

Preface: Writing for the Long Run

DEMAND, dè-mănd.' n.s. [*demande*, Fr.]

3 . The calling for a thing in order to purchase it.

Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755)

Recently, some critics have wondered aloud—and disagreed—about the economic motives of Shakespeare and his theatrical company. Andrew Gurr points out in *The Shakespearean Playing Companies* that when the King's Men took up the lease to the lucrative Blackfriars playhouse in 1608, they could have abandoned their theater of the moment, the Globe, or rented it out, but they didn't. And again in 1613, when the Globe burned down, they could have abandoned the site and reverted to Blackfriars, but they didn't. Instead, they chose to rebuild the more down-market Globe at great personal expense. Both decisions strike Gurr as “quixotic” and, in terms of sheer profit and loss, unreasonable. Perhaps, he speculates, they were animated by “nostalgia.” In their repertory they “clung tightly to the older traditions,” and so too in their allegiance to the more variegated audiences of the Globe. Shakespeare and his fellows lost money, though apparently the affective pay-off was enough: “They could afford the self-indulgent and extravagant luxury of buying themselves a new system based largely on nostalgia for the old times.”¹ When Shakespeare and Co. had enough money, the profit motive disappeared; money was what allowed them to buy their way out of the need to make money.

Not so fast, says Theodore Leinwand in *Theatre, Finance, and Society in Early Modern England*. Could the real estate choices of Shakespeare and Co. have been motivated not by nostalgia, but “exhilaration”? Just as today “[r]ock-and-roll bands . . . make considerable fortunes from compact disks and music videos [yet] continue to mount lavish live-performance tours held at huge outdoor venues . . . [m]ight there have been players who were, as we now say, committed to playing for popular audiences?”

Or might “emulation” or “condescension” or “[f]ear” or “caution” in various ways also be part of the affective mix?² 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. “The early modern English economy, considerably less theorized than our own,” says Leinwand, “must certainly have operated according to a blend of cognition and affect.”³

Between them, Gurr and Leinwand raise questions well worth pursuing: 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? What sort of economic cognition can we attribute to Shakespeare and to others who wrote (and performed and published) “for the market,” as my subtitle has it? Can we think of them as simply “actors . . . rationally pursuing their goals” according to a calculus of profit and loss (the model of “utility maximization” offered us by neo-classical economics)?⁴ Or should we consider other motives, and, if so, what might those motives be—not just fear, emulation, desire and so on, but fear, emulation, and desire as early modern people would have understood and experienced them? These are the questions that give some point to Gurr and Leinwand’s light sparring over the affective payday that Shakespeare and his partners seem to have expected. Their questions raise, but do not really address, some of the most far-reaching problems an economic criticism of early modern English literature must confront.⁵

As it happens, Gurr and Leinwand have recently been said to exemplify “two avenues or paths” now diverging within an “emergent mode” of such criticism. In “On a Certain Tendency in Economic Criticism of Shakespeare,” Douglas Bruster borrows terms from Shakespeare to provide a rough typology. Gurr, he says, with his concern over the “frugal husbandry” of the King’s Men and his chagrin as they appear to abandon the profit motive, exemplifies “the reckoned.” This sort of reader values the “calculated and specific.” Leinwand, by contrast, is preoccupied with the company’s “affective econom[y]” and with “other emotional factors.” He typifies “the rash,” critics who emphasize the “intuited and general.” “With apologies for simplification, I represent them here as antinomies.”⁶

Ironically, though, one effect of setting Gurr beside Leinwand in this way is to make us aware of just how similar the two in fact are. Both, really, number among “the rash.” Neither has much to say about the economic thought at work as the King’s Men choose their venues. For both, the choices of Shakespeare and his partners are mostly emotional. Did

these decisions proceed from nostalgia? Or was it exhilaration? Or some mix of those and then. . . . We're left with a vague sense that Shakespeare and Co. were businessmen (except when, for some reason, they chose not to be), little sense of how they might have combined commercial acumen with other imperatives, and almost no sense of the commercial reasoning that informed their choices. Nor is Bruster himself much help. He reminds us that an economy, traditionally defined, is a "system involving money, credit, debt, profit, and loss."⁷ But exactly what this "system" would be in the early modern period, and how Shakespeare and his partners would have been invested in it, cognitively, is not clear.

If these two early modern critics really do between them represent the major tendencies in today's economic criticism, then that criticism has reached something of an impasse. It's not that this criticism has not produced acute readings of the "amalgam of cognition and affect" elicited by England's changing market economy; it has. Leinwand's own study is a particularly subtle inquiry along these lines. But his leading concern is with "what *the market* felt like," not what it meant to "think" that market.⁸ Cognition has a place in his amalgam, but it is gestured toward, not described. A more inclusive "reckoning" of early modern economic thought and feeling seems in order.

Let's consider what we know of Shakespeare's dealings with the theatrical marketplace. What sort of cognition seems to have been at work? Sometimes, certainly, he wrote for the "short run," and he thought mostly of the moment. His audiences could be fickle, and they often left him guessing. They liked his *Hamlet* (1603), for instance, and he had good reason to think that they would, since it had appeared before in another avatar. When it was put on, in whatever version, they went. But he also seems to have thought that they would like a roughly contemporaneous play, his *Troilus and Cressida* (1609), and in the event they did not. Either it was never put on the stage or it was and it bombed. For this commercial artist, the "short run" mattered crucially, and for some of his plays meager returns at the "box office" meant their run would be short indeed. Shakespeare often wrote to meet demand of this capricious sort—or so he must have felt (and, certainly, his friend Ben Jonson complained often enough of his vacillating and injudicious audiences).

But Shakespeare, it's clear, kept the "long run" in mind too, as well as another sort of demand.⁹ Then as now, the most compelling and consequential way the public made its approval or disapproval known to drama-

tists like him was through the sales curve. Will people pay for an afternoon at *Romeo and Juliet* (1597)?, he had to wonder, but also, will they pay for the next play, and then the one after that, and so on? And he was not alone in asking these questions. He was one in an acting company that was also a joint stock company. He and his partners had a longstanding relationship with James Burbage and his sons, who bankrolled the Chamberlain's and then the King's Men.¹⁰ Together, they leased and bought real estate, built, and then (as Gurr and Leinwand note) rebuilt the Globe theater. Together, they acquired another venue, Blackfriars. Together, they developed a repertoire of company owned play scripts, distributed earnings through profit sharing arrangements, and so on. Their enterprise bore all the marks of long term planning and investment, and their marketing was based, clearly, on a shrewd sense of consumer trends.

In keeping their accounts, therefore, acting companies like Shakespeare's did not just tally up the receipts from their most recent smashes and flops. They extrapolated from past annual returns to future profits. In effect, they anticipated the financial viability of the theater business as a whole in early modern London. To say that Shakespeare wrote for the "long run" is to say that he depended on *continuing* demand, that he could plausibly believe that he would be in business when present demand had been met and tastes had shifted. Many of the decisions that Gurr wants to attribute to nostalgia or Leinwand to exhilaration look different if we take a longer view, as Shakespeare did, and so too does Shakespeare's economic cognition. He seems to have had demand, sustained demand, on his mind as he wrote and produced his plays, and he appears to have considered it robust.

In *On Demand*, I argue that, if we are going to make sense of the economic choices of Shakespeare and his fellows, we need to attend to, precisely, demand. That is, we need to make sense of those others in early modern England who were also making choices, including choices to buy this or that book, attend this or that play. Without buying, there can be no selling. The question of exactly what economic thinking we can presume of Shakespeare and his business partners matters because it does not end with them. Whatever that thinking may have been, it has implications for more than the King's Men and their real estate ventures. This dynamic engagement between early modern writers and audiences, where choice met choice within the available understanding of the market, was what meant to write "for" that market in early modern England.

To make my case, I begin by considering the effects of demand in early

modern England. In the first chapter, I review mounting evidence that suggests that the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a steady rise in demand and consumption in the kingdom. In these years, English people began to buy many more goods—more clothes, food, house ware, and more books—than they once had, and more services as well, including theatrical performances. The benefits of prosperity were distributed unevenly; they were also widespread. The English of this day were active consumers, delighting in novelty and energetically seeking out new opportunities to spend. They bought more, and others found ways to sell them more, bringing about decided changes in English farming, manufactures, trade, transport, merchandizing—and, I argue, in the production and consumption of literature.

Next in that chapter, I consider the causes of this demand. For this, I turn to economic historian Jan de Vries for a cogent explanation. He is not the only one to offer this explanation; it reflects trends in economic history of some twenty years, and such analyses have been adopted and applied outside of early modern England, as we will see. De Vries, though, offers the most innovative and methodologically detailed version of such claims. Around this period, he says, many English households reorganized themselves and so increased their productivity. More members worked, and they worked harder and differently, fashioning goods in the home for sale or taking up jobs for pay outside it. Where once they might have made what they needed for themselves, now they were more likely to make what they wanted to sell and to rely on the market to supply them with goods and services in turn. The money they made in “proto-industry” and on the job they spent on what other households had to offer. Often these households were themselves being reorganized along similar lines. As productivity rose, so too did consumption, each driving the other along. De Vries says this “industrious revolution” primed the pump for the “industrial revolution” some centuries later.¹¹

Nor was this “revolution” unknown to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, I argue. They grasped its effects, if not always its causes. Certainly, this is an understanding that we can attribute to the literary entrepreneurs of the time. Their incomes, and often their livelihoods, depended on their knack for discerning, reacting to, and manipulating the fluctuating tastes of their audiences. English society had been “commercialized” for some time, possibly since the twelfth century, and the profit motive, I take it, was more or less a constant, and with them late and soon.¹² As consump-

tion burgeoned around them, providing their commercial enterprise with its impetus and its *raison d'être*, Shakespeare and others in his line of work gave close consideration to the springs and effects of the economic decisions of their fellow Englishmen. These people made up the audience to which they had to appeal. They and their propensities to buy this and not that were what literary marketers made it their business to know.

If demand always presented itself unambiguously and ready to be exploited, though, commercial marketing would not be the tricky affair that it often is. I argue that the awareness that the early modern English had of their own demand was far from simple, not for writers, and not for audiences either. This was because demand itself presented them with an intricate and often inconsistent mix of imperatives (some explicit, some tacit, some, as we will see, hardly capable of articulation) and information (some of it self-evident, some opaque, some, as we will see, hardly recognizable as such). Growing demand in England outstripped the discourse—as we now say—that the English had to depict and explain it. The impetus behind consumption was not lacking, but the language in which to represent it coherently and consistently was.

Of course, this did not stop the early modern English (among them, writers such as Shakespeare) from talking about demand and consumption. They did, almost compulsively. But, in order to do so, they had to take up whatever terms they had and to reconfigure them. As Laura Caroline Stevenson puts it in her fine study of “commercial self-consciousness” in the period, “social fact changes more quickly than vocabulary and ideology, and so men frequently find themselves describing observations of the present in the rhetoric of the past.” This does not mean that such men are merely repeating what they have said before, that their rhetoric is not meant to “describe what they observe.” It means, rather, that they are “strain[ing] their rhetorical concepts to the snapping point in an attempt” to make sense of what is only partially visible to them. “The tension between what men really see and what they say they think they see expresses itself in paradox.”¹³

On Demand is given over to such paradoxes and to the rhetorical means that certain early modern authors found to articulate them. In the chapters following the first, I find the paradoxes of demand in Thomas Nashe’s *Pierce Penilesse* (1592), William Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (1609), Ben Jonson’s *Entertainment at Britain’s Burse* (1609), as well as his *Volpone* (1606), and the preface to Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). My readings are presented as case studies in the cognitive, but also the af-

fective and rhetorical effects of demand-led economic change in England. I concentrate on works from around the turn of the seventeenth century, mostly because, as we will note, this is a period when the pressures of demand were being felt, but when the obvious indices of it were not yet in place. But my analysis speaks to developments that stretched over the “long sixteenth century,” in the well known phrase, roughly the latter part of the fifteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth. The “industrious revolution” that Shakespeare and his contemporaries experienced had been many years in the making, and its full effects would not emerge for centuries to come.

It goes without saying that my readings do not exhaust what early modern English writers had to say on the topic; far from it. These readings are meant to be extrapolated to other authors and other works and to be tested against them. Similarly, in my readings, I test the economic history that I use against the literary works I’ve chosen. For instance, de Vries’ explanation for rising consumption in early modern England, including literary consumption, is helpful. But it does not do all that much to explain the consumables in question, literary works themselves. These require a more nuanced reading of the problems that consumption entailed for authors and audiences in the period. In the first chapter, therefore, I read and then re-read de Vries’ claims, the second time reconfiguring them to yield a better account of what the early modern English thought (and felt) about their economic lives. The arguments of de Vries and other economic historians are both enabling and ancillary in this book. They fill in much that has been left blank in recent economic criticism of the early modern period, and in doing so they give us a more concrete sense of the inclinations of working artists such as the King’s Men, and their customers too.

And it is these consumers, finally, who are the subject of this book, since it is their demand that I read into works of Nashe, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Burton. My purpose in *On Demand* is two-fold. I want to explain how demand operated on and in the thinking, as well as the feeling, of the early modern English over the long sixteenth century, and, at the turn of the twenty-first, to make “demand” available as a literary critical term of art. If you take your definition from the lexicon of political economy, you will learn that “demand” is the desire for a good (or a service), along with the ability and inclination to pay for it (or so-called “effective demand”). More technical understandings of “demand” emphasize the cost/benefit analyses that go into such purchases as customers “maximize their utility.”¹⁴ For de

Vries, it is the “behavior that changes, augments, replenishes or diminishes the goods accessible to the individual.”¹⁵ “Demand,” as I use the term here, combines all of these emphases. It is the desire for goods, and it implies the full register of emotional responses that wanting, buying, and having calls up. It is also the actual buying of goods, and, beyond that, the purposeful striving that makes buying possible. It is interested economic behavior taken in the aggregate. Early modern “demand” has the weight and consequentiality that it does, for economic and for literary historians both, because it does not consist merely of individual choices made according to whim, of affect unlinked to cognition. The desires of English consumers, and their willingness to act on those desires, yielded a market force to be reckoned with. Demand was their collective “calling for things,” to paraphrase Samuel Johnson. It answered the early modern vendor’s cry, “what do you lack?,” and turned that lack into having.