

*Performing Economic Thought: English Drama and Mercantile Writing 1600–1642.* Bradley Ryner.

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This layered, well-researched book takes up nine plays — all but one, *The Merchant of Venice*, from the seventeenth century — with the goal of demonstrating that the theater was not only open to economic thought, but also good at it. Ryner argues that “the representational techniques available to playwrights could facilitate a more nuanced exploration of economic systems than those available to mercantile writers” (1).

*Performing Economic Thought* features seven chapters that follow a general introduction. These treat “tables and metaphors” in Walter Mountfort’s *The Launching of the Mary* (1633); “overflowing props” in Massinger’s *The Emperor of the East* (1631); “characterising economics” in Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling* (1622); “the panoramic stage” in *Merchant of Venice* (1597) and *Cymbeline* (1609); “stage-managing interpretation” in Jonson’s *Staple of News* (1626); “generic self-reflexivity” in Brome’s *Jovial Crew* (1641); and “the performativity of economic models” in Heywood’s second part of *If You Know Not Nobody* (1605) and Massinger’s *The Picture* (1629). Most chapters begin with one of the four m’s — Thomas Mun, Thomas Milles, Gerard Malynes, and Edward Misselden — the group of seventeenth-century economic writers loosely referred to as “mercantilist” in orientation. Ryner then moves to a play or plays to suggest drama’s suppler handling of a shared theme.

A notable chapter concerns the meaning of stage properties in Massinger’s *The Emperor of the East*, a tragicomedy of the Caroline era written for the king’s company. Here Ryner takes up an apple that circulates widely in the plot and is defined differently depending on where it is and who has it. As a prop that sheds light on patronage relations, Ryner avers, “the apple helps us to understand the uncertain relationship between the material world and models meant to describe this world” (64). This is an intelligent insight into a fascinating topic — circulation of stage properties as a de facto portrait of the economic — and it is surprising that no one has thought of it before. The implications for drama and the market earlier in the period seem extremely consequential. One can see, for instance, how such a paradigm might unfold for texts from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, from the title prop of *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* through the resonant chain of *The Comedy of Errors*, Malvolio’s letter in *Twelfth Night*, and the handkerchief in *Othello*. Even the shoes in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* possess a market-centered aura. Identity in these plays’ properties seems commercially inscribed, to coin a phrase, and following the properties from location to location in their plots is to encounter a multiplicity of models for understanding how the market is conceived, defined, and reenvisioned in the playhouses of early modern London. This is a brilliant idea, once again, and its originator is to be complimented for thinking of it.

What Ryner seeks to offer readers are representations of the economic from a perspective much more open to uncertainty and nuance than is common in economic writing as traditionally defined. Overall, his book joins studies like Jonathan Gil Harris’s *Sick Economies* (2003) and Valerie Forman’s *Tragicomic Redemptions* (2008) in shifting our attention from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean and Caroline eras. The advantage to such a movement is the availability of more sophisticated economic discourse outside the playhouses. One downside involves dramatic documents that are less familiar, and sometimes less rich, than those of the 1590s and early 1600s. As Ryner’s study suggests, however, this is fertile ground for those interested in systematic thought, and texts that foster it. *Performing Economic Thought* offers a number of paradigms by which this philosophy may be recovered. Such has been the influence of book history that seven pages of images from early books and manuscripts (as well as a modern set of graphs illustrating a Janet Yellen allusion to *Macbeth*) lend useful visual confirmation to this study’s arguments. Also

complementing Ryner's discussions is an engagement with economic discourse from recent headlines.

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