Worlds Apart

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For my mother and father
Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xv

Prologue: Commerce and culture 1
1. The threshold of exchange 17
2. Another nature 57
3. Artificial persons 101
4. The spectacle of the market 149
   Epilogue: Confidence and culture 195

Notes 204
Index 257
Preface

MARKET AND THEATER. What different meanings these two words evoke. One word summons up ancient images of stalls, scales, and ledger books, of raucous hucksters and sober, black-coated clerks. The other conjures up a magical world of sets, costumes, and greasepaint, of gallant heroes, scheming villains, and clowns in motley. Markets we are accustomed to think of as meeting every sort of material need. Theaters we associate with more symbolic, less tangible human longings. Commerce involves risk and therefore prizes the clear and specific assignment of liability. Comedies, by contrast, glory in their avowed inconsequentiality as they do in the immunities that innocuousness invites. Theatricality is to the serious person of business what commerciality is to the serious person of the theater: a threat to the foundation of trust on which each enterprise stands. From this perspective, the two figures appear to inhabit entirely different, if not wholly contradictory, realms. Reality and fiction. Materialism and symbolism. Necessity and freedom. Work and play. What are these terms but variants of the pairing of market and theater? And how else to think of them except as worlds apart?

One of my purposes in this book is to answer that question. Yet the answer I offer is an admittedly equivocal one in that it both denies and affirms this image of separate worlds. On the one hand, I want to show that the themes of commerciality and theatricality have actually sustained a long, intimate, and complex relationship in Anglo-American thought; on the other hand, I believe that people brought and, in a sense, thought these two themes together precisely because they experienced their markets and their stage as distinct and different universes. Only here I propose that the decisive historical difference lay not so much between the two institutions as between them and the common social world whose needs commerce and comedy were under-
Preface

stood to serve. To be thus set against one another, the two institutions had first to be detached from everything else.

It is in this sense, then, that markets and theaters have stood as worlds apart. Owing to the special and often implicit conditions of belief and accountability that operate within their bounds, the two institutions have for long periods of time stood at some remove from the rules and rituals of ordinary social intercourse. And often enough, their bounds have been effectively coexistent. The theater of late medieval and early modern England, for example, was a theater in and of the marketplace. And though the rules governing credit in the market stalls of those times may have differed in detail from the conventions governing credibility in the adjoining theatrical booths, the fact nonetheless remains that in either instance the customer's will to believe was a stipulated or conditional act, a matter less of faith than of suspended disbelief. What bound the market and theater together, then as now, were the same peculiar experiential properties that set them apart from other kinds of exchange.

Why, then, my interest in the years between 1550 and 1750? If markets and theaters have for so long been linked by virtue of their shared differences from ordinary life, why single out these two centuries for special scrutiny? To that question this study is itself an extended reply. But a short answer might begin by pointing to this epoch as a time when the residual boundaries separating market from other forms of exchange were rapidly dissolving. To be sure, merchants and lawyers of the time contrived a variety of sophisticated commercial instruments, together with a body of equally intricate contractual law, in order to oversee and underwrite the very transactions that an older, ceremonialized marketplace could no longer secure. But such commercial and legal inventions did little to resolve (and much to aggravate) the larger, more refractory questions of personal identity and accountability arising within an increasingly placeless and timeless market process. Such solutions did not indicate, for example, how one's self, one's motives, and one's relations were to be represented in a world where traditional reference points were increasingly subject to the market's overarching rule of full commensurability. Nor did they indicate how or where human
acts of representation were to be anchored in the face of such detached and impersonal abstractions as exchange value. These were social and cultural problems and as such were left to the theater (among other institutions) to take up during this period. It is thus in the evolution of the theater and its conventions of representation – its theatricality – that I trace a protracted struggle to forge a broader sociocultural accommodation with an expansive system of capital formation and commodity exchange. In these years, the theater became a laboratory of and for the new social relations of agricultural and commercial capitalism.

It is not enough, consequently, to treat the Anglo-American theater as a mere text or register in which to read the cultural consequences of an emerging market economy. The early modern stage did more than reflect relations occurring elsewhere; it modeled and in important respects materialized those relations. Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, as we shall see, did not just hold the mirror up to nature; it brought forth “another nature” – a new world of “artificial persons” – the features of which audiences were just beginning to make out in the similarly new and enigmatic exchange relations then developing outside the theater. Without an appreciation of the theater’s constitutive and exploratory powers in this regard, it is correspondingly difficult to understand the violence and antipathy visited on the stage in these years. The theater bestowed an intelligible albeit Protean human shape on the very formlessness that money values were introducing into exchange; for such an achievement, spectators were alternately grateful and horrified.

I emphasize the word “form” here because it occupies the foreground of this study. Some readers will no doubt be disappointed to see so little attention given to the immediate and ultimate purposes for which the theaters were built, that is, the plays themselves; others will just as likely wonder at my seeming indifference to the putative object of all markets, namely, the allocation of scarce resources among competing interests. In the pages that follow I as rarely take up the content of a particular play as I do that of a particular trade. But that is because I am concerned above all to chart the changing formal and informal resemblances between commercial and theatrical convention over
Preface

time. To speak of the market and theater in Anglo-American thought is, in this regard, to speak of the understandings men and women held of the social structuration of their commercial and theatrical experience. It is to speak, in short, of changing definitions of commerciality and theatricality. Studied in sufficient detail, these two themes can illuminate one another as well as some of the broader intellectual traditions in which they were lodged, say, within political theory or moral philosophy. But even more important, these themes can shed light on the historical emergence of a market culture in Britain and America; that is to say, they can reveal how fundamental structures of meaning and feeling came to be framed around the characteristic problems and prospects of an expansive market system.

So while the spine of this study remains, strictly speaking, an intellectual history of two related ideas – market and theater – the body of the narrative resembles something more in the nature of a cultural history: a history of meanings and feelings broadly defined, as embedded in expressive practices widely observed. Obviously, no historian could hope to recover, much less fully consider, the whole range of expressive practices ascribable to either the market or the theater in the years between 1550 and 1750. Fortunately, however, there already exists a considerable body of research and writing on these subjects, from which I have drawn liberally in my efforts to situate the texts that, as intellectual history, lie at the heart of my narrative. I have tried to record my debt to this rich historiography in the footnotes; there I have made an effort to include where relevant more general references, rather than to confine them to a separate bibliographical essay.

Bound up with these contextual “facts,” of course, are methods and theories for interpreting them. In this case, the obstacles I encountered in my attempts to interpret practices that had been at once textual and performative, figurative and material, ephemeral and fateful led me to consult a number of writers in other disciplines, notably political economy, economic and symbolic anthropology, philology, and literature. If my argument has been successful, it is in no small part due to insights already familiar within those disciplines but still novel to a historian like myself.
If, on the other hand, I have stumbled, it is not for lack of illumination from others but from my own defects and limits of vision and the special difficulties my subject posed. Commerciality and theatricality are inescapably dialectical ideas — labile, reflexive, deconstructive — and, like the practices of which they are the abstracted properties, they invite the observer to invest too much, to overreach, which is why I have kept to the texts as my anchor.

Still, the reader will almost immediately notice that my “Anglo-American” texts are drawn for the most part from one side of the Atlantic. Despite the book’s hyphenated subtitle, the thought and culture examined herein are largely British. In part this is because the most influential texts before 1750 were British and were read on both sides of the ocean. But the predominance of British texts also reflects the fact that before 1750, indeed almost before 1850, few Americans were compelled to create, much less to confront, formal and figurative parallels between commercial and theatrical practice. Yet despite this instance of economic and cultural “lag,” I have retained the American side of my subtitle as I have that of my narrative, even if only in the form of an epilogue. I have done so because the trajectory of that narrative is quite deliberately Anglo-American: from England to America.

Curiously, my initial interest in this project turned on an altogether unexamined assumption that the cultural interplay of commerciality and theatricality in contemporary mass culture was a peculiarly modern and peculiarly American phenomenon, an assumption against which this book itself may stand as refutation. Readers will find in my narrative, I hope, the seeds of questions applicable to our own market culture, for it was these questions that originally pushed this narrative backward in time and outward in reach. Americans’ engagement with the predicaments and problematics sketched in this book came later than it did in Britain, and to a certain extent we are still very much engaged and bemused by them. As late as 1870, an actor could still be denied a Christian burial in New York City; today, an actor has become president by claiming allegiance to the very traditions that would have categorically condemned him as a
xiv  Preface

hypocrite a century earlier. To this public change of heart or mind, I plan to devote another volume. If, then, the Anglo-American subtitle still seems to be a case of bait and switch, I can only reply, like Melville, that "something further may follow of this Masquerade."
Acknowledgments

If there is one lesson I should have brought away from my work on markets, it is that of the ultimate futility of itemizing one's personal, not to mention scholarly, debts. Nevertheless, this book owes much to the wisdom and generosity of many friends and colleagues, and I would like to express my gratitude to them.

This study began some years ago as an introduction to a dissertation on American theater. But, as so often happens to historians, a casual foray into other times and places – to get my bearings, so to speak – eventually developed into a full-scale inquiry of its own. Donald H. Fleming offered indispensable direction during the early stages of this inquiry, and I remain deeply appreciative of his forebearance in what could only have seemed at first to be a curious historical digression. The staffs of the Houghton Library at Harvard and the Beinecke Library at Yale were likewise immensely helpful, as was the time afforded me to write by a Morse Fellowship. I am also grateful to Steve Fraser and Frank Smith, my editors at Cambridge University Press, to Mary Nevader, who copyedited my manuscript with singular precision and tact, and to Jim O'Brien, for his careful work on my index. A grant from the Griswold Fund underwrote some of the expenses incurred in the preparation of the manuscript. Portions of Chapter 1 first appeared in slightly different form in the Radical History Review, and I thank the journal’s editors for their permission to reprint.

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xvi  Acknowledgments

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Finally, I want to thank my wife, Leslie, whose patience and faith in this project far exceeded anything I had a right to expect. For this gift, above all, I am most grateful.