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Douglas Bruster's provocative study of English Renaissance drama explores its links with Elizabethan and Jacobean economy and society, looking at the professional status of playwrights such as Shakespeare, and the establishment of commercial theaters. Stressing that playhouses were, first and foremost, places of business, he argues that a significant proportion of the drama's practical energy went toward understanding the material conditions that maintained its existence. He sees this impetus as part of a "materialist vision" which has its origins in the climate of uncertainty engendered by a rapidly expanding London and its burgeoning market. Exploring, for example, the economic importance of the cuckold theme, the role taken by stage objects as commodities, and the commercial significance of the Troy story as staged in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Bruster returns the theater and the plays performed there to their basis in the material world. In doing so, he offers new ways of reading the drama of Renaissance England.

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*for Elizabeth D. Scala and Virginia Katherine McMath*

## Contents

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<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
<b>A note on texts</b>	xv
1 Toward a material theater	1
2 Drama and the age	12
3 “City comedy” and the materialist vision	29
4 Horns of plenty: cuckoldry and capital	47
5 The objects of farce: identity and commodity, Elizabethan to Jacobean	63
6 The farce of objects: <i>Othello</i> to <i>Bartholomew Fair</i>	81
7 “The alteration of men”: <i>Troilus and Cressida</i> , Troynovant, and trade	97
<i>Notes</i>	118
<i>References</i>	145
<i>Index</i>	160

## Preface

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This book explores how English drama responded to the market, even as it sprang from it, during the Renaissance. Faced with a relatively unfamiliar but expanding network of commercial exchange, playwrights fastened onto a variety of strategies to understand the dynamics of the market. They did so, of course, from within it, in conjunction with playhouses that were quickly becoming fixtures in the landscape of early modern London. Thus the first part of my argument in this study focuses on the institutional situation of London's playhouses – that is, on how and why theaters came to be theaters when they did – as particular historical pressures called for new means of understanding the material foundations of urban life. Then, in chapters devoted to the economic basis of the cuckold myth, the objective inscription of identity in Elizabethan and Jacobean farce, and the staging of London's market through the Troy tale in *Troilus and Cressida*, I explore how dramatists came to mythologize the elaborate realities of London's material base.

One strategy involved exploiting the traditional links between sexual and economic transaction, using erotic possession and possessiveness as symbolic doubles for the economic. Although the links between the sexual and the monetary have long been a customary site of cultural exploration, the literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras displayed a special, if anxious, fascination with the topic. As the social relationship between people and things became increasingly more complex, Elizabethan and Jacobean comedy – its farce in particular – subsumed subjectivity within the objective. Props in Renaissance farce became markers of value and status, encoding identity into worth counters which, passed from hand to hand, often acted as reservoirs of erotic potential. Consciously or unconsciously, playwrights connected identity with ownership, rendering the relationship between property and person as one of almost complete interdependence.

Seeing formal exchange rooted ever more firmly within the boundaries of the city itself, writers of the period also sought to interpret the dynamics of London's market through folk metaphors, agrestic figures



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 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

xii Preface

which would allow them to gloss the urban market and the concepts of labor and property in anatopical, or “other-placed,” terms. Rural tropes like cony-catching and cuckoldry, for instance, provided ready, if temporary, help in the construction of a vocabulary for a changing social and financial economy. The myth of the patient, knowing cuckold, or “wittol” became the dominant literary paradigm for interpreting the concept of profit in the literature of the 1590s and early 1600s. The often misogynistic scenario of marital infidelity offered an attractive double for commercial speculation: like the wittol, who usually winked complacently at his wife’s adultery in return for pecuniary or social gain, the literary merchant was frequently characterized as necessarily patient, one who willingly entrusted goods of value to others to enhance his financial status. Like the trope of cony-catching, the cuckold myth traced its roots to the rural and bestial – to animals like the cuckoo, the stag, and the bull – and formed what might be called a portal trope between country and city. Because they were rural at base, and because the countryside was seen as a center of natural struggle, both figures offered themselves as metaphors with which Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights could explain the savagery of urban competition.

For all its apparent novelty the market also called up, in the literary imagination of Renaissance England, echoes of property exchange and the acquisitive impulse as shown in stories set in London’s international rivals, past and present. Such cities as Vienna, Verona, Malta, and Cyprus took an important role, of course, in staging the urban market in (and of) Renaissance London. London also looked to ancient cities for its urban mythology. As the prophet Oseas, chorus of Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene’s *A Looking Glass for London and England* (1588), warns the theater audience about the events recently revealed in “Nineveh”: “London, take heed, these sins abound in thee” (1.3.144).<sup>1</sup> Already possessing celebrated mythological/historical links to London, the city of Troy provided an especially attractive model which dramatists could use to describe and anticipate the social implications of a commercial culture. The story of national conflict deriving from an act of theft, of course, appealed to the historical and moral imaginations of Renaissance playwrights in a time of increasing international tensions over military and mercantile supremacy. Thus, a play like Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, with its wealth of commercial imagery and topical allusions, drew on the established complexity of London’s literary ancestor in the construction of a narrative full of contemporary – and commercial – import.

These three general strategies with which dramatists attempted to come to grips with social change – linking the sexual and the economic, the

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[More information](#)

---

Preface

xiii

urban and the rural, and the ancient with the modern – allowed them to explore and define the character of the socioeconomic changes affecting London. Describing the often mystifying nature of the city's relationship with the market, playwrights sought to reconcile the worlds of the near and the far,<sup>2</sup> the subject with the object, and the past with the present. Their attempts to do so brought them face to face with the complexities of the material world.

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## A note on texts

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Where possible, I have in this study modernized the spelling and punctuation of quotations from Renaissance texts. Upon their first citation in a chapter, plays (and selected primary texts) referred to are followed by a date indicating their estimated year or years of composition; the dates for plays are supplied by Alfred Harbage, Samuel Schoenbaum, and Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim in *Annals of the English Drama, 975–1700*, third edition (London: Routledge, 1989). I use the Wagonheim updating of the *Annals* aware of the negative review by Anne Lancashire (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 225–30), which points out a number of mistakes and omissions in the new edition. Most of Lancashire's objections concern issues that do not, in most cases, affect the validity of the dates provided in Wagonheim's text. Needless to say, all dates should be understood as approximate. Unless otherwise noted, references to Shakespeare are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). References to Jonson's plays are from the modernized spelling edition of *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. G. A. Wilkes, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981–82), based on the edition of C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson. Quotations from Heywood's plays are drawn from *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, 6 vols. (London: 1874; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964). Quotations from Webster are from *The Complete Works of John Webster*, ed. F. L. Lucas, 4 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928). References to E. K. Chambers' invaluable study, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), are given simply as "Chambers" (along with volume and page number) in the notes.