

The Theatrical City

*Culture, Theatre and Politics in London,
1576–1649*

Edited by
David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1995

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

The theatrical city: culture, theatre, and politics in London, 1576-1649 / edited by
David L. Smith, Richard Strier, and David Bevington.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 44126 9 (hc)

1. English literature – Early modern, 1500–1700 – History and criticism.
2. Politics and literature – England – London – History – 17th century. 3. Politics and
literature – England – London – History – 16th century. 4. English drama –
England – London – History and criticism. 5. Literature and anthropology –
England – London – History. 6. Theater – Political aspects – England – London –
History. 7. London (England) – Politics and government. 8. London (England) – In
literature. 9. London (England) – Civilization. I. Smith, David L. (David
Lawrence), 1963–. II. Strier, Richard. III. Bevington, David M.

PR421.T44 1995

942.105'5-dc20 94-27825 CIP

ISBN 0 521 44126 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52615 9 paperback

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Introduction

This book began in a pedagogical venture. Early in 1990, the director of an enterprise in the History Department at the University of Chicago called the Interdisciplinary Program for the Study of Europe (IPSE, for short) asked two of us, David Bevington and Richard Strier of the English Department, if we would be interested in participating in an interdisciplinary year-long course for 1990–1 to be called ‘The City in Early Modern Europe’. The proposal was that a three-person team composed of the two of us and a historian of England (from England) be assigned to the spring quarter of that academic year (one of the aims of the Program was to bring over historians from Europe). The focus of our quarter was to be London. We readily agreed, and soon were able to enlist the collegial participation of David L. Smith, Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge.

The year-long course as a whole necessarily took a broad and somewhat schematic approach to urban culture in early modern Europe. The autumn quarter was to be devoted to the interrelations of history and art in Florence; the winter quarter chose Leipzig in order to study the connections between history and music; and the spring quarter adopted as its focus the relationship of history and literature, with a particular interest in the drama. Owing to staffing difficulties the scheme was not quite as interdisciplinary in the autumn and winter as had been hoped, though the subjects of investigation still remained Florence and Leipzig. In the spring, the original conception was fully borne out: a cross-disciplinary approach to London through a study of its drama and other literary genres in the context of the social, economic and political circumstances that gave rise to (or accompanied) the high Renaissance in England.

In working out our quarter, the three of us discovered that we were as interested in dramatic aspects of politics as we were in political and social aspects of theatrical productions and literary texts. For that reason, we entitled the course, ‘London: The Theatrical City’ – a version of the title of this present book. Our plan, then as now, was to employ the term ‘theatrical’ in a fairly plastic sense, covering popular as well as elite theatre and even ‘dramatic’ spectacles such as the execution of Charles I. We decided that texts did not have to be theatrical in any strict technical sense to be included in our deliberations. The theatricality of London itself, and of the court, gave us the backdrop we were looking for in our interdisciplinary dialogue. We decided that the course would cover the period from the building of the Theatre (1576) to the execution of the

king (1649). This seemed like a convenient period, and these events announced the range of our concerns.

David Smith came to Chicago from Cambridge for the spring quarter of 1991. The living arrangement provided for him at the Bevingtons' house, and the close-knit character of the Hyde Park neighbourhood where the University of Chicago is located, made for frequent contact and intense, literally convivial cooperation. In the course, our usual procedure was to have David Smith lecture on historical subjects and to have Richard Strier and David Bevington take turns presenting texts. After David Smith had talked about the Elizabethan court, Richard Strier followed with a session on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; David Smith's lecture on the political, social and economic anxieties at the end of Elizabeth's reign led into David Bevington's analysis of political, social and economic conflicts in Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. And so it went, with numerous interventions during the lectures from the other instructors, the course assistants, and the students in the class, both graduate and undergraduate.

This experience was so rich and intellectually rewarding that we soon turned our minds to the possibility of a book-length project. The volume, we decided, would follow the shape of the course: it would retain its chronological scope, would construe theatricality broadly, and would take a liberal view of what would count as texts for analysis. We wanted to expand the interdisciplinary dialogue beyond the three of us, while still finding a way to capture in print the close collaboration and genuine dialogue that the course provided. The strategy we arrived at was to have each chapter of the volume consist of an essay by a historian on a particular text, set of texts, or event followed by an essay by a literary scholar on that same text, set of texts, or event. Some of the texts were chosen by us and had been used in the course; some were suggested by the participants themselves. It is worth noting that, despite major differences in approaches and interests, almost every historian or literary scholar we contacted was immediately enthusiastic about the project and readily agreed to participate in it. This readiness to participate not only gratified us but led us to think that our volume might speak to a real need, or at least a widespread desire.

The aim of the paired essay format was to establish true dialogue and true interdisciplinarity. We understand interdisciplinarity to require, logically and in practice, the existence of disciplinary difference. The existence, and productiveness, of disciplinary difference was part of the excitement of the course. We therefore asked each scholar to write within her or his discipline, whatever she or he took that to mean, and then to exchange drafts with the other half of the pair and see what effect such an exchange would have. The resulting volume gives us a picture not only of some aspects and productions of London in the English Renaissance but also of the current state, with regard to these matters, of the two

'disciplines' of literary and historical studies and of the relations between them. Each essay in the volume is, we believe, worthwhile in itself. The 'pairs' speak to one another (and sometimes fail to do so) in ways that we did not and could not mandate, but that we believe to be interesting and significant in themselves.

We begin with a pair of essays on John Stow's *A Survey of London* (1598), by way of introduction to the City itself. Ian Archer's approach to Stow embraces at once our basic theme of the interrelatedness of social process and the production of written texts. Archer sees Stow's work as an integral product of the City's traditions, along with pageants, lord mayor's processions, stage plays, printed maps, epitaphs and much else; all are nourished by the City's physical reality, its wealth, its rapid development. Archer is as concerned with Stow's worries about London as he is with the laudatory handclapping; the Stow we meet in these pages is anxious about undesirable change and the decline of social ideals. The result, Archer argues, is a nostalgia for a medieval past of 'charity, hospitality and plenty', and of ceremonials and pageants. Recognising Stow's nostalgia enables Archer to provide insight into the reliability of Stow's observations, for it shows us why Stow is so reluctant to see old customs fall away and so ill equipped to comprehend London's resilience in coping with social change and even with poverty. Stow is especially unable to measure the worth of new forms of charity (by no means all of them institutionalised and bureaucratic) that were taking the place of more traditional social obligations. Archer shows Stow's ambivalence to be representative and genuine, shared by no less an authority than Queen Elizabeth herself.

Lawrence Manley too connects Stow's *Survey* to ceremonial and theatrical representation, and sees in Stow the paradox of a conservative response to the erosion of late medieval traditions of hospitality coexisting with a 'progressive' celebration of new socio-economic mobility and metropolitan growth. Part of what is new here is Manley's emphasis on the *Survey* as a written document: on its influence as a model for the writing of urban history; on its humanist and Aristotelian-Ramist assumptions that cities could be analysed according to *res* and *homines*; on its organisational plan of a district-by-district perambulation of London's wards, liberties and suburbs. Manley reveals Stow's conception of London as a ceremonial space, showing us what a wealth of information Stow provides on ceremonial routes, on the major feast days for such occasions, on guild participation and the function of important buildings, and on the role of jousting and sports. Stow's emphasis on pageantry in London, Manley shows, provides the author ample opportunity for praise and dispraise: praise for traditions like the disappearing Midsummer Marching Watch and for those charitable Christians whose benefactions support the common good, dispraise for those who seek private gain only and who suppress older rituals without regard for civic sentiment. Stow deplures such things

as gossiping curates who pull down maypoles, public ostentation of wealth, the expansion of bureaucracy in Westminster, and the conversion of religious houses into gun factories. The new public theatres distress Stow with their heteroglot character and variegated audience, and he pays them scant attention. They do not suit his version of civic pride.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595) contains urban as well as courtly characters, and is therefore admirably suited to add awareness of the court to that of the City, and to suggest some aspects of their interaction. Penry Williams shows us that the festivals of Theseus's court are much like those of Elizabeth's. In both, ritual and display intersect with policy-making and patronage. Even if, as Williams argues, the marriages of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* need not point to a specific occasion in the 1590s, they do celebrate the political and social functions of marriage in the courtly world over which Elizabeth presided. In his analysis of this rich interplay of literature and history, Williams thus argues that Shakespeare's play embodies not only the mental world of the Elizabethan court but also the social world of Elizabethan London. It embodies division and conflict – between popular festivities and courtly entertainments, reason and passion, male and female – but also, and perhaps more importantly, it embodies, in Williams's view, a vision of the way in which social and political conflicts can be defused. Williams stresses the importance of this in the context of bad harvests and social unrest in the mid-1590s. He views Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as helping us see how it could have been that the social fabric of London was not rent apart in that difficult moment. In the context of the volume, Williams leads us to see Shakespeare as having had an awareness of the 'resilience' of London that, in Archer's view, is overlooked by Stow.

Louis Montrose argues that the relationship of Queen Elizabeth to her subjects is at the heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* fascination with unstable hierarchies and categories of gender, rank and age. Bottom, for Montrose, is an exaggeratedly comic representation of those many males in Elizabeth's court who found themselves in a dependent, uncertain and partly eroticised relationship to a monarch who was capable of being (like Titania) benign and domineering, adoring and sinister, tender and imperious. As Montrose points out, Bottom is not simply a dependent child at Titania's sheltering bosom. He is also an artisan and a would-be actor. Although socially inferior to the nobles and gentry who inhabit Theseus's court, he has a secure place in the civic and guild-oriented world that Shakespeare knew so well as his own heritage. The world of traditional guild theatre was one in which Elizabethan governmental policy was making itself severely felt. That policy was killing off or selectively appropriating an older theatre of Corpus Christi plays and folk ceremonials in favour of newer ceremonials designed to mythologise the Tudor state. We have seen, in our first pair of essays, how John Stow responded with

alarm to the dismantling of Midsummer marches, maypole ceremonies and the like. Montrose's contribution to this discussion is to show how insistently *A Midsummer Night's Dream* alludes to the passing world of popular civic entertainment and to the celebration of royal authority that takes its place. Although Bottom and his colleagues are guild members, and although Bottom refers to the raging Herod of the cycles, the artisans' purpose in playing is no longer to observe the cycles of the agrarian and ecclesiastical calendar by recreating sacred history; it is to pay homage to a court wedding. Montrose shows that Shakespeare's presentation of such a transformation and of dependent relationships in a royal or ducal court is not without an element of critique. Bottom's allusion to 1 Corinthians in his comically jumbled evocation of 'a most rare vision' has the effect of inverting temporal and spiritual hierarchies. However absurd the vision in its manifestation of asses' ears and braying, its exponent in the play is the artisan-turned-actor. This droll representative of the Shakespearean theatre instinctively knows more about imaginative art (and spiritual mysteries?) than does his patron. Bottom thus unknowingly aligns himself with Puck as the spokesman for 'shadows'. By implication, Montrose argues, the social reality of dependence on Queen Elizabeth is transformed by the play's dreamwork into a fantasy of the artisan-poet-player-dramatist's control over the Faery Queen.

Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* is only three or four years later (1599/1600) than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and is similarly a play for a public company. Again, the worlds of artisans and of gentlefolk collide. Both plays are presided over by genial figures of royal or ducal power who reconcile differences and to whom homage is paid in the plays' closing moments. Both plays accept a significant degree of hierarchy while at the same time valourising the independence of various social groups and adopting the tolerant, whimsical pluralism that Renaissance English culture seems to have imagined as part of its national identity. Yet Dekker's play may also reflect the darker sense of anxiety and social tension that, as Penry Williams has hinted, was characteristic of Elizabeth's last years. Paul Seaver develops this view. He shows in some detail how conditions seemed to worsen towards the end of Elizabeth's reign: war with Continental Catholic powers dragged on; the Irish situation was exacerbated by the earl of Essex's ineffectual expedition; the economy stagnated amid rising inflation; and of course plague and the bad harvests alluded to in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* added to the misery. And over everything hung the uncertainty of the royal succession.

Seaver contends that Dekker's play is an enchanted rather than a reflecting glass with regard to contemporary social history. He shows that it deliberately distorts key aspects of London's social world in the direction of wish-fulfilment fantasy. Seaver points out that while a Simon Eyre did live in the fifteenth century and did indeed become lord mayor (and build

Leadenhall), he differs from his namesake in Dekker (and in Dekker's source, Deloney's *The Gentle Craft*) in one rather fundamental way: the historical Simon Eyre was not a shoemaker. He was an upholsterer and then draper. To the uninitiated this might seem like a trivial change, but to the social historian it is essential. What Seaver shows is that if Eyre had been a shoemaker, he could never have become lord mayor of London. No shoemaker ever did. Seaver shows that the guild that included shoemakers, the Cordwainers, cut a paltry figure in London's highly stratified world where Drapers, Goldsmiths and especially Grocers held a dominant position. The forbidding Sir Roger Oatley in Dekker's play is not a Grocer by accident. Dekker's vision of Simon Eyre is of a self-made, successful entrepreneur whose unhistorical rise to the top of London's social and economic world provided a dreamlike model of social mobility for the play's original audience at the Fortune Theatre – where the Admiral's men, headed by Edward Alleyn, offered stiff competition to Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's men, and enjoyed a special affinity with London's bourgeoisie.¹ Seaver shows that Dekker's fantasy allowed this audience to explore tensions in London's social and economic structure while at the same time enjoying a holiday world of release in which all conflicts could finally be resolved. Scenes in Eyre's shop reveal struggles between the master and his 'covenanted' servants or workers; shoemakers are shown to be at odds not only with members of the other guilds but also with gentlemen in the City. The patronising manner and antagonisms in the encounters of all the rival social groups are greatly intensified when a noble like the Earl of Lincoln appears on the scene. The play's happy ending resolves all these tensions in a way that, as Seaver leads us to see, would have struck its original audience as a vision as 'rare' and fantastical as Bottom's.

David Bevington surveys this same scene of conflict and idealised resolution in terms of the play's literary genre. *The Shoemaker's Holiday* is a festive comedy, a splendid illustration of the viability of C. L. Barber's term.² Dekker's play celebrates holiday in a way that addresses the concerns of Stephen Greenblatt, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michael Bristol and others about containment and misrule.³ Does this play endorse finally the co-optation by which political authority allows a degree of licence (including theatrical performance) merely in order to contain disorder and thereby return everything essentially to where things stood before, or is the play subversive in encouraging its audience to explore new possibilities about its social

¹ Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642* (Cambridge, 1970, 2nd edn, 1980).

² C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959).

³ See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, 'Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion', *Representations*, 1 (1983), 1–29; Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984); and Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (1985).

and economic status? Bevington takes a mediating and synthesising position, arguing that the play's very genre encourages debate, exchange of views and presentation of multiple perspectives. For instance, in Bevington's view, when Sir Roger Oatley and the Earl of Lincoln meet in a flurry of mutual mistrust, the dramatist need not take sides; both are canny men, driven by self-interest, each willing to make use of the other in temporary alliance but finally contemptuous of what the other represents. Social aspiration and patrician snobbery cancel each other out in the audience's sympathies. Bevington shows that this balancing of apparent opposites pervades the play. The central figure, Eyre, is ebullient and shystering, generous and mistrustful, open and devious. All is jollity with him when it is not pure calculation. Eyre's wife, Margery, is fascinated by the accoutrements of social advancement even as she disclaims all such 'vanity' with pious moralisms. The romantic subplot trumpets its endorsement of virtuous poverty even as it invites sympathy for the rejected wealthy gentleman. The play's endorsement of the monarchy seems unalloyed with satire, and yet even here the comic exaggeration and the implicit advice to an English monarch to practise geniality bring the play to an Aristophanic close of hilarity and reconciliation. Bevington's essay thus complements the historical perspective of Seaver's by demonstrating the aptness of the play's literary genre to the kind of imaginative balancing act that Dekker undertook.

With our next play and pair of essays we move from texts that depict London and Elizabethan life as polyglot, and that imagine or survey multiple social realms, to a text that focuses exclusively on a single realm: the court. Yet even here, in John Marston's *Parasitaster, or The Fawn*, probably produced in 1604, only a year after the accession of King James, 'the court' is not a monolithic phenomenon. Instead, as Linda Peck demonstrates, the play presents us with two different courts, and two courts within a single court. Stressing the connection of the play to Queen Anne and her circle, Peck argues that *The Fawn's* origin in this circle partly accounts for its presentation of noble women as at once political pawns and political powers. Still, the central focus of the play, as of the court, must be the ruler – with a clear allusion to King James, the British Solomon (as he liked to think of himself). Asserting the possibility of criticism even within the court, Peck argues that *The Fawn* at once flatters and criticises James. It presents a satirical portrait of a foolish would-be philosopher-duke who presides over the venal and trivial court of Urbino, a court that stands in ironic relation to the Urbino of Castiglione's *The Courtier*. At the same time the play presents an idealised picture of the Duke of Ferrara, who embodies much of the advice in King James's *Basilikon Doron* (1599), a book that was widely reprinted at his accession. The play is deeply aware of the power of that 'grateful poison, sleek mischief, flattery', and yet, by making the primary flatterer the good

Duke in disguise, the play suggests the possibility of the truly wise ruler seeing through flattery. Moreover, this ruler distinguishes himself not only by having full humanist awareness but also by supervising the marriage of his son in order to take care of the matter of the succession. Peck leaves open the question of whether the final effect of the play is satiric or laudatory. Perhaps the point is that it is both at once.

Frank Whigham's meditation on eroticism and flattery in *The Fawn* suggests that the play takes us very deeply into the hothouse world of the Jacobean court. He argues that this play and other disguised-ruler plays (including Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*) are closely tied to the specific historical moment of the year or so following James's accession, when widespread plague prevented James from being visible to most of the nation in the ways that the moment seemed to demand. The ruler, in this situation, became an oddly private figure, but with all his abstract and actual powers intact. Whigham sees *The Fawn* as exploring the erotics of flattery from the point of view of an object of flattery who has come to experience it and to use it as a means of humiliation. The flatterer must tap into the desires of his (or her) object. Whigham sees in the potentially lustful monarch turned into revengeful flatterer the mutual obsession with sexuality that characterised the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts. The monarchies of these years were personal monarchies indeed. Marston's play resonates with the anecdotes Whigham cites about James crawling into bed with favourites who have just consummated their marriages (as opposed to the anecdotes about Elizabeth punishing consummation). The highly eroticised atmosphere of the court emerges into visibility in Marston's play and in Whigham's analysis of it. Finally, Whigham speculates on the importance of the comic mode of *The Fawn*, suggesting, as does Peck, that the play (and perhaps the culture at this moment) manages to keep its critical tendencies in balance with its more optimistic ones.

Issues of desire, repression and disguise are relevant not only to the Jacobean court but also to a figure, on the stage and in history, who played a major role in Stuart England but who has not yet become the focus of any of our essays: the 'hot Protestant' or 'Puritan'. Patrick Collinson shows that the greatest stage-Puritan of the period, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, corresponded, in many of his activities and attitudes, including his alliance with a reforming magistrate, with actual Jacobean Puritans. Even the cry of 'Down with Dagon', with which Busy attacks the idolatrous and immoral puppet play in the Fair, was, as Collinson shows, unusual but not entirely unprecedented in the annals of actual Puritan activity in the period. Yet Collinson's is another essay in this volume that does not see the drama as merely 'reflecting' social realities. The startling claim that Collinson makes and suggestively documents is that the satiric figure of the stage-Puritan pre-

ceded rather than followed the historical existence of that figure, and indeed helped to make it a historical reality. Collinson argues that the satirical type of the Puritan – zealous, canting, hypocritical, ‘Busy’ – was, by a curious irony, created in response to a great series of anti-prelatical satirical works in the late 1580s, the ‘Marprelate Tracts’. Richard Bancroft, the future archbishop, seems to deserve the credit (if that is the term) for seeing that satire would ultimately be more the enemy than the friend of the reforming movement. In the responses to the Martin Marprelate Tracts, Collinson proposes, the figure of the stage-Puritan was born. This figure, very different from that of ‘Martin’ himself, crystallised an element within the culture – not only for defenders but even for attackers of the establishment – that until then had only been nebulous, but that immediately became a major role on the public stage and in the public life of late Elizabethan and Stuart England.

Leah Marcus’s essay helps us to think further about the culture’s and Ben Jonson’s ambivalence about both theatre and Puritanism. She suggests two readings of *Bartholomew Fair* (and, incidentally, of *The Alchemist*), readings which may be thought to correspond, as in Shakespeare’s case, with the dual existence of these plays as both court and public entertainments and with the dual existence of these plays (in Jonson’s case) as both plays and texts or ‘works’. Marcus summarises her own compelling demonstration in an earlier study that, from the courtly or ‘high culture’ point of view, the play can be seen as a brief for the supervenience, in matters of ‘sport’ and entertainment, of tolerant royal authority over Puritanical local authorities (like those that Collinson documents in *Busy*’s native town of Banbury). Yet Marcus now sees the play as demanding a more complex reading, especially in its existence on the public stage in 1614. She argues that Jonson is fascinated as well as repelled both by licence and by Puritanism. She sees Jonson as partaking of the full ambivalence of the location of the theatres in the ‘liberties’ of London, which were strongholds of religious nonconformity as well as of theatres, and she notes that some of the ‘Puritans’ were, like Jonson, economically dependent on the theatres that they professed to despise. She sees Jonson as intensely aware of both the sewage and the gardens of London (sewage reform, she points out, was one of the great achievements of the period). She speculates that the author and many of the spectators that took pleasure in the humiliation of Zeal-of-the-Land *Busy* were ambivalently exorcising a figure that they felt uncomfortably present in themselves. Marcus leaves us with a sense that both the Puritan and the theatre were highly cathected and ambivalent presences in the culture of the early Stuart world.

Our next pair of essays focuses on a play written and produced early in the reign of Charles I, Philip Massinger’s *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (published in 1633, probably written *c.* 1625). Keith Lindley sees this play as a meditation on a figure at least as troubling for the traditional culture

of the period as the figure of the Puritan: the vastly wealthy London merchant. Lindley sees the play both as an idealised picture of traditional aristocratic values and as representing a response to powerful pressures that were exerted upon those values during the period. In his view, the play dramatises an assault on aristocratic values, an assault that – and here perhaps is the fantasy element in this play – is ultimately unsuccessful. The traditional aristocratic values, as Lindley explicates them, involve a combination of noble ‘blood’ (aristocratic lineage), proper condescension, ‘honour’ (with a military component), conscience, and the possession of a settled landed estate. This last item reveals the Achilles’ heel of the system. Land can be bought. This was especially true in England in the Tudor–Stuart period. When a wealthy merchant buys land in the country, what happens to traditional status? Moreover, as Lindley points out, not only land but aristocratic titles, and even wives, were abundantly available for cash. All this social dislocation might have been less disturbing if the newcomers adopted, or at least paid lip service to, the traditional values. But what if they did not? This is the possibility that Lindley sees Massinger dramatising in *Sir Giles Overreach*. Overreach cares only for wealth and power. He has no regard for honour, reputation, conscience or condescension. He does not find wealth ‘sordid’; his great value is ‘industry’. Lindley shows how a figure like this is presented by Massinger as corrupting the whole fabric of elite social life in the countryside: the marriage market, the relations between neighbours, and the local system of justice (since at least some Justices of the Peace, in this play, are also for sale). Lindley notes the play’s happy ending, but suggests that the figure of Overreach, and what he stands for, probably haunted the viewers and readers of the play in a way belied by the happy resolution.

Martin Butler’s essay complicates our reading of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. He argues that what we see in the play is not a clash between aristocratic and other values but a dramatisation of tensions within the system of aristocratic values. He suggests that, despite Overreach’s vaunted connections to the City (which may, Butler suggests, be a kind of smokescreen), Overreach is in fact nothing like the traditional City type who is set off against the ‘gentlemen’. This difference immediately becomes clear when we compare Overreach with the equivalent figure in the play that is the ‘source’ for *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, Middleton and Rowley’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (c. 1605). Hoard is a typical usurer and miser; Overreach is not. Overreach is a spender rather than a hoarder. He maintains a first-rate cook and an extensive and expensive household. He is a conspicuous expender with nothing but scorn for the great ‘bourgeois’ virtue of thrift. He praises ‘industry’ for the spending power, not for the accumulation, that it produces. Overreach, then, shares and manifests a central – perhaps the central – value of ‘traditional’ aristocratic behaviour. He is himself a gentleman (a knight); he is not a hypocrite; and, almost