

Fall 2011

Review of David J. Baker, *On Demand: Writing for the Market in Early Modern England*.

Paul Innes
University of Glasgow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Innes, Paul (2011). Review of "Review of David J. Baker, *On Demand: Writing for the Market in Early Modern England*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 9 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol9/iss2/4>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol9/iss2/4>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

**David J. Baker, *On Demand: Writing for the Market in Early Modern England*.
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 199 pp (+xviii) ISBN 9780804738569.**

Reviewed by Paul Innes, University of Glasgow

Writing for the Market and Writing about the Market

A major set of challenges faces modern writers who seek to understand the growth of writing and the market in early modern England. The first issue is the difficulty of constructing a coherent analysis at such an historical remove. A second comprises the problems posed by contemporaneous writings on an unclear subject. And a third, perhaps even more complex consideration is the growth in various forms of entertainment and literature that became part of the very phenomenon that early modern writers tried to address. The set of issues that results needs delicate unpacking if its subtleties are to be appreciated.

In the Preface to his book, David J. Baker makes it clear that he is interested in critical disagreements "about the economic motives of Shakespeare and his theatrical company" (xi). He is especially indebted to Andrew Gurr: *The Shakespearean Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) and Theodore Levin: *Theatre, Finance and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Gurr observes that on two occasions Shakespeare's company decided to maintain their commitment to the Globe when they did not have to do so. The first occurred when they purchased the Blackfriars, the second when the first Globe burned down. Baker notes that "Both decisions strike Gurr as 'quixotic' and, in terms of sheer profit and loss, unreasonable" (xi). Gurr suggests that the company's attachment to the site was instead emotional (he uses the term "nostalgic"). When discussing the same issue, Levin proposes that the reason for the attachment was an affective long-standing commitment to popular audiences. Baker writes that "This critic does not deny that the King's Men operated according to a hardheaded business logic, but he doubts that was all there was to it" (xii). Baker's book explores the gap between Gurr and Levin. The divergent positions of these two scholars set up a problematic in which Shakespeare's company becomes, for Baker, a kind of test case for the relationship between financial considerations on the one hand, and other forms of motivation on the other. It enables him to lay out an important question for interpretation: "Just how did cognition and affect work together in the financial thinking of, not only the King's Men, but other literary entrepreneurs in their time?" (xii). The answer to this question will not be easy to determine. It is bound up with two areas of contention that are still only partially recognized and understood. The first challenge for Baker is to characterize how a contemporary awareness of the market for literary works impinges on the production of those works. The second is a much broader issue, that of early modern conceptions and representations of the market itself. The result is that, for Baker, "A more inclusive 'reckoning' of early modern economic thought and feeling seems in order" (xiii). His book goes on to look at the ways in which literary production accords with the pressures exerted by wider market forces. The pre-existence of demand is the context within which literature is produced and consumed.

The first chapter lays out the baseline for Baker's characterization of the market in the period. He notes that "[. . .] domestic manufactures added a powerful stimulus to England's economy throughout the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries" (6). Despite rising prices and

inflationary pressures, the median-income household unit managed to achieve a relatively new capacity to purchase goods and services. Baker makes heavy use of Jan de Vries's theorizing of the emergence of the early modern marketplace in England in *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The economic historian locates his analysis in the domestic household as a unit of both consumption and production in and of itself, which allows him a way around the well-known problems of inflation and individual conspicuous consumption. De Vries focuses largely on the period after the literary Renaissance in England, so that Baker is faced with the problem of extrapolating some of the economic behaviors noted by de Vries backwards in time. This presents a methodological problem, but it does have the advantage of clearing the ground. It permits Baker to construct a space for the relationship between the market and the literary over which the rest of his volume will range. Baker's use of de Vries in this way makes sense, but it does leave him with a need to explain how the roots of the revolutionary practice that de Vries uncovers can be discerned in the earlier part of the period. Some of these, of course, are part of the "literary" domain that Baker investigates, including the playhouses, the publishing industry and literary entrepreneurs. The exponential growth in literary production provides evidence for a society that was struggling to represent cogently to itself the effects of the new and undefined marketplaces and goods that had become available. Indeed, Baker implicates contemporary attacks on the marketplace as part of the process: "Anti-consumption critique may have been a *selling point*. Literary works that excoriate indulgence are themselves, of course, consumables" (26). The commodity value of satirical attacks upon the marketplace acts as an indicator of literary production.

Baker's choice of texts tests the relationship between demand and literature in different ways. This is a necessarily selective process, ranging across *Pierce Pennilesse*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Entertainment at Britain's Bourse*, *Volpone* and *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Each is investigated in terms of its internal deployment of fiscal and economic metaphors and logics, as well as in terms of its relation to the wider developing socio-economic context. His chapters play out variations, as he notes in his Preface: "These readings are meant to be extrapolated to other authors and other works and to be tested against them" (xvii). Each case is intended to be an exemplar, partial to be sure, but no less interesting for its use as a limit text. The broad overall movement of the argument is from the local (*Pierce Pennilesse*) to the international (*The Anatomy of Melancholy*) with the other texts supplying more mixed examples.

The procedure Baker adopts in his later chapters therefore moves logically through his list of works. Each illuminates in turn a particular aspect of the overall field of enquiry. The technique is one of sampling, and the literary examples are related to specific aspects of the overarching economic context in different ways. Baker uses his shifting emphases to rework the relationship between literature and the market as a kind of intertextual layering. Each chapter relates its principal literary marker to an element of modern theoretical and historical work on the conditions of the marketplace in early modern England. By so doing, Baker is able to illustrate his argument cogently, as well as to construct a sensible overall structure for his book as a whole.

The first literary text that Baker analyzes in detail is Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse*. He challenges C. S. Lewis's negative observation that Nashe's work is only a piece of "commercial literature" and so not really worthy of attention. Baker sees the text's relationship with the

market, on the contrary, as something that is indeed due more discussion: "[. . .] the book's supposed defects are really its virtues, at least commercially speaking" (37). This is because

Nashe's signal achievement, I think, was to take the tropes of anti-consumption thought and to *commodify* them, to turn them into marketable prose that elicited and matched his readers' own complicated desires and hostilities. (39)

This passage epitomizes Baker's twofold project: to discuss how literature in this period represents and interrogates commercial practice and also how literature turns a profit. His pithy phrase for the operation is a "knowing duality" (46).

Baker goes on to locate a nexus for this complex relationship in the problematic category of credit. A credit system is a necessity for a long chain of supply and demand to operate with some efficiency, particularly when the buyer and seller do not know each other. Credit functions in place of the mechanisms of trust between familiar individuals that are common in less well-developed economic systems. This in turn leads Baker to *Troilus and Cressida*, a play that seems obsessed with both the marketplace and moral values, especially when the two are not aligned: "Thus *Troilus* repetitively stages the dilemmas of the early modern marketplace" (77). For Baker, the play serves to problematize how credit functions as something both more complex and more abstract than is easily apprehended by the characters. He realizes that one of the problems raised by this particular play is that it does not seem to have been successful on its own stage. He suggests that this relative lack of success can be connected with the central issue of value and commodity exchange that the play attempts to grasp. In order to recoup some of the outlay and turn a profit, Shakespeare's company turned to the market for printed matter: "The uncertain performance history of the play became, in the hands of publishers Richard Bonian and Henry Walley, a selling point" (88). It is the first instance of an important development in the early modern period, in which a theatrical work that is so closely concerned with market value is made available to the market for printed works. The entertainment industry is beginning to become internally differentiated.

By the midpoint of the volume, it is clear that Baker's technique is to move from primary contemporary texts to modern economic history, and then back again. This sets up a dynamic procedure for analysis, but it is not simply a circular movement. He goes on to read Ben Jonson's *Entertainment at Britain's Bourse* and *Volpone* in terms of their sensitivity to Britain's place in global trade. He makes a powerful argument for feelings of relative insecurity in this period (93-101), which of course predates much later and fully-fledged imperial western discourses. Baker tries to resist backdating the imperial glow, instead characterizing the early modern English experience as an "economics of uncertainty" (101), especially in relation to the financial power of much larger economies such as China. Importantly, this allows him to find a way into Jonson's knotted representations of trade, politics and power: "On this view, Jonson's scepticism about world trade--or rather, his positive conviction that this trade is often incomprehensible and unmanageable--is not as crotchety or misplaced as it can seem to us" (115). He takes the Sir Politic Would-Be subplot in *Volpone* as exemplary of a range of contemporary anxieties, supplying a refreshing re-reading of what can often seem rather strange to us, so much so that it is frequently cut in performance. Baker reminds us of the important function of Sir Pol as a multiply ironic counterpoint to the main strands of the play.

The book's final main exemplar is the Preface to Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. This is the text that most readily relates the interests of *On Demand* to the early modern book trade; Baker is alert not only to Burton's contemporary success, but also to its waning popularity. He draws particular attention to Burton's long-term interest in the book's sales and his constant addition of text to the various editions of the work. He sees this process as evidence of Burton's thematic concerns with the marketplace, and with the market value of his own writing (123). By means of a return to de Vries (and others), Baker characterizes Burton's interest in the workings of the market as a comparison between the current state of England and that of the Dutch. For Burton, England is less well developed than the United Provinces, especially in terms of the infrastructure devoted to commerce (roads and, especially, canals). The international comparison allows Baker to discuss the somewhat imprecise vagaries produced by the term "mercantilism" (133-141). He emphasizes the ways in which Burton reflects on the contemporary "roiling debate" (139) on economic matters.

In many ways, *On Demand* is much more concerned with early modern representations of the market than with the status of literary works as commodities. The book does pay attention to the latter, but achieving a balance is not an easy endeavor. *On Demand* explores different kinds of textual works in terms of their relationship with the emerging discourses of the market. Its comparisons are therefore internal to the early modern English negotiation of what the market and its seemingly aggressive expansion might mean. Inevitably, some areas seem relatively under-utilized, such as the massive growth in the market for English translations from other contemporary languages as well as the classics. This is an inevitable result of the methods Baker adopts. His primary interest is in texts that work as representative samples, rather than as providing a coherent overall narrative. In this respect he provides an important service in pointing to the ways in which we might conceive of the relationship between literary works and the marketplace.