

Early Modern English Capitalism and the Commonwealth Tradition  
Scott Lucas

In King Edward VI's reign (1547-1553), writings and sermons on the subject of Tudor economics focused strongly on what its authors saw as the deleterious effects of acquisitive capitalism on the common good, a strain of thought termed Commonwealth theory. Evangelical authors such as Robert Crowley and William Baldwin and reformist ministers such as Hugh Latimer and Thomas Lever called on those engaged in commerce to make brotherly love and care for others the chief focus of their commercial transactions rather than monetary profit. Economic actors were to understand their work as properly performed not on the principle of self-advancement but on that of keeping all of the realm supplied with the necessities of life. Thus, farmers were to raise and price crops not with the end of profit in mind but to ensure food for all. Merchants were to import and sell only wares of strong use value (eschewing "useless" luxury items), in order to help the commonweal. Even the highest persons of the realm were to understand their governing positions as offices granted by God to ensure the just interactions among every social group. While the Commonwealth movement lost prominence after 1553, its dreams of an equitable economic realm for England lived on in people's memories. The values of the Commonwealth movement notably inform the creation of the anonymous play *Thomas of Woodstock* (c. 1591), whose virtuous characters promote Commonwealth economic principles in opposition to the corruption King Richard II and his favorites introduce into the land.

The Digital History of *The Tempest*  
Mike Opal

This paper traces the concept of the digital in *The Tempest* and some of its adaptations. Through the digital, we can understand the play's representation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism as a question of perception and experience.

The digital converts continuous processes into discrete units of the same type. The process of digitalization also creates irrecoverable loss in the original signal. *The Tempest* and its later adaptations treat digitalization as the sign of Prospero's power. The digital is not only the sign of Prospero's power, however. In the sequence with Caliban's gaberdine, Trinculo hides himself under Caliban's cloak and re-emerges, once again, as Trinculo. The gaberdine splits the jester's identity into distinct periods and social forms. I suggest that this is an allegory for the transition to capitalism. Treating this as a moment of digitalization helps us understand the historical perception of transition itself, in particular how the play renders the vanishing moment of transformation from one form into another.

Lastly, I suggest that the relationship of the digital, modes of production, and identity is visualized by the 2021 film adaptation of *The Tempest*, called *Sycorax*. In the film, the temporalized transition between shots—the dissolve—attempts to provide a weight and being to the vanishing moment of transformation. The film's dissolves take up the play's comic depiction of transition in order to imagine the experience of living through an obscure change in perception as a result of capitalist relations, an experience shared by Shakespeare's characters and modern readers.

Boundless desire in Bacon's *Orations at Gray's Inn Revels* (1595) and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1600-1)  
Mickael Popelard

Starting from the assumption that unlimited desire is coterminous with capitalism, whose very essence lies in boundless predation and the appropriation of « the extra-economic supports it needs to function » (Fraser 2022), the present essay proposes to examine how early modern drama and philosophy were instrumental in bringing about a major shift in the dominant « structure of feeling » (Williams, 1977) with respect to desire. The point, here, is to suggest that the intertwining of thought and feeling – i.e. « thought as felt and feeling as thought », as defined by Williams – can be said to have paved the way for the rise of capitalism as a new social formation. In order to do so, I offer to consider two early modern dramatic pieces, namely Bacon's *Orations at Gray's Inn Revels* (1595) and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (c.1601) with a view to showing that such works opened up a space for the discussion and representation of boundless desire in the early modern period. While Bacon equates philosophy with a desire to conquer all of nature's works and appropriate new epistemic territories, in Shakespeare's comedy boundless desire is certainly cast in a much more negative light. Yet, precisely because the representation of immoderate desire takes such pride of place in *Twelfth Night*, the dramatic centrality of the theme tends to belie its axiological condemnation. It will therefore be argued that, in their own respective ways, the two works considered here helped to foster a new structure of feeling which, in turn, proved essential to the emergence of early modern capitalism.

Lyly's Broken Books and Autolycus's Sheets: Printed Goods as Sites of Class, Consumption, and Waste in Early Modern England  
Rachel Leann Spencer

Discussing the ties between the professional theatre and the early modern book trade tends to emphasize the two industries' cyclical bond. The early modern book trade manages to preserve artifacts from the playing companies — that is, mainly playbooks; the professional theatre regularly appears a lucrative business partner for London's stationers. This productive relationship between the two markets fractures and strains under this conductive trade-off, however, when we consider how printed goods feature in the early modern period's dramatic works. Exploring John Lyly's *Endymion* and William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, this paper seeks to identify and unpack these collisions of stage and print. In doing so, I look to arrive at a skittish, hesitant theatrical stance on print, as represented by the spell-binding dumb show in *Endymion* and the character of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*. Lyly and Shakespeare both wrestle with questions of quality and permanence — two matters that tease out anxieties that print, in the early modern period, might be just as fleeting as stage performance. Thus, this paper ultimately challenges the more positive narrative of print and theatre's indebtedness to each other — a challenge which relies on the status of cheap print, wasteful readers, and the development of a print 'middle-man' as all distasteful factors of printing for Lyly and Shakespeare.

I Have an Oath in Heaven: Shylock, Coke, and Slade's Case  
Patrick J. Long

Modern contract law begins with a minor dispute over a crop of wheat. In 1596, John Slade sued Humphry Morley for failing to pay him for the grain. The case was argued and re-argued over a number of years, from 1596 to 1602, before every judge in England, until finally achieving immortality in Sir Edward Coke's *Law Reports*. It is Coke's version, known as *Slade's Case*, that has had the most profound impact on subsequent law. Even so, the import of the case was known even while it was still pending in the courts. The arguments over the case riveted London during the years in which Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*. The influence of the case on the play is clear. Although

Shakespeare scrambles the parties and converts the grain to ducats, the issue of how the state can enforce a contract is central to the play and to the case. And even more important is the question of the value of an oath. As Coke commented, and as Shylock would agree: “I am surpriz’d that in these Days so little Consideration is made of an Oath.” With *Slade’s Case*, English law tipped in favor of creditors, allowing credit to move freely, and with less risk of loss. That freedom marked the beginning of England as a capitalist economy.

“*All that glisters is not gold*”: Shakespeare Allegorizing Material Wealth  
Vincent Mennella

Explicating the meaning of the proverb, “All that glisters is not gold,” a 1648 pamphlet attributed to David Jenkins declares, “This old Proverb *is* so full of mysterie, *that* it hath matter enough in it to make a Historie: and as it *is* mysticall, so it *is* sophisticall, metaphoricall, and alegoricall, & literally true to a tittle.” This pamphlet provides an apology for King Charles I, but the terms Jenkins invokes as well as his pamphlet’s titular proverb resonate with a pair of Shakespeare’s plays that contribute to the study of money, material wealth, and nascent capitalism, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Richard II*. Although the Memento Mori within the golden, hollow crown of mortal kingship presides over the exchange of wealth, power, and grief between two kings in *Richard II*, Shakespeare contorts representations of gold and death to comedic ends in *The Merchant of Venice*. Richard’s deposition and Shylock’s forfeiture of his bond bring to light a paradox of representation that runs throughout both plays: material wealth and monetary objects enjoy the signifying power Richard reserves for the crown. Preserving the bond between monetary metaphors and their material referents reveals *Richard II*’s creation of a new polity and *The Merchant of Venice*’s Christian allegory of mercy as a concord of justice and lucre mediated by machiavellian pragmatism.

Theatre Dybbuk’s *Merchant of Venice (Annotated)* and the Dramaturgy of Interruption  
Robin Alfriend Kello

What might *The Merchant of Venice*, with its foundation of vitriol and exclusionary social structure—so dependent on the boundary between Christian and Jew or alien and citizen—offer audiences in the present? How can Shakespeare’s late-Elizabethan preoccupations map onto such varied challenges as climate change, Capitalocene anxiety, the rollback of reproductive rights, or the prevalence of conspiracy-driven and authoritarian politics? Theatre Dybbuk’s *The Merchant of Venice (Annotated)*, or *In Sooth I Know Not Why I am So Sad* responds by working (and reworking) its Shakespearean source text, scene by scene, continually breaking the fourth wall to thread connections (and align analogous economic and political crises) from its moment to ours.

This essay draws from *Merchant (Annotated)* and conversations with playwright and director Aaron Henne to examine its dramaturgy of interruption, which perpetually unsettles pleasures of plot and suspension of disbelief to instead offer its audience a sharp uppercut of both radical performance and political exigence. Developing a grammar of movement based on the key recycled props of garbage bins and dollar bills—the trash and cash that suffuse the play and our world outside of it—Henne’s drama brings into relief the habits of thought that underpin political violence while also serving as an example of how Shakespeare’s work and legacy can be refashioned in present performance. This essay centers performance and strategies of adaptation in a broader reflection of how we might continue to make Shakespeare new.

Pilgrimage to No Where: Cultural Capital and Capitalism in the *Parnassus Plays*.  
Elizabeth Hanson

My paper addresses *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, the first play in the group of three anonymous plays performed at St. John's College, Cambridge at Christmas from 1599 to 1601. The third play in the group is famous for its references to Shakespeare, Spenser and its attention to the London commercial stage. The second play engages (hilariously and in a way that triggers my graduate students) with the dismal career prospects of university graduates, at least those who aspire to poetry. The first part is generally considered the least interesting, offering an idealistic account of the university student's career as an arduous journey to Parnassus—which will be shown to be delusional, presumably by a different author, in *The Return from Parnassus*, rather than cameos and shoutouts to the great canonical poets of the day.

I offer the beginning of the sequence to our seminar because it treats the study of letters as an investment of *time* that is supposed to pay a dividend which is not exactly financial, but the absence of which spells poverty. That is, the *Pilgrimage*, and the link back to it at the beginning of the *Return* reveal clearly that the preoccupation of the playwrights is not poetry as such but its value (or lack thereof) as cultural capital in a demystified way. In other words, the treatment of study as an investment of time for which the student pays an opportunity cost demonstrates that the authors of these plays understood themselves and their studies in ways that presage not only capitalism's treatment of time and talent as resources with value but the promise of and resistance to conversion to material value that poetry takes on in such a system. While it is tempting to take these plays from circa 1600 as evidence of emergent capitalism shaping the ways of living and thinking among well-lettered men, I argue instead that the Parnassus plays engage with an issue that is also intrinsic to the clerical estate in an enduring form. They suggest that what we now call cultural capital predates actual capitalism, arises in scholarly contexts, and furnishes habits of thought and feeling to the mix of cultural and exploitative practices that will start to coalesce as capitalism in the seventeenth century.

The Curation and Accumulation of Kinky Props  
Erika Lyn Carbonara

Undergirding this essay is the contemporary kink community's preoccupation with material accumulation and the relationship between material items and sex practices, the origins of which I argue come to fruition during the early modern period. In contemporary kink culture, "props"—as I refer to them as throughout this essay—frequently communicate one's sexual identity or sexual interests to others in the community. But material items have become much more than that in contemporary kinky culture, as outlined by scholars such as Margot Weiss and Catherine Scott; they also convey a sense of authenticity and intrinsic value that is both community-building *and* exclusionary, predominantly along lines of race and class.

In this essay, I analyze two portrayals of early modern props that I argue prefigure contemporary kink's preoccupation with curation and accumulation. The first is *The School of Venus*, or *L'Escole des Filles* (1655), and its accompanying frontispiece, which depicts four women gathered around a display of dildos. I read this image as an example of mercantile exchange in which the origins of the curation of kinky props are evident.

My second example is Philip Massinger's *The Picture* (1629). This play contains numerous examples of what we would call "kink": voyeurism, submission, masked encounters, attempted cuckoldry, and male chastity. The driving force of Massinger's plot is Mathias—a Bohemian knight—who wishes to obtain more material goods. In one notable exchange, Mathias suggests that accumulation is important to marital

(and presumably sexual) success. Mathias explicitly links war and colonization to material wealth and sees his labor as a soldier as a “trade” for the material items he will gain. Reading these two texts together provides insight into the premodern relationship between material items and sexual practices and prefigures the exclusionary practices of contemporary kink.

Races and Regulations: Horses, Theatre, and the Spectacle of Leisure in Restoration England  
Anthony Brano

This paper examines how the commercialization of leisure in Restoration England—specifically through horse racing and print culture—functioned as an artifact of capitalism, linking aristocratic spectacle with middle-class consumption and financial speculation. At the heart of this analysis is Francis Barlow’s 1687 etching *The Last Horse Race Run before Charles II of Blessed Memory*, the first known print of an English horse race sold to the public. Through its visual and poetic elements, the print not only celebrates the King’s patronage of the sport but also reflects the increasing commodification of entertainment, as racing prints became collectibles for a broadening consumer base.

This entanglement of elite leisure and economic forces extended beyond print culture. Restoration plays like Edward Howard’s *The Man of Newmarket* dramatized the risks of financial speculation, presenting horse betting as both a social currency and an index of shifting economic power. Meanwhile, the legal regulation of gaming—such as the 1664 *Gaming Act*—ironically institutionalized high-stakes betting rather than suppressing it, reinforcing the elite’s ability to manipulate financial risk while expanding the culture of speculation.

By analyzing Barlow’s print alongside theatrical representations of gambling and legal responses to betting culture, this paper argues that Restoration England’s leisure economy served as an early training ground for capitalist speculation. The rise of printed memorabilia, gaming regulations, and spectator sports created a culture in which risk and reward became central to both economic and entertainment practices, shaping the speculative ethos of modern capitalism.