

1 Toward a material theater

Did not Will Summers break his wind for thee?
 And Shakespeare therefore write his comedy?
 All things acknowledge thy vast power divine
 (Great God of Money) whose most powerful shine
 Gives motion, life.

Chremylus to Plutus, in Thomas Randolph's *Hey for Honesty* (1627)

This study evolves out of an apparent cultural paradox: during the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean era – a time that many commentators agree constituted a signal transitional period in English history – London responded to the rapidly intensifying pressures of social change by institutionalizing its theater. Throughout the early and middle sixteenth century, players had traditionally adapted themselves and their theatrical productions to the spaces at hand – to inn-yards, city streets, and the interiors of various and varied buildings. With the opening of the Red Lion in 1567, the Theater in 1576, and the Curtain in 1577, however, there came a general, significant movement from itinerant playing to acting in fixed playing spaces. For the first time, acting companies began to enjoy the use of semipermanent, purpose-built structures for the marketing of dramatic entertainment, staging productions in playhouses that would become regular fixtures in the urban geography of Renaissance London.¹ That these acting companies ceased having to adapt themselves to changing performing conditions (or rather, ceased having to do this on such a regular basis) just when the social landscape itself became especially changeful – this constitutes what seems to be a paradox underlying the physical institutionalization of English drama during the Renaissance. As sociology has taught us, however, such a paradox may be merely apparent: with what Max Weber called ‘rational industrial organization’ going hand in hand with the historical unfolding of the market system in the West, a certain level of centralization has almost inevitably accompanied social change. Products of this process, the Renaissance playhouses can be seen less as anomalies, perhaps, than as the logical outcome of a historical pattern of social development.

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The erection of London's amphitheaters came as a gesture, by those involved in the business of playing, toward a kind of professional stability, a gesture which attracted considerable notice in London at the time. Those whose objections to playing had long taken on primarily moral overtones now responded to the theaters in terms of direct institutional rivalry, seeing in the establishment of the public playhouses false temples that could detract from churchgoing and drain money from church coffers. Throughout the late 1570s, attacks on playing and playgoing invariably stressed the patent evils of a fixed theater. Resentful of the players' new status and prosperity, William Harrison lamented shortly after 1576 that "It is an evident token of a wicked time when players wax so rich that they can build such houses."² In a 1577 polemic against "dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes," John Northbrooke, a Gloucester minister, inveighed against houses specially "builded for such exercises," those places "which are made up and builded for such plays and interludes as the *Theatre* and *Curtain*."³ And in a sermon preached at St. Paul's in November of 1577, one T. W. (Thomas White?) exhorted his audience to

Look but upon the common plays in London, and see the multitude that flocketh to them and followeth them: behold the sumptuous Theatre houses, a continual monument of London's prodigality and folly . . . and if it be not suppressed in time, it will make such a Tragedy, that London may well mourn while it is London, for it is no playing time.⁴

Like Harrison's offhand jeremiad, T. W.'s sermon grudgingly recognizes a historical truth: something different about the "time" had indeed allowed, even sponsored, the construction of semipermanent playhouses. What before had been a relatively haphazard, mobile enterprise now began to claim a permanent status. The strong undercurrent of jealousy evident in the mention of the "multitude" that flocks to the "sumptuous" playhouses and the manner in which theatrical terminology ("it will make such a Tragedy") slides into and (however intended) ironizes T. W.'s moral are of course significant, but one might also note the logical contradiction between labeling the theaters a "continual monument of London's prodigality and folly" and the ensuing, antitheatrical diagnosis. That is, while the description of the playhouses as apparently permanent fixtures in the local landscape would prove to be more accurate than he might have imagined, on the latter point – his declaration that "it is no playing time" – T. W. could not have been more wrong.

Between the erection of the first purpose-built playhouses and the closing of the theaters in 1642, in the estimate of Andrew Gurr, "well over fifty million visits were made to playhouses."⁵ This unprecedented rate of playgoing in London was matched by a heightened concern, by investors,

shareholders, and those who operated the playhouses, for the increase and assurance of profits. Indeed, “playing time” became a serious, highly competitive commercial enterprise. The construction, in the Fields and Liberties of London, of amphitheaters designed especially for theatrical productions enabled theater-owners and managers not only to improve the practical conditions of performance, but also to control admission to the playhouses and obtain from each member of the audience the required admission fee – always a potential problem in outdoor and temporary venues. In this way the specialization of function of the Renaissance playhouse evolved alongside commercial concerns even as it responded to a material transformation in the size of the city’s potential playgoing audience. The topographical “fixing” of the theater which seems, in retrospect, to belie the fluidity so characteristic of London and England during the Renaissance can be seen then as a corollary, rather than contradiction, of the pressures of historical change. Its institutionalization came as a response to this change; a practical acknowledgment of the early modern push toward centralization, it testified in suggestive ways to the far-reaching effects of social transformation.

Correspondingly, London’s playhouses can best be understood in terms of commerce, as centers for the production and consumption of an aesthetic product. During the Renaissance, the cornucopian plays which even today appear to offer almost everything to almost everyone delivered many myths in different voices to audiences which seem to have been themselves extremely heterogeneous.⁶ What Norman Rabkin calls the “common understanding” – the tendency or ability of Shakespeare’s plays to offer (even affirm) simultaneously, without contradiction, contradictory themes, messages, and ideological stances – was, I would argue, ultimately a product of early modern market forces which shaped dramatic commodities to answer the various manifestations of social desire, desire addressed by the titles, no less than the content, of plays like *As You Like It* (1599) and *What You Will* (1601).⁷ More interesting to me than whether a particular thematic reading of the plays “holds true,” then, is how, and why, it came to be the case that so many readings “hold true” – that is, how, and why, the drama became and remains the equivalent of what Brecht, speaking of radio, would later call an “acoustic department store.”⁸

Thus it is the theater’s role as part of the market – itself inextricably linked to the forces of social change – with which I am most concerned in the following study. Like the theater, the market took its first permanent roots during this period: the two “institutions,” in fact, share a similar physical chronology. Thomas Gresham began construction of the Royal Exchange in Lombard Street in London in 1566–67, just as the Red Lion

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playhouse opened for business and only a decade before the opening of the Theater and Curtain. Four-stories tall, the Royal Exchange came to be known popularly as “Gresham’s Exchange,” and was dedicated in large part to matters of national and international finance, changing foreign money and distributing new coinage. In addition, the piazzas surrounding it contained around a hundred individual shops – shops “richly furnished,” as John Stowe remarked, “with all sorts of the finest wares in the city.”⁹ A visitor from Germany in 1592 called the Exchange “a palace, where all kinds of beautiful goods are usually to be found.”¹⁰

Not quite a year after the erection of the Globe on the Bankside in 1599, in the same year that the second Blackfriars and the Fortune would open their doors to playgoing audiences, Elizabeth signed the documents legitimizing the operations of the East India Company. And in the spring of 1609, four years after the opening of the Red Bull and one year after the commencement of theatrical activity at the Whitefriars, Robert Cecil opened the New Exchange (sometimes called “Britain’s Bourse”) on the Strand frontage of Durham House in London. Like the Royal Exchange, the New Exchange was – in the words of Lawrence Stone – “a sort of stock exchange and estate agency . . . a kind of bazaar for the upper-class clientele which normally passed along the Strand between the Law Courts and the royal palace at Westminster, and the Inns of Court and the City to the east.”¹¹ And, even as the Blackfriars playhouse capitalized on the atavistic “liberty” that the former monastery had brought the parish, the New Exchange testified to the post-Reformation character of its time of construction in the very materials that made up its foundations: the first building stone for its construction came from (then standing) monastic buildings at Saint Augustine’s in Canterbury.¹²

I offer these historical instances out of a belief that, together, they come not as random or coincidental events, but rather as part of a larger historical trajectory: the dawn, in London, of institutionalized capitalism. Writing dramatic commodities for consumption in public and private theaters – and even for sale at book stalls – professional playwrights during this period frequently alluded to the energies of the developing market. Around 1605, during the flurry of economic activity characterizing the two decades bordering the monarchical transition, Thomas Heywood literalized the connections between market and theater in the Second Part of *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* by presenting a scenario purporting to show how Thomas Gresham had conceived, supervised – even laid the first masonry for – the Royal Exchange. At the fictional cornerstone ceremony Alexander Nowell – reknowned scholar and “Dean of Paul’s” – borrows the architect’s plans for the Exchange from Gresham and, looking them over, mentions its unusual design. He

notes especially a “fair / Space” which “Seems open,” and asks Gresham: “your conceit for that?”¹³ Gresham responds:

This space, that hides not heaven from us,
 Shall be so still; my reason is,
 There’s summer’s heat as well as winter’s cold;
 And I allow, and here’s my reason for’t,
 ’Tis better to be bleaked by winter’s breath,
 Than to be stifled up with summer’s heat.

Open to the elements, the Exchange is depicted as a kind of *argentaria mundi*, a “bank of the world” where the counsellors of seasonal change feelingly argue for the naturalness of commercial exchange – all performed under the open gaze of heaven. Heywood’s description of the design’s open “space” also makes the Exchange sound much like the physically exposed *theatrum mundi* of the Elizabethan amphitheatres – in one of which this description would have first been heard. The play was most likely the property of Queen Anne’s Men when initially acted in 1605, and thus probably put on at the Curtain. Constructed less than a decade after the Exchange, the Curtain, like its companion amphitheatres, resembled Gresham’s building in its “fair space,” open to both the cold of winter and “summer’s heat.”

Further similarities between the Exchange and London’s amphitheatres are suggested when Heywood’s merchant continues his architectural blazon by describing another part of the Exchange, the “Pawn” or covered walkway featuring a row of shops in the upper gallery:

Here, like a parish for good citizens
 And their fair wives to dwell in, I’ll have shops,
 Where every day they shall become themselves
 In neat attire; that when our courtiers
 Shall come in trains to trace old Gresham’s Burse,
 They shall have such a girdle of chaste eyes,
 And such a globe of beauty round about,
 Ladies shall blush to turn their vizards off,
 And courtiers swear they lied when they did scoff.

Gresham fashions his description for Nowell, connecting his Exchange with a moral and hygienic Protestantism. In its emphasis on the visual, however, his portrait of the shop gallery also brings to mind London’s theaters. Like Elizabethan actors, Gresham’s “good citizens” costume themselves in “neat attire” and prepare to see and be seen by their customers. Gresham speaks of this audience in terms of “a girdle of chaste eyes, / And . . . a globe of beauty round about.” I would like to suggest that the imagery he uses – “girdle . . . / . . . globe . . . round about” – invites

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comparison of the Exchange and London's public amphitheatres, many of which (like *the Globe*) were circular. On an amphitheater's stage an actor would have been surrounded by a girdle of eyes: Webster's "character" of an "excellent Actor" (1615) seems to say as much in suggesting: "sit in a full Theater, and you will think you see so many lines drawn from the circumference of so many ears, whiles the *Actor* is the *Center*."¹⁴ Like the citizen merchant and his wife, actors appalled themselves for the business of selling commodities. One of the commonplaces connected with shopowners in the drama, in fact, held that they calculatingly dimmed the light in their shops to set the stage for retailing shoddy goods.¹⁵ The similarity of the two endeavors, selling goods and selling performances, evolves out of the gaze, display, and the way seeing anticipates and infuses buying.¹⁶ Stephen Gosson, himself a playwright before becoming one of the theater's most vehement critics, drew strong connections between the theater and the market, in one place characterizing the Royal Exchange as an institution where transactions similar to those taking place in the theater could be found: "Mine eyes throughly behold the manner of Theaters, when I wrote plays myself, and found them to be the very markets of bawdry, where choice w[i]thout shame hath been as free as it is for your money in the Royal Exchange[e], to take a short stock, or a long, a falling band, or a French ruff."¹⁷ Gosson's emphasis on "choice w[i]thout shame" stresses the commodity function of the Renaissance theater, a place where money can buy the fantasy of one's choosing.

Thomas Middleton would follow Gosson in using the Exchange as the ultimate metaphor of conspicuous display (and envious admiration) in Allwit's description of his pregnant wife in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613):

A lady lies not in like her; there's her embossings,
 Embroid'rings, spanglings, and I know not what,
 As if she lay with all the gaudy-shops
 In Gresham's Burse about her.

(1.2.31–34)¹⁸

A few years earlier, in 1611, the relationship between business and theater had found articulation in Arthur Gorges' petition to King James for the founding of a "Public Register for General Commerce," a petition printed, significantly, at a shop in "Britain Bourse" – that is, the New Exchange. Gorges pleads for an institution which would centralize information about real estate and other financial matters so that, when forced to sell holdings for ready cash, members of the (decaying) gentry would be able to get a better price. One of the many ironies behind the proposal is that, at least in Gorges' argument, the Register would be more honest, ultimately, because of its secrecy. As Gorges suggests,

the parties themselves that do either lend or borrow, buy or sell, may use it with as great security and secrecy as they shall think fit by using other men's names than their own, other places than their own houses, and other friends or Factors for themselves if they be so disposed. So as by this free, plain and easy course all men may rest satisfied, that there is no cunning intent by means of this Office, to defraud men, nor by the practice thereof to discover men's wealths or secret estates, futher than to themselves shall seem good.¹⁹

Theatricality, to Gorges, ensures complete honesty in these financial matters: "free, plain and easy." Others regretted the conflation. Slightly over four decades later John Hall would decry the theatrical basis of business and "gaudy-shops" in a passage in *The Advancement of Learning* (1649), where he stated that "Man in business is but a Theatrical person, and in a manner but personates himself, but in his retired and hid actions, he pulls off his disguise, and acts openly."²⁰ In a less critical manner Gresham's happy laud grounds the topography of the Exchange and the business of commerce in a theatrical phenomenology. That it does so in the context of a play, a play itself transacted in a "fair space," only highlights the deeper connections between the two institutions. Indeed, in retrospect this scene of Heywood's offers an almost incestuous paean to an institution similar to the playhouse itself.

Hence were the playhouses frequently characterized, by detractors and supporters alike, as markets in miniature. The typical Puritan animus toward the theater traditionally sprang from the ostensibly profane nature of the market and display generally. Not surprisingly, those who derived all or part of their living from the theater saw things differently. In *The Gull's Horn-Book* (1609), for instance, Thomas Dekker described playhouses in more favorable, although no less commercial, terms: "The theatre is your poets' Royal Exchange, upon which their Muses – that are now turned to merchants – meeting, barter away that light commodity of words for a lighter ware than words – plaudits and the breath of the great beast which, like the threatenings of two cowards, vanish all into air."²¹ As markets, playhouses often brought a lucrative return on investments. If no one became wealthy *writing* plays, it was from the Renaissance theater, as Keynes noticed in *A Treatise on Money*, that Shakespeare did in fact become rich: his money came not from the genius of his dramatic compositions, but from the percentage he drew – through his control of shares in the acting company – of the Globe and Blackfriars' gate.

As Dekker's "commodity of words" might indicate, it was also during Shakespeare's lifetime that plays themselves were beginning to be described in terms of their exchange value. Sandra Clark characterizes this period as one in which "the demand-supply continuum between an expanding public and its reading matter was set up."²² Playwrights

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assumed the lead in articulating this continuum, the beginnings (i.e. prologues, inductions, and preface epistles) and endings (epilogues) of plays forming the traditional loci in which to stress their commodity function as well as the contractual relationship between author, players, and audience. Addressing the readers of *The Roaring Girl* (1611), Middleton declared that “the fashion of play-making I can properly compare to nothing so naturally as the alteration in apparel,” and followed this comparison with an extended parallel between the vagaries of taste in garments and drama.²³ Jonson took up the play-as-commodity conceit in the Prologue to *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) as well; there his Scrivener reads a lengthy “Articles of Agreement” between “the Spectators or Hearers, at the Hope on the Bankside, in the county of Surrey on the one party: and the Author of *Bartholomew Fair* in the said place, and county on the other part.”²⁴ The anonymous epistle prefacing *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) suggests that “were but the vain names of comedies changed for the titles of Commodities,” the drama’s censors would “flock to them,” and that when its author “is gone, and his Comedies out of sale, you will scramble for them.”

Play performances also drew this kind of description. The placelessness of the Renaissance platform stage worked to exoticize and commodify space, endowing the act of conflation itself with a sexual, fetishized value. In the words of the Prologue of *Henry V* (1599):

Can this cockpit hold
 The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
 Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
 Attest in little place a million,
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt
 On your imaginary forces work.

(11–18)

Shakespeare’s understated bawdy here – “cockpit hold . . . / . . . may we cram / Within this wooden O” – is synthesized with a portrait of actors and playhouse engaged in a theatrical enterprise of rational accounting. By the time Shakespeare came to write this prologue, Gosson had already described an actor as being “like to a Merchant’s finger, that stands sometime for a thousand, sometime for a cipher.”²⁵ With the aid of such players who act as “ciphers” to the “great accompt” of English military adventures in France, geographic space becomes a reducible commodity – a commodity which could be (and was) sold to the audience of the “wooden O” itself. Providing dramatic commodities for public consumption, the Renaissance theater functioned as an institutionalized, profitable market.

In this way playhouses like the Rose, Swan, Globe, and Hope replicated the phenomenon which Jean-Christophe Agnew, in a recent study, explores in describing 1550–1750 as a period “when the residual boundaries separating market from other forms of exchange were rapidly dissolving.”²⁶ Taking up the theater’s relationship to the market, Agnew sees the English Renaissance stage as “a laboratory of and for the new social relations of agricultural and commercial capitalism.”²⁷ Describing the “experimental, exploratory, and extraterritorial qualities” of the Renaissance theater, he suggests that these qualities “allowed the theater of that epoch to operate as a proxy form of the new and but partly fathomable relations of a nascent market society. The professional theater of the English Renaissance became in effect a ‘physiognomic metaphor’ for the mobile and polymorphous features of the market.”²⁸

Rather than a “proxy form” of the market, however (the word here implies substitution, and in doing so confers upon the stage a privileged position in relation to the “real” market), London’s playhouses were, of course, actual markets. When discussing *Bartholomew Fair*, Agnew accedes to the fact that “the theater was itself a market,” but this admission functions in the context of a study which most often sees “market” and “theater” as worlds apart – as discrete, if related, entities.²⁹

Agnew’s argument often emphasizes the marginality of the Renaissance playhouses, even speaking once of “the limbo of London’s liberties.”³⁰ In doing so, it participates in an understanding of the Renaissance theater most fully detailed by Steven Mullaney’s influential study, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*. Mullaney’s account locates what many see as subversive or destabilizing qualities in the *texts* of Renaissance drama in the cultural geography of London’s Liberties themselves:

When popular drama moved out into the Liberties to appropriate their ambivalent terrain for its own purposes, it was able to do so only because the traditions that had shaped and maintained those Liberties were on the wane. A gap had opened in the social fabric, a temporary rift in the cultural landscape that provided the stage with a place on the ideological horizon, a marginal and anamorphic perspective on the cultural dynamics of its own time.³¹

To Mullaney, the “ambivalent terrain” of London’s Liberties offered a form of critical haven for the Renaissance stage, one from which the playhouses explored the cultural milieu of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. This terrain thus gave the public playhouses a “liberty that was at once moral, ideological, and topological – a freedom to experiment with a wide range of available ideological perspectives and to realize, in dramatic form, the cultural contradictions of its age.”³²

My differences with Mullaney’s position in the following study rise out

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of a belief that the playhouses were deeply implicated in a narrative of institutional development which transcended geographical boundaries. It is my argument that to posit a relatively stable and unchanging London against which the Liberties and certain plays seem rebelliously marginal is to underestimate the fluidity of existence and exchange in the early modern city. It may also recuperate the stance of the paternalistic “authorities” (puritan and governmental alike) whose often vituperative denunciations of the popular playhouses, as the above examples might suggest, form a large part of the contemporary comment on the English Renaissance theater. Against Mullaney’s argument that “the place of the [Renaissance] stage was a marginal one, and in the world of early modern culture such marginality was in itself significant,”³³ I would posit that the theaters of Renaissance England (public and private alike) were both responsive and responsible to the desires of their playgoing publics, and were potentially no more marginal a part of London than their publics demanded. Places of business, they regularized and normalized carnival. And although the commercial in no way precludes the marginal or actively ideological, it seems undeniable that in Renaissance London the profit motive claimed a great, even predominant measure of the theaters’ practical energy.³⁴ Certainly issues and elements such as the political tension between government and players, the aristocratic patronage of acting companies, and the folk and festive aspects of performance, among many others, must be included in any full understanding of the playhouses and their relationship to the larger social world of early modern England. But the economic foundation of the playhouses, I believe, established a map of interests that must be charted alongside, if not before, a similar sketch of more explicitly ideological concerns.

It is my intention in this study to begin with the premise that the theater was, *a priori*, a market, that it was, primarily, a place of business – and, as a business, part of a complex of centralizing institutions. This need not imply that the playhouses were without a social vision. Their market function, however, necessarily mediated, even directed, that vision. 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.

Thus, what should remain in the forefront of critical analysis of Renaissance drama is the theater as place of commercial exchange. Of cardinal importance to our understanding of the *plays* of Shakespeare’s age – plays often retailed in concrete, textual form – are the fifty million *visits* paid to theaters during the period. In the social context of Tudor and Stuart