer offering an absolute right to private, unshared consumption. In order to sustain this fiction, though, the commodity needs to be invested with a fetishistic cult. For once the veil of its auratic uniqueness is removed, the commodity-form reveals the degraded and scandalous indifference with which it serialises its consumers.[29] Virginity, within this context, is precisely the fiction that sustains the fetishistic cult of the commodity-Woman to be exclusively possessed *qua* wife. And once its aura is made to wither through pre-nuptial consummation, this commodity is nothing but a debased object for nakedly mercantile and impersonal exchange *qua* whore.

In Middleton's comedy the fiction that sustains this distinction between 'whore' and 'wife' is the subject of an irreverent scrutiny in which both women's objectification and men's desire appear to be entirely overdetermined by the process of reification into which they are forced. For in the social system that constitutes their environment, human relations, and in particular those driven by sexual exchange, have become subsumed by the all-pervasive sway of the commodification system. In this environment, marriage itself, that is the social contract through which the commodity-woman is removed from the sphere of circulation, resolves in most cases into a farcical demystification of the purchaser's exclusive rights over the use of the commodity that he has acquired. Whereas in Shakespearean comedy marriage is represented as the social sanction for the successful fulfillment of sexual desire or romantic love, in Middleton's satiric comedy it is this sanction itself that is in fact under scrutiny.[30] The multiple marriages in which such an eroticised comedy as *As You Like It* (1599-1600) - which presented to its original public a boy actor disguised as a woman (Rosalind), who is transvestite as a male (Ganymede) pretending to be a woman on whom another man (Orlando) practices his courtship for Rosalind - finds its culmination, seem to provide a socially acceptable conduct to channel the

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Press, 1985), 172.

[29] See Terry Eagleton's suggestive 'Aura and Commodity', in *Walter Benjamin: or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London and New York: Verso, 1981), 25-42.

[30] Rose, *The Expense of Spirit*, 43.

transgressive libidinal impulses that threateningly saturate the action of the play.[31] Although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it may remain an open question as to whether this resolution will actually succeed in re-establishing sexual and social harmony. In Middleton's comedy, however, the familial institution is undermined at its foundation by the nakedly and crassly utilitarian interests that it is associated with, that is, by the reified role of individual subjects as bearers of wealth to be appropriated through the sealing of the wedding contract. If a positive, alternative, vision emerges - as in the resolution of Moll and Touchwood Junior's plot in *A Chaste maid in Cheapside* - this still is in defiance of the prevailing satiric exposure of the emergent, all-pervasive economic logic of commercial exchange, which objectifies human relations into the reified, dominant structure of the commodification system.

But if this is indeed the manifest content of Middleton's social critique, it must be added that perhaps its still haunting appeal lies as much in the evident resonance that this content can find in our own fully commodified late capitalist society, as in its theatrical power. For, by the same token of exposing its satirical object in its most ludicrously grotesque expressions, Middleton's comedy offers a leverage to transfigure it into the subject for a potentially utopian, liberating laughter: the kind of laughter called for by the finales of *A Mad World, My Master*, *Michaelmas Term, A Trick to catch the Old One* or *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, in which in the brief, final releasing twist of an irreverential dénouement, the agency of sexuality exposes the repressive environment of a claustrophobically materialistic social dimension. Only, this liberatory laughter is merely a deconstruction from within of the horizon of the middle-class and dominant masculinist and normative heterosexual gaze. In order to achieve a genuinely progressive and emancipatory dimension, that horizon would need to be opened up to the autonomous claims of alternative and still subaltern class and

[31] The significance of boy actors' cross dressing and gender inversion in English Renaissance theatre has been a widely debated issue among feminist critics. See, among others, Catherine Belsey, 'Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies', in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. by John Drakakis (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), 166-190; J. E Howard, 'Power and Eros: Cross dressing in Dramatic Representation and Theatrical Practice', in *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 93-128; Kathleen McLuskie, 'The Act, the Role, and the Actor: Boy Actresses on the Elizabethan Stage', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3 (1987): 120-130; and Valerie Traub, 'The Homoerotics of Shakespeare's Comedy (*As You Like It, Twelfth Night*) ', in *Desire & Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 117-144.

gender positions.

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Epilogue: Visible God

...Thou visible god,
That sold'rest close impossibilities,
And mak'st them kiss;
(IV. iii. 389-391)

William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens* (1607-1608)

Shakespeare, so the story goes, excellently depicts the real nature of money:[1] the general equivalent, the meta-good that can be permutated into all goods, the exchangeability of all products, activities and relations, the universal commodity; the levelling sway that spoils the material being of everything it touches to turn it into a mere inscription of abstract value, into its own self-reflection, that is into a commodity; that which displaces the materiality of the commodity onto a signifier of itself, and in so doing shows its full indifference to the concrete material existence of any particular object. Money is that which separates the value of things from their substance. Just like Timon's prodigality, which turns every object into a void receptacle for its protean self-realisation, money turns everything into an abstraction disembodied of its concrete specificity. Money represents the equation of the incompatible, ceaseless mutability. It is the externalised embodiment of all human abilities, the ability of abilities and, as such, the alienated ability of humankind, whose power allows human beings to transcend their natural limits and deficiencies: 'Thus much of this', yells Timon, 'will make / Black, white; foul, fair; wrong, right; / Base, noble; old, young; coward, valiant' (IV. iii. 28-30). All that is precluded to me as a result of my being base, old, coward, I can access through money. Therefore in so far as the effects of being base, old and coward are annihilated by money, I am no longer

[1] See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (London: Lawrence & Wishart,

so, but noble, young and valiant. As a possessor of money, money's power becomes my own power. Money is the confounding and confusing of all human and natural qualities, that which brings imagination into life, materialises wishes into actual existence, turns images into reality, solders impossibilities and transforms all human and natural imperfections into their contraries: '...bless th'accurs'd, / Make the hoar leprosy ador'd, place thieves, / And give them title, knee and approbation / With senators on the bench... .Make... the wappen'd widow wed again' (IV. iii. 35-39).

One could go a long way with these riddles and aphorisms, as Shakespeare does in *Timon of Athens*. In this study however, I have set out to cut through the phenomenal form of value and what from a present perspective appears as the almost transhistorical dimension of the commodity and money market, in order to historicise some emergent elements in early modern social and economic relations as these are mediated, represented, transfigured, superseded by and congealed in (in so far as these texts are themselves social and material products) the literary and dramatic texts that I have read. I have sought to sketch and bring into view diverse and yet interlocked narratives of transformation: in early modern social relations; in economic practices and in the ideas that informed contemporary understanding of them; in the social and material history of early modern theatre and its subsumption in the ongoing processes of commodification of cultural production; in the mode of representation of the early modern society in contemporary drama and therefore in the generic and formal shifts that accompany the loosely diachronic trajectory shaped by the chapters of this study. Yet, no proper, comprehensive history is provided here of any of these patterns of change. Rather, I have mobilised the cultural objects that I engage with in my textual readings as sites of an interpretative interest which, as I have articulated in my introductory chapter, is shaped by the ongoing critical and theoretical debates in this field of studies. And, more broadly, I have tried to suggest how a symptomatic reading or metacommentary may reveal the saturation of these debates by our own historical moment, that is by the way our present constructs our perceptions of the past and of the cultural artefacts that we have inherited from it. So, the other history that is, in the main, silently hinted at here is the history that these artefacts tell us back about our

1977), 120-125, which I freely paraphrase in a couple of passages of this paragraph.

own investments in them. To activate this dialogue, I have taken the task of historicising seriously, not to try to grasp how the past was to itself, as it were, but to bring into sharp relief those elements of impermanence, change and difference that could enact a resistance from collapsing the past into sameness with the present. But this is also a two-way street, in which the past comes to haunt us and remind us of the continuity and all too often cheerless self-repetition of history. And here is the flip side of the coin of Benjamin's messianism: his sad materialist attitude. We are a creation of the conflictual and divided history that has produced our own present fully as much as this history, or the multiplicity of histories into which it can be dissected, as we represent and textualise them become a product of our own making and remaking. I take this emphasis to be one of key things that ultimately distinguish historical materialism from other, more recent visions of history.

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