



The Modern Stage of Capitalism: The Drama of Markets and Money (1870-1930)

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The Modern Stage of Capitalism: The Drama of Markets and Money (1870-1930)

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Comparative Literature

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Abstract

The Modern Stage of Capitalism tells the story of why and how modern drama captured the spirit of capitalism in all its contradictions. Although the bourgeois novel has long been considered the definitive genre of capital, at the end of the nineteenth century, Western theatre was in the perfect position to explore the ambiguous impact of capitalist culture. It was at the zenith of the economic hierarchy of the arts and at the nadir of the aesthetic hierarchy. Even with the serious drama of the day, modern theatre could not entirely purge itself of the tarnish of commerce. This enmeshment in commerce and the market economy generated a wealth of formal innovations and a wide range of responses to capitalist culture that went beyond moral outrage. Dramatists from Ibsen and Shaw to Brecht and O'Neill were neither apologists for, nor mere detractors of capitalism; they explored the bonds and clashes between religious values and secular economic virtues, drawing parallels between the institution of theatre and the brave new world of capitalist modernity. Besides dramatic texts, this interdisciplinary project relies on archival research of theatre productions, socio-economic theories that the playwrights responded to (Smith, Marx, Weber, Morris, Taylor), and critical theory that examines the relationship between economics and literary studies (Bourdieu, Jameson, Moretti). The present study takes modern theatre as a case study to show that products of culture engage with capitalism in a network of both promotional and antagonistic relations. The modern stage became a testing ground for the ideas of capitalist culture including the work ethic, competition, and the accumulation of capital.

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For my mother

Introduction

“Money is a kind of poetry.”
—Wallace Stevens.

“There is the capitalist art and the capitalist style of life.”
—Joseph A. Schumpeter.

Theatre and commerce. The coupling of these words might strike us as obvious and embarrassing, conjuring up images of second-rate Victorian melodramas and lavish Broadway spectacles. As American playwright Tina Howe puts it, “of all the arts, the theatre is the most conservative, because you have that ghastly problem of having to sell all the tickets every night.”¹ As a result, when discussing modern theatre as art, critics tend to remember the noble ventures of the Independent Theatre movement in Europe and the Little Theatre movement in the United States that sprang up at the end of the nineteenth century to defy the boorish commercialism of conventional theatre. To talk about money and the material conditions of theatre making is often deemed so self-evident as to be uninteresting. This dismissive attitude is evident even in the economic histories of the theatre, such as *The Business of the Theatre* (1932) that covers American theatre from 1750 to 1932 and that the American Actors’ Equity Association commissioned Alfred L. Bernheim and the Staff of the Labor Bureau. Bernheim notes that “in modern times theatre has always been commercial” and lists Shakespeare as a prominent example of an artist who catered to his audience and to the tastes of his day.² Yet instead of contemplating the relationship between modern theatre and the economic world in which it developed, Bernheim simply suggests that as long as profit-making doesn’t override aesthetic considerations, theatre is in the clear as far as artistic integrity goes. Yet artistic

¹ Qtd. in Richard Toscan, *Playwriting Seminars 2.0: A Handbook on the Art and Craft of Dramatic Writing with an Introduction to Screenwriting* (Franz Press, 2012), 18.

² Alfred L. Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre 1750-1932*, assisted by Sara Harding and the Staff of the Labor Bureau, Inc. (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1932), 3.

integrity and the question of respectability were at the center of modern drama.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Western theatre was in the perfect position to explore the ambiguous impact of capitalist culture: it was at the zenith of the economic hierarchy of the arts and at the nadir of the aesthetic hierarchy. But even with the serious drama of the day, theatre could not entirely purge itself of the tarnish of commerce. It is easy to forget how uneasy the fathers of modern drama such as Ibsen, Chekhov, and O'Neill initially felt toward their attraction to an art deemed low by their contemporaries. "A play is a pension fund," writes Anton Chekhov in a letter to his brother where he advises the latter to start scribbling for the stage because it doesn't require much talent.³ Chekhov, who first begins his playwriting career by penning popular vaudevilles, would continue to have a love-hate relationship with the theatre. His ambivalent attitude eventually produced a masterpiece of modern drama—*Чайка* (1896; *The Seagull*)—a dramatic work that lays bare the inherent commercial values behind the façade of the art world and the social construction of "talent." This sense of complicity and enmeshment in the market economy is precisely what elicited a rich variety of responses to capitalist culture in modern drama that went beyond apology or moral outrage.

The History of the Drama of Capital

To be sure, the history of the theatre, once divorced from ritual, has long been bound up with money and capital. In early modern Europe, professional theatre companies were already proto-capitalist joint stock companies that depended on large-scale credit made available by the 1571 usury statute. No wonder so many of Shakespeare's plays, such as *The Merchant of Venice*

³ Chekhov to Al. P. Chekhov, 21 February 1899, in A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem: Pis'ma* [*Complete Works and Letters: Letters*], vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), 164. Translations from original are my own.

(1605) and *The Life of Timon of Athens* (1607), dramatize the vicissitudes of credit and debt.⁴

The last two decades in particular have witnessed significant scholarly attention paid to economic issues in Shakespeare and early modern English drama, a time when drama faced little competition from prose fiction.⁵ During the Restoration and early eighteenth century, morality plays about the perils of avarice and financial speculation were popular with the audiences.

Thomas Shadwell's *The Volunteers, or the Stockjobbers* (1693) predicted the crash of the South Sea Bubble that came in 1720. Caryl Churchill includes a scene from Shadwell's play in Act One of her *Serious Money* (1987), which takes place at the London Stock Exchange. George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) was an early dramatic attempt at a bourgeois tragedy. In the early nineteenth century, Goethe already satirized paper money in the second part of his closet drama *Faust*, where Mephistopheles saves the Emperor's finances by issuing paper money instead of gold. Indeed, the ghost of Goethe's Mephistopheles permeates Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *The Master Builder*. The Victorian stage too brimmed with plays about money and capital, as evinced by the success of such comedies as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Money* (1840), Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance* (1841), and George Henry Lewes's *The Game of Speculation* (1851) among many others.⁶ Kristen Guest identifies, however, a certain shift already present in late-Victorian melodramas from earlier works in their representation of the individual versus the market. If early Victorian plays such as Bulwer-Lytton's *Money*

⁴ See David Hawks, "Raising Mephistopheles: Performative Representation and Alienated Labor in *The Tempest*," *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Michelle M. Dowd and Natasha Korda (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 177-93.

⁵ For general overview and list of works published on the subject, see Douglas Bruster, "On a Certain Tendency in Economic Criticism of Shakespeare," *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism*, ed. Linda Woodbridge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 67-79.

⁶ Kristen Guest, "The Subject of Money: Late-Victorian Melodrama's Crisis of Masculinity," *Victorian Studies* 49.7 (Summer 2007): 635-57; Jane Moody, "The Drama of Capital: Risk, Belief, and Liability on the Victorian stage," *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91-109.

acknowledged the problem of social identity defined by money “only to subordinate it to the hero’s merit and respectability,” after the 1870s, affirmative representations of masculinity are replaced by “anxious depictions of male victims’ struggles within an impersonal and abstract economy.”⁷ Guest relates these changes to a more general turn in economic discourse away from affirmations of individual, moral control over the marketplace.

From the 1870s, a few key historical developments took place that made modern theatre a privileged site for capturing the spirit of capitalism in all its contradictions. While the first manifestations of capitalism can be discerned as early as the Middle Ages⁸ and while money features prominently in Medieval and Renaissance drama, the late nineteenth century witnessed the institutionalization of modern social sciences, including economics, through the work of Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, that heightened the awareness of capitalism as a system of production.⁹ Capitalism can be broadly defined as an economic and political system in which private capital or wealth is used in the production or distribution of goods and prices are determined chiefly in a free market.¹⁰ Other elements central to capitalism include competitive markets, wage labor, and capital accumulation.¹¹ The term *capitalism* in its modern sense is attributed to Louis Blanc in 1850, to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1861,¹² and to Karl Marx in

⁷ Guest, 636.

⁸ Henri Seé, *Modern Capitalism, Its Origins and Evolution*, trans. Homer B. Vanderblue and Georges F. Doriot (London: N. Douglas, 1928), 16.

⁹ While Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) is considered a precursor to modern economics, during his own time, Smith was known as a social philosopher, not an economist in its current use of the word.

¹⁰ “Capitalism,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. 2010. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 20 August 2012. <<http://www.oed.com.ezp.prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/27454?rskey=N9Osvo&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>>.

¹¹ Robert L. Heilbroner, “Capitalism,” *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd ed., ed. Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹² Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce: Civilization and Capitalism 15–18 Century* (Berkeley: University of

1867.¹³ It is important to note, however, that as pivotal as Marx's *Das Kapital* was, the term "capitalism" appears only twice in the first volume. Instead, Marx prefers to use "capitalist mode of production." Characters on stage consciously begin to use words like "capital," "capitalist," and "capitalism." They deliberately reference Marx. "Wo steht das bei Marx?" ["Where is this in Marx?"] repeatedly asks Lyrical Poet Y in Ernst Toller's satirical *Hoppla, wir leben!* (1925; *Hoppla, We're Alive!*). And the playwrights themselves were interested in using the stage to engage with the social theories of their time. Gerhart Hauptmann read Darwin, Saint-Simon, and Marx.¹⁴ Ernst Toller studied Marx's *Das Kapital*, Engels' *Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* [*Condition of the Working Class in England*], and Max Beer's *Geschichte des Sozialismus in England* [*History of Socialism in England*].¹⁵ Before becoming a writer, the Czech playwright Karel Čapek studied philosophy and wrote his dissertation on Gustav Fechner and William James.¹⁶ O'Neill educated himself about the conditions of the American working class.¹⁷ Bernard Shaw was a proud member of the Fabian socialist society and the co-founder of the London School of Economics.

In the wake of rapid industrialization, important legal developments were changing the nineteenth-century economic marketplace, such as the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 that

California Press, 1992), 237.

¹³ Marx referred to the *capitalistic system* (*kapitalistisches System*) and to the capitalist mode of production (*kapitalistische Produktionsform*) in *Das Kapital* (1867). The word "capitalism" meaning an economic system appears in Volume I of *Das Kapital* and in *Theories of Surplus Value*. Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

¹⁴ Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Dramatic Works of Gerhart Hauptmann*, ed. and intro Ludwig Lewisohn (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912).

¹⁵ Cecil Davies, *The Plays of Ernst Toller: A Revaluation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 162.

¹⁶ For more on Čapek's biography, see William E. Harkins, *Karel Čapek* (New York: Columbia University, 1962).

¹⁷ Patrick Chura, "'Vital Contact': O'Neill and the Working Class," *Eugene O'Neill and his Contemporaries: Bohemians, Radicals, Progressives, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Eileen J. Hermann and Robert M. Dowling (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2011), 175-99.

provided for limited liability for all joint-stock companies and stirred debate about individual moral responsibility. The new economic forces invading people's lives as well as the unpredictable boom and bust cycles of capitalist modernity provoked anxiety and questions about ethics. The novel of capital was one site where such questions were raised and explored.¹⁸

The novel of capital

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, we find a cluster of novels focusing on speculative bubbles, financial panics, and money matters that critics have called “the novel of the stock exchange.”¹⁹ To name but a few examples, among such novels are Émile Zola's *La curée* (1871) and *L'Argent* (1891), Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) and *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1903), Upton Sinclair's *The Moneychangers* (1908), Joseph Conrad's *Chance* (1913), and Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914).²⁰ These novels grapple with the capitalist culture of financialization and anxieties over the new ways of manipulating public and private capital. What these works share in common is their reliance on melodramatic conventions to dramatize moral accountability in an increasingly reified economy and to place the blame of crises and panics on identifiable villains of finance.

¹⁸ For examples on the study of the novel of capital, see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); David Kaufmann, *The Business of Common Life: Novels and Classical Economics Between Revolution and Reform* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995); James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Halina Suwala, *Autour de Zola et du naturalisme* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993). See also David Zimmerman, *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁰ Earlier examples also include Balzac's *César Birroteau* (1837) and Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* (1857).

Melodrama, defined by Peter Brooks as “express[ing] the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue,” reigned supreme on the pages of the novel and on theatre stages until Henrik Ibsen would take a more sober look at capitalist modernity.²¹ As a young man Ibsen served as an apothecary’s apprentice in Grimstad, a small coastal town with a unique economic structure. Regardless of class, all males of Grimstad “were small investors in the shipping trade” and thus shared the risks of the shipping business that was the lifeblood of their town.²² Ibsen would show not only how every member of society is complicit in the socio-economic structure of which he or she is part, but also how the community as a whole performs the cover-up of capitalism’s irresolvable contradictions, including the separation of economics from moral conduct.

The naturalist novel often portrays the highs and lows of economic cycles as natural and thus inevitable occurrences. For example, in William Dean Howells’ *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the decline in the popularity of Lapham’s paint and his eventual bankruptcy are punctuated by the start of a dull summer of drought. The business cycle is equated with the seasonal changes of nature. In Norris’s *The Pit*, the global wheat market is described as an uncontrollable “ocean” with “gigantic pulses of [...] ebb and flow.”²³ In Zola’s *Money*, the desire to make money is compared to the sexual instinct.²⁴ In short, although these novels might criticize avarice and the impulse to play the market, they in part re-inscribe capitalist ideology by *naturalizing* its effects and crises. The incessant accumulation of capital figures as unquestionable necessity—the sword

²¹ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 20.

²² Robert Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography* (London: Richard Cohen Books, 1996), 217.

²³ Frank Norris, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago*, 1903 (Seven Treasures Publications, 2008), 138.

²⁴ See Chapter One, p. 67.

of Damocles that hangs above the heads of the seemingly powerful financiers. Theatre scholars, like Jane Moody, have long bemoaned the fact that “the novel’s position as the definitive genre of capital remains undisputed.”²⁵ In the last chapter of his recent book, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (2013), Franco Moretti takes on the drama of Ibsen and makes the following observation in passing:

The realistic bourgeois is ousted by the creative destroyer; analytic prose, by world-transforming metaphors. Drama captures better than the novel this new phase, where the temporal axis shifts from the sober recording of the past—the double-entry book-keeping practiced in *Robinson* and celebrated in *Meister*—to the bold shaping of the future which is typical of dramatic dialogue. In *Faust*, in the *Ring*, in late Ibsen, characters ‘speculate’, looking far into the time to come. Details are dwarfed by the imagination; the real, by the possible. It’s the poetry of capitalist development.²⁶

Moretti’s study is largely focused on the nineteenth-century novel and its prose—the drama of capital is outside the scope of his book. The aim of the present study is to pick up that thread and to ask: how *is* drama the poetry of capitalist development? In what ways did modern drama critique and/or promote capitalism? What specifically about the dramatic form allowed it to stage the crises of capitalism in a way different from the novel? Why should we look to modern drama to understand our past and current rapports with capitalist culture?

The Wings of the Market and of the Theatre

There a few reasons why modern drama managed to capture the spirit of capitalism in all its contradictions instead of merely expressing outrage or leaving the audience with feel-good resolutions. Throughout its history, the stock exchange has often been compared to the theatre.²⁷

²⁵ Moody, 92.

²⁶ Franco Moretti’s book, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (New York: Verso, 2013), 185.

²⁷ Edward Chancellor, *Devil Take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation* (London: Macmillan, 1999), x.

Part of the association of speculation with theatricality has to do with the architecture of stock exchanges that were often built as theatres with galleries from which onlookers could observe the daily spectacle of trading (Figure 1.1.)

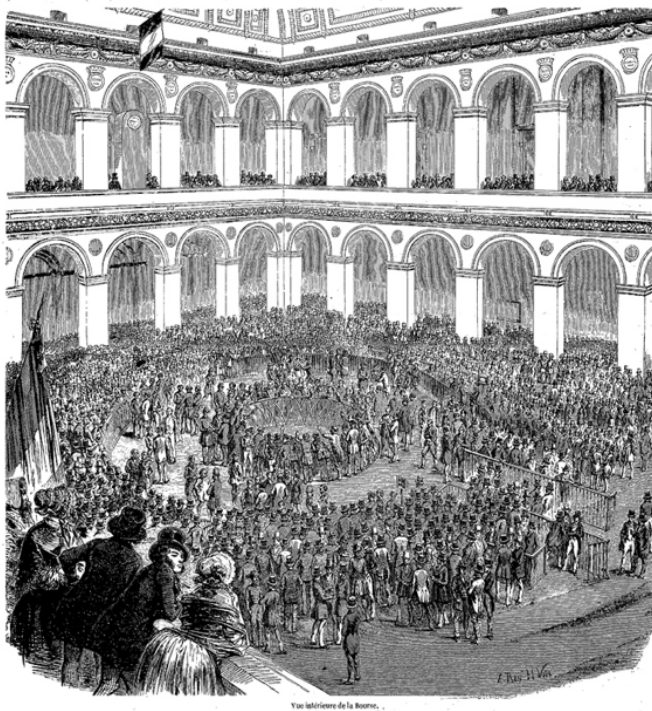


Figure 1.1.

Interior View of the Paris Bourse, 1853

Illustration from Edmond Texier, *Tableau de Paris*, vol. 2 (Paris: Paulin et Le Chevalier, 1853), 158.

The opening and closing of *The Pit* by Frank Norris, for example, establishes a parallel between the theatre and the wheat exchange by showing the same set of characters as actors and spectators in both worlds. In a similar vein, most of the action of Zola's *Money* takes place not at the Bourse, but at the *Coulisse*, which in French means “backstage” or “the wings of the theatre” (albeit used in the plural form *coulisses*). The official Paris Bourse remained a market chiefly for *rentes* (government securities) and railway securities until the 1890s. Buying and selling futures took place on the *Coulisse*, i.e. on the outside wings of the Bourse, in the building known as Palais Brongniart. There the banks and the financiers could circumvent government regulation.

In the vicinity of the Parisian Bourse was the notorious Théâtre de Variétés, so that the market and the theatre were facing each other. Before the construction of Palais Brongniart was completed to house the Bourse, the trading of stocks and bonds took place behind the Paris Opera in Théâtre des Arts until the 1820s.

The parallels between the two worlds went beyond architecture, however. In 1882, Edmond Benjamin et Henry Buguet, published a journalistic and satirical account set in the world of the theatre and the world of the Bourse—*Coulisses de Bourse et de Théâtre*, playing on the dual meaning of *coulisse* (Figure 1.2).

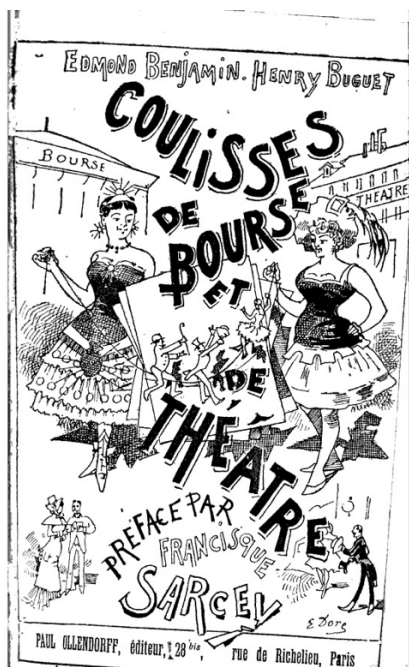


Figure 1.2

In the preface, drama critic Francisque Sarcey slyly assures the reader that the theatre and the Bourse have nothing in common, yet the anecdotes that follow illustrate how the two often share similar vocabulary and are frequented by the same crowd. For instance, *souffler aux nigauds*, which literally means “to prompt the dense ones,” was a common turn of phrase among seasoned speculators hoping to persuade the more naïve participants to buy or sell stocks to their own

advantage. Indeed, the novel of capital often associates financial speculation with the world of the theatre, so that its critique of corrupt business practices relies on what Jonas Barish has famously called “the antitheatrical prejudice.”²⁸ Like speculation, theatricality can swindle an audience. The novel and drama are at this time locked in a fierce competition for audiences, so the antagonism is not altogether surprising. Writing in the mode of financial melodrama, both novelists and dramatists joined a public discourse that often equated financial crises with scripted melodramas staged by powerful financiers. In the conspiracy theories of the time, influential capitalists were said to spur panics for their own monetary gains. According to senator Robert La Follette from Wisconsin, the panic of 1907 was a “carefully planned and skillfully staged” drama by J.P. Morgan who managed as a result to “squeeze small investors and gain control over the public’s bank and insurance deposits.”²⁹

Ibsen’s Modern Breakthrough and Capitalist Art

There is much to be gained by studying the drama of capital. In the drama of Ibsen and the British and Irish playwrights who wrote in his wake, the drive for the accumulation of capital figures neither as a natural instinct nor as a social necessity. Or rather, if capital figures as a necessity, it is a theatrical necessity and thus a construct. As we will later see in Chapters One and Two, in the problem plays of Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, Galsworthy, and Granville-Barker, capital takes the form of a *deus ex machina* that perfunctorily takes care of the plot and the unsolvable moral problem at the end. The invisible hand of the market makes its material grasp felt on stage through the sudden arrival of a wealthy capitalist who decides the faith of the rest of the characters (Mrs. Wilton in Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman*), a business deal (Shaw’s *Widowers’*

²⁸ Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

²⁹ Qtd. in Zimmerman, 155-56.

Houses), a reference to the Stock Exchange (Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*), a reference to the corporation (Shaw's *Major Barbara*), a nod to invisible shareholders (Galsworthy's *Strife*), accounting (Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*), or the appearance of financial shares (Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*). In an unsettling way that is meant to leave the audience with a bad aftertaste, economic efficiency often has the last word in these plays. Moreover, modern playwrights began to rewrite well-known myths in light of the economic expediency that was fast becoming the leading ideology of the day. In the nineteenth century, the discourse of economic efficiency is so pervasive that Charles Darwin reverts to economic metaphors in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859) to explain how the beehive produces wax—in his narrative, nature figures as an efficient manager making sure animals engage only in the most economical and productive of labors. In Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), the reincarnation of souls is given an economic justification. Angel Charles explains the cosmic management of souls in the following manner: "I guess economy's at the bottom of it though. They figure that the souls would get worn out quicker if they remembered." Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920) reimagines the Jewish golem legend as a capitalist tale where from the vantage point of efficiency the soul of a would-be sentient creature and a glitch in a robot's makeup are equivalent.

Modern Drama and the Problem of Critique

It is important to stress, however, that these portrayals of capitalist modernity were not simply undertaken for the sake of critique. At the time of Ibsen's modern breakthrough, modern theatre began to compete for audiences with the novel and later with film, and this two-front campaign provoked an array of innovative techniques, such as the performance machines of the expressionist playwrights. Ibsen, a self-professed capitalist and eager investor, would show in *An*

Enemy of the People (1882) that the financial stability of an entire community depended on it being continually performed and how each member was complicit in this performance. The socialist-inclined German and American expressionists may have criticized the dehumanizing aspects of machines and management, but they also, paradoxically, found stylistic inspiration in capitalist modernity's new sights and sounds, generating an artistic Taylorization of the stage. Modern playwrights across the political spectrum drew freely from capitalist culture for financial and aesthetic purposes. The modern stage became a testing ground for the ideas of capitalist culture including the work ethic, competition, and the accumulation of capital. One reason for the variety of responses to capitalist culture in modern drama is that the period from the 1870s to the 1930s was witness to a proliferation of debate about socio-economic systems that the triumph of capitalism and the collapse of Soviet socialism have obscured.

The relationship between modern drama and capitalist culture has been treated in theatre scholarship before in such studies as Bernard Dukore's *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht* (1980) and James Fisher's edited volume *To Have or Have Not: Essays on Commerce and Capital in Modernist Theatre* (2011). There exists an impressive range of books on Bernard Shaw and his relationship to socialism.³⁰ *The Modern Stage of Capitalism: The Drama of Markets and Money (1870-1930)* resists two dominant strands of theatre scholarship of this time period. The first approach is to view modern drama solely as a lens of critique or as an outlet for moral outrage: that is, to argue that playwrights such as Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, German and American expressionist playwrights, and Brecht employed the theatre as a vehicle to criticize capitalism along with such social issues as the woman question, bad housing conditions,

³⁰ See, for example, Harry Morrison, *The Socialism of Bernard Shaw* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1989); Travis Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and The Socialist Theatre* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994); Judith Evans, *The Politics and Plays of Bernard Shaw* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003); Charles Carpenter, *Bernard Shaw as Artist-Fabian* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel, *Shaw, Synge, Connolly, and Socialist Provocation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).

environmental disasters, etc. The other approach, which is not necessarily in opposition to the first, is to claim to historicize modern drama by branding it a bourgeois product. This argument involves conceding that Ibsen might excoriate bourgeois marriage in *A Doll's House* and that Hauptmann might expose labor exploitation in *The Weavers*, but then the critic immediately add the qualifying statement that both are fundamentally bourgeois playwrights, seeing the world from a bourgeois perspective. As a result, one ends up either with dusty, bourgeois playwrights or radical predecessors to Brecht.

Both approaches have overlooked the diversity of aesthetic and economic responses to which capitalist culture gave rise in modern drama, and the fact that playwrights not only criticized capitalist culture but also explored the dynamic relationship between capitalism and critique. What I mean by capitalist culture is the set of social practices, norms, habits, and values that are attributed to the capitalist economic system such as the work ethic, accumulation of capital, competition, division of labor, wage labor, and heightened professionalization.³¹ Several economists and sociologists have noted capitalism's unique relationship to critique. To put it in the simplest way possible, criticizing any aspect of capitalism is an inherently difficult task because capitalism has a way of subsuming critique, repackaging it for entertainment and commercial purposes, and rendering it null. In the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello discuss the "waning of critique at a time when capitalism was undergoing significant restructuring whose social impact could not go unnoticed." The overarching question in their study of management discourse after 1968 is: how is it that social critique becomes powerless, beyond expressing moral indignation, at a time when

³¹ See Richard Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* (Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Beacon, 2008).

social conditions are deteriorating?³² Boltanski and Chiapello define “the spirit of capitalism” in broader terms than Max Weber (for whom “the spirit of capitalism” evolved from the Protestant work ethic) as the “ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism.”³³ The most salient feature of this ideology is that it is incredibly adept at addressing critiques against it and coming up with new justifications for “the insatiable character of the capitalist process.”³⁴ According to Boltanski and Chiapello, “capitalist accumulation is amoral,” and this is precisely why it can make use of a variety of moral justifications to buttress itself.³⁵ It is not tied to one specific creed.

Other thinkers, like economist Joseph Schumpeter, have seen the relationship between capitalism and critique in a somewhat different light. Instead of viewing critique as outside artillery aimed at the fortress of capitalism that the latter manages to capture and subsume, Schumpeter argues that critique is intrinsic to the capitalist process, which has produced “that atmosphere of almost universal hostility to its own social order.” “Capitalism,” writes Schumpeter in 1942:

creates a critical frame of mind which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own; the bourgeois finds to his amazement that the rationalist attitude does not stop at the credentials of kings and popes but goes on to attack private property and the whole scheme of bourgeois values.³⁶

No wonder Schumpeter concluded that capitalism would ultimately fail. Indeed, many of the playwrights covered in this study display a similar hostility toward capitalism and to their own complicity as members of the bourgeoisie (Hauptmann, Kaiser, Toller). Some even stage

³² Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* [*The New Spirit of Capitalism*] (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 4. English translations and page numbers are from Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2005).

³³ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁶ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 1942 (New York: Harper, 2008), 143.

humanity's self-destruction (Kaiser, Čapek). Most important, modern drama constantly questions the effect and purpose of its own critique. I don't disagree that the nineteenth-century drama of social reform, for example, sought to ameliorate social conditions (and in some cases was even successful in doing so), but it is not the only theoretical work being done in this drama, which simultaneously puts on trial the theoretical weapons of left-wing intellectuals: irony, satire, humor, outrage, and self-critique. One may certainly read Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905) as an illustration of Shaw's politics, mainly the Fabian belief in the advancement of socialism through gradualist and reformist means. Yet an interpretive problem arises the moment Adolphus Cusins discovers that Andrew Undershaft, the powerful arms dealer, has built a William Morris Labor Church in his capitalist utopia of Perivale St. Andrews. Discerning the dark humor and perversity of the situation, Cusins immediately exclaims: "Oh! It needed only that. A Labor Church!" (151) The socialist ideas of William Morris, who was friends with Shaw for twelve years and gave regular lectures at the Fabian Society, are mangled and recycled in Undershaft's domain to make workers, in Undershaft's own words, "most economical," "unselfish," "indifferent to their own interests," "conservative," "with their thoughts on heavenly things [...] and not on Trade Unionism or Socialism," so that Undershaft's "profits are larger" (108). Capitalism has found a way to address the critiques of Fabian socialists regarding the working conditions of its laborers and to carry on in its quest for capital accumulation.

Economics and Humanities

The Modern Stage of Capitalism is an interdisciplinary study that takes modern theatre as a case study to show that products of culture engage with capitalism in a network of both promotional and antagonistic relations. What is to be gained from studying capitalist culture

from the viewpoint of the humanities (literary and theatre studies) instead of economics? The question itself assumes a rift between the two disciplines, which was not always the case. As Kurt Heinzelman points out, by the publication of William Jevons's *The Theory of Political Economy* in 1871, literary studies and economics had become separate disciplines.³⁷ Many scholars identify the split between literary and economic discourses as arising in the eighteenth century with the emergence of the science of political economy and the novel.³⁸ One methodology that has tried to connect the two disciplines is economic criticism. In *New Economic Criticism* (1999), Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen describe two early examples of economic criticism — Kurt Heinzelman's *The Economics of the Imagination* (1980) and Marc Shell's *The Economy of Literature* (1978) — as paradoxically “presuppos[ing] the very rift between discourses and disciplines” that they wish new economic criticism to bridge.³⁹ Woodmansee and Osteen try to locate when and why the two discourses—literary and economic— separate. They offer a few hypotheses. According to David Kaufmann, economic theory and narrative fiction both became media for intellectual debate during the same period because “the rapid growth of institutional consolidation of commercial capitalism in the eighteenth century created a demand for new descriptions of and apologias for the economy, the state, morality, and citizenship, a demand that was taken up by ... both the field of political economics and the novel.”⁴⁰ Kaufmann thus follows Nancy Armstrong's influential argument that the novel emerged as a way of establishing the dichotomy between male and female

³⁷ Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of Imagination* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980), 11.

³⁸ See Seamus O'Driscoll, *Invisible Forces: Capitalism and the Russian Literary Imagination, 1855-1881*, Dissertation. Harvard, 2005.

³⁹ Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, *New Economic Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

⁴⁰ David Kaufmann, *The Business of Common Life: Novels and Classical Economics Between Revolution and Reform* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 169.

spheres.⁴¹ Woodmansee claims that the dissociation of economics from the humanities is connected to the emergence of Romantic ideology, which defined literature (and indeed the arts generally) in opposition to commerce, and to the belief in the separation of aesthetic value from monetary value.⁴²

Recent economic literary criticism, however, has also shown how the two discourses and disciplines profoundly conditioned each other. James Thompson argues that the eighteenth century is the historical moment when “the concept of value underwent profound transformation and was rearranged into the various humanistic, financial, and aesthetic discourses that we know today.”⁴³ And yet there is still bad blood between literary and economic studies. In “The Vexed Story of Economic Criticism,” Elizabeth Hewitt remarks that even as “American literary scholarship over the last thirty years has emphasized the marketplace [...] the field has not entirely erased its essentially antagonistic attitude toward the economic world that is so fundamental to the production of the archive it studies.”⁴⁴ Many of assumptions made by economic literary criticism about the various types of interactions between economics and literature are still based on the novel. Woodmansee and Osteen are silent on drama and so is Heinzelman. Only Shell reminds us of the connection between economy and theatre. The use of the word *economy* in literary theory begins with Aristotle’s *Poetics* where he distinguishes between households (*oikos*) suitable for representation in comedy and those suitable for

⁴¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴² Woodmansee, 4.

⁴³ James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 1.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Hewitt, “The Vexed Story of Economic Criticism.” *American Literary History* 21.3 (Fall 2009), 620.

representation in tragedy.⁴⁵ The present study aims to show how elements drawn from the world of the theatre (dialogue, dramatic plot, spectacle, and performance) imbue economic theory so that an intriguing paradox emerges. On the one hand, classical economic theory wants to posit the laws of supply and demand and the business cycle as akin to the natural laws and cycles studied by the natural sciences. On the other hand, economics reverts to metaphorical and theatrical language during moments when it stumbles upon something it cannot fully explain by laws of nature.⁴⁶ Thus *The Modern Stage of Capitalism* doesn't only explore how modern drama reflected and refracted on stage economic developments from the 1870s to the 1930s, but also looks at how theatre exposed language that attempts to naturalize capitalist ideology: rhetorical tropes like “the invisible hand,” “the work ethic,” “the market,” “the laws of the jungle,” “survival of the fittest,” etc.

My first chapter, “Play the Market: Representations of Capitalist Economy in Henrik Ibsen, Adam Smith, and Émile Zola” examines Ibsen’s modern breakthrough in the context of his experience as a theatre manager and investor. I focus on the representations of invisible hands in Ibsen from “the hand of Providence” in *The Pillars of Society* to the “icy metal hand” that seizes John Gabriel Borkman’s heart, in order to show how Ibsen’s drama was part of a larger history of ideas that witnessed the gradual transformation of the religious concept of Providence into the invisible hand of the market. What is fascinating about Ibsen’s drama is that it captures a modern world in transition, where elements of Christian ethics co-exist with an emerging secular, socio-corporate ethics. The second chapter, “The Invisible Stage Hand, or the Drama of Capitalist Realism,” explores the drama of capitalist realism of Galsworthy, Granville-Barker, Shaw, Wilde, and Chekhov—a corpus of modern plays that dramatize the irresistible seductions

⁴⁵ Shell, *The Economy of Literature*, 90-91.

⁴⁶ Cf. “reenchantment” in Martin Harries, *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

of capital. These tragicomic works render capitalist modernity as a *theatrum mundi* where capital is the new *deus ex machina* that seemingly resolves any unsolvable problem. The third chapter, “Machine Art: From German to American Expressionist Theatre” discusses labor dramas from Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* (1892) to Mamet’s *Glengarry Glenn Ross* (1983) and beyond that explore the crises and conditions of modern labor such as the conflict between labor and capital, division of labor, and Taylorization. The expressionist productions of Elmer Rice and Sophie Treadwell do not just replicate the mechanization of the modern workspace, but also create a new symphony of sounds inspired by office machines. The fourth chapter, “It’s A Jungle Out There: Animal, Human, and Capital in Brecht and O’Neill” examines how O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and Brecht’s *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923) grapple with the capitalist ideology of competition that relies on metaphors of animality and the jungle. Brecht wrote *In the Jungle of Cities* when he was not yet seriously immersed in Marxism, still fascinated and anxious about Americanism and the modern city, while O’Neill composed *The Hairy Ape* at a time when he was reevaluating and relinquishing his earlier socialism and labor activism. Given these two playwrights’ ambivalent attitudes toward capitalist modernity, it is not surprising that the city jungles in their dramas are not simply the sites of brutal competition between animalized humans, but also sites of the urban sublime. In conclusion, I will trace the lingering echoes of modern drama’s formal and thematic responses to capitalist culture in contemporary theatre, performance, and visual art that tries to make sense of the recent economic crisis.

Play the Market: Representations of Capitalist Economy in Henrik Ibsen, Adam Smith, and Émile Zola

“I am now, of course— thanks to you—a capitalist!”
—Henrik Ibsen in a letter to his publisher Frederick Hegel.

“Each of the spectators looked for a drama in the fate of this single gold piece, perhaps the final scene of a noble life.”
— Honoré de Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin* (1831).

In February of 1870, the actors of the Christiania Theatre resigned to protest against the failure of the board of governors to appoint Norwegian writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson as head of the theatre. Trouble had been brewing since 1868 when a Dane instead of a Norwegian had been named the director. Living in a self-imposed exile in Dresden at the time, Henrik Ibsen was not interested in the leadership position, which the board considered offering to him. His days of theatre management were behind him as he focused on his dramatic writing. Still, Ibsen felt compelled to write to J.P. Andresen, the chairman of the board of governors of the Christiania Theatre, to share his opinion on the mutiny and to tell the board what he would have done had he been in power. “If at the present moment I had any influence on the affairs of the theatre,” wrote Ibsen:

I would, for the sake of emphasis, urge the staff of the theatre to present to the board of governors a statement suggesting that only a part of those who have resigned be allowed to return, and only then on condition that they accept a significantly lower salary and lose their share in their retirement fund that had accumulated up to the time of their return to the ranks. In any case, I can tell you that if I were to take a position with the theatre, I would have to be certain that such disturbances would not occur again. It is very likely that if I accepted a position there, the rebels might return, either because they saw in me “a transition to Bjørnson” or because they would expect my sympathies to lie with them, sympathies I no longer share. But if they were disappointed in me for one or both of these reasons, the theatre would have to go through the same turmoil next year. These people must be taught that it is easier to resign than to return, and there is no better time to besiege them than the long salary-less summer months.”¹

¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (Clinton, MA: The Colonial Press, 1964), 95.

In a letter to his mother-in-law, Magdalene Thoresen, Ibsen again stressed his allegiance with the management and not the rebels: “I myself have been manager of a theatre; I know that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the actors are indisputably in the wrong, and the management is right. *Vae victis!* they said in ancient times, and the same should be said today.”² This is a strikingly harsh response coming from a man who once professed sympathy for socialism and who stated in a speech to the workingmen of Trondheim that “the reshaping of social conditions [...] under way in Europe [was] concerned chiefly with the future position of the workingman and of woman.”³ Ibsen’s response reveals a managerial mindset preoccupied with the smooth running of theatre business and the compliance of employees. This is made even more evident by the fact that the insurgent actors had reason to hope that Ibsen’s sympathies would lie with them. After all, Ibsen himself was once involved in the struggle to give Norway a national stage.

In the nineteenth century, Norway struggled to establish its national identity by stepping out of the cultural shadow of Denmark, with which it had been in a political union from 1524 to 1814. Thus the Christiania Theatre was established in 1827 as the first public theatre in Norway, but from the very beginning it remained under Danish influence, employing Danish actors. Despite the nationalistic fervor and the blossoming of Norwegian literature, the conservative board of directors at the Christiania Theatre continued to view their establishment not as a national institution but as a private enterprise answerable only to its investors and to its select group of subscribers to seasonal tickets.⁴ Ibsen understood this commercial reality of the Christiania Theatre about which he wrote in his essay “The Two Theatres in Christiania.”

² Ibid., 97.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ann Schmiesing, *Norway’s Christiania Theatre, 1827-1867: From Danish Showhouse to National Stage* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 177.

Ibsen was also familiar with the business side of theatre from firsthand experience. From 1851 to 1857 Ibsen served as a stage manager at the National Theatre in Bergen. In 1857, he was offered the position of the head of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania that was established in 1852 for the purpose of promoting Norwegian drama and culture and for defying the influence of the largely Danish Christiania Theatre, located in the luxurious square Bank Pladsen. The principal debate at the time was whether the Christiania Norwegian Theatre could be strong enough to challenge the dominance of the Christiania Theatre or whether efforts should be devoted to the Norwegianizing of the city's main stage. Ibsen's lifelong friend and rival, the Norwegian playwright Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, believed in the latter option and thought that the Christiania Norwegian Theatre was largely a futile, if well-meaning, venture that only diverted attention from reforming the main theatre of the capital—the Christiania Theatre.⁵ Ibsen's leadership of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre, however, made Bjørnson seriously consider the possibility of a union between the two theatres given that both faced financial difficulties (albeit to a varying degree) from their competition.

The board of directors of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre chose Ibsen to come to the rescue of a sinking theatre burdened by financial troubles. Ibsen would spend the next five years frustrated at not having the necessary financial resources to do all that he wanted. The theatre, which was located in Møllergaten, a working-class area, mainly put up vaudevilles with the occasional nationalist play by a Norwegian. Ibsen was held back from his plans for improvement by the limited abilities of his actors (the Christiania Theatre continued to attract most of the acting talent), the small stage, and the meager funds allocated for set and consumes.⁶ To add insult to injury, the Storting (the Parliament) rejected his theatre's application for a loan to

⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁶ Ibid., 159.

renovate the building. Ibsen's aim to transform the Christiania Norwegian Theatre from a house of amusement frequented by the lower classes and by staunch nationalists into a theatre of serious artistic credentials failed. The Christiania Norwegian Theatre went bankrupt in the summer of 1862, Ibsen was discharged from his post, and in 1863 the two rival theatres officially merged.⁷ In January of the same year, disillusioned Ibsen began serving as a literary adviser to the ever still-powerful Christiania Theatre. Soon thereafter Ibsen would leave Norway and not return for twenty-seven years. When the Christiania Theatre was being reorganized from 1862 to 1865 Ibsen was offered the position of the managing director, which he duly refused. The theatre directorship went to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson who would finally transform the Christiania Theatre into a respectable Norwegian cultural institution.

Ibsen was no longer interested in nationalistic scuffles at home. Instead, he raised the reputation of Norwegian drama in the arena of world theatre by composing his dramatic works and promoting them in translation in Germany, Austria, England, America, and France among other countries. Thus the flowering of Norwegian drama took place not so much by vanquishing Danish influence at home as it did through Ibsen conquering foreign stages. Ibsen returned to Norway a national literary hero in 1891. Although Ibsen sympathized with the national cultural agenda, as a theatre manager in his native Norway he resisted both the fervent nationalism of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre and the entrenched Danishness of the Christiania Theatre.⁸ Both during his time at the Bergen Theatre and at the Christiania Norwegian Theatre Ibsen grew despondent seeing the nationalist sentiment prioritized above aesthetic considerations.

Thus, as merciless as Ibsen's response to the rebellion of the actors of the Christiania Theatre might seem, it was not out of character. It showed the savvy ruthlessness of a corporate

⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁸ Ibid., 160.

manager dealing with actors as employees. According to Ibsen, the smooth running of a theatre was not to be compromised for a parade of nationalistic zeal. Although Ibsen may have shared the actors' exasperation with the bureaucracy during the whole ordeal, he betrayed no sympathy for "the rebels who ha[d] risked their careers" in the hope that the management would "give in to their terms," for he had a precise view of the subordinate role of the actor:

An actor stands in a different position from other artists. He is not independent, he is part of a complicated machine in the working of which he is bound by law to take part, and if he has chosen to be an actor he must bear the responsibilities that go with the position.⁹

Indeed, representations of strong leadership that often borders on the tyrannical find their way into Ibsen's dramatic oeuvre: Peer Gynt, Karsten Bernick, Mayor Peter Stockmann, Doctor Stockmann, Torvald Helmer, John Gabriel Borkman, Halvard Solness. These are all indomitable men who rule with an iron fist, all the while believing that they are experts at their work and that they know what is in the best interests of their respective communities and subordinates. Maintaining that they are the ones most qualified to head and to guide their respective enterprises and households, these leaders often emphasize the constant risks and responsibilities with which they are burdened. Yet, in his dramatic works, Ibsen also subtly undermines the authority of these male figures by bringing to light their doubts about their own abilities and their moral decisions.¹⁰ Is John Gabriel Borkman the best choice for the president of the bank, or is he completely deluded? Is Halvard Solness the master builder of his community because of his unmatched expertise or because he keeps young talent down in fear of being replaced? Is Doctor Stockmann the only honorable man left in town or is he an incorrigible idealist with a strong aristocratic streak? Can Karsten Bernick discern the difference between his own selfish motives

⁹ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 94 and 97.

¹⁰ This is often coupled with presenting the female figures as the true "pillars of society" that have the power to stir the men to moral reasoning. See Joan Templeton, *Ibsen's Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

and the interests of his community, or have the seductions of capital rendered him delusional? Put simply, are these men-in-charge too big to fail? As Ibsen's plays raise these questions, it becomes evident that, while in real life Ibsen was often an authoritarian theatre manager, in his dramatic works, he allowed that kind of dictatorial leadership and cutthroat competition to be put on trial. In a way, Ibsen's belief in figures of authority can be linked to his distrust of the rule of the majority, which distinguished him from Bjørnson. In a letter to Danish critic and lifelong friend Georg Brandes, Ibsen noted the ideological distance between Bjørnson and himself:

It will never, in any case, be possible to me to join a party that has the majority on its side. Bjørnson says, "The majority is always right." And as a practical politician he is bound, I suppose to say so. I, on the contrary, must of necessity say, "The minority is always right." Naturally I am not thinking of that minority of standpatters who are left behind by the great middle party that we call liberal; I mean that minority which leads the van and pushes on to points the majority has not yet reached. I mean: that man is right who has allied himself most closely with the future.¹¹

In this instance, Ibsen sounds strikingly similar to his character Doctor Stockmann at the end of *En folkefiende* (1882; *An Enemy of the People*), published in the same year.

A Capitalist Drama

Ibsen's suspicion of the majority and his focus on strong leaders have given rise to two dominant strands in the scholarly criticism of Ibsen's drama. Noting that Ibsen is not interested in the conflict between labor and capital, the first camp brands Ibsen a boring bourgeois playwright solely concerned with the bourgeois worldview.¹² The second camp tends to read Ibsen as a radical playwright, even an anarchistic one, who spells out society's deficiencies

¹¹ Ibid., 198-99.

¹² For a review of Ibsen's reputation among scholars, see the Introduction to Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-15.

without providing comprehensive solutions to those problems.¹³ The second view originated in Ibsen's own time, and he had to grapple with it in the press. When the London *Daily Chronicle* implied in 1890 that Ibsen was surprised to see his name evoked by socialistic agitators as a supporter of their dogmas, he found it necessary to respond and to elucidate his stance on socialism. The correspondent of the newspaper was referring to Bernard Shaw's Fabian lecture delivered on *A Doll's House* (1879; *Et dukkehjem*). For one, Ibsen stressed that he never belonged and "probably never shall belong, to any party whatsoever." That said, he was much interested in the question of socialism and endeavored to acquaint himself with it, although he did not have "time to study the extensive literature dealing with different socialist systems." Ibsen clarified that he was mainly surprised that he, "who had made it [his] chief business in life to depict human character and human destinies, should without consciously aiming at it, have arrived at some of the same conclusions as the social-democratic moral philosophers had arrived at by scientific processes."¹⁴

Although Ibsen was interested in the question of socialism, his own involvement in the theatre world bears the markings of a capitalist mindset, thus producing a contradictory dramatic oeuvre that exposes the faults of capitalist modernity while at the same time embracing some of its key features. Deeply ambivalent, Ibsen's capitalist drama intuits the invisible forces of the market, the intangible forms of money, and the theatrical manipulation that corporations often engage in to win public trust. Perhaps, for this reason, Ibsen has once again been cast in a relevant light in our contemporary culture of financialization. Indeed, there has been a strong

¹³ See Bernard Dukore, *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980).

¹⁴ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 292.

resurgence of scholarly interest in Ibsen's oeuvre.¹⁵ It is not by accident that Franco Moretti links his reading of Ibsen in *The New Left Review* to the financial scandals of our own time.

If we look closer at Ibsen's dramatic oeuvre, we may begin to see him neither as a dusty bourgeois playwright nor as a radical predecessor to Bertolt Brecht, but as a capitalist playwright, profoundly interested in probing such issues as the irresistible expansion of capital, speculation, and the fantasies of unlimited progress. To call Ibsen a *capitalist* playwright does not mean to downplay the social critique at work in his drama or to reduce his eventual success to a strategic catering to the literary and theatre markets of his time. Rather, studying a capitalist Ibsen means taking into account how capitalist culture informed Ibsen's idea of theatre and what specific role theatre played in Ibsen's understanding of and attitude toward capitalism. As we will soon see, in Ibsen's drama, the complicated machine of the theatre with its many moving parts and competing interests, often figures as a microcosm of the capitalist world at large, whereas capitalist modernity is shown to be profoundly theatrical.

Ibsen came from a well-to-do merchant family that went bankrupt when Ibsen was seven years old. This was not the last time that Ibsen would face bankruptcy. Although Ibsen did not follow in the footsteps of his merchant father, his own involvement in the theatre world was deeply enmeshed in the commercial side of the art. Till late in his career, Ibsen struggled to achieve what he called in a letter to Bjørnson "economic independence" that would allow him to "work with full force and undivided attention in the cause of spiritual emancipation."¹⁶ Beside his aforementioned work as a theatre manager, Ibsen wrote letters to the Norwegian government

¹⁵ See in particular: Leonardo F. Lisi, "Allegory, Capital, Modernity: *Peer Gynt* and Ibsen's Modern Breakthrough," *Ibsen Studies* 8.1 (2008): 43-68; Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Franco Moretti, "The Grey Area: Ibsen and the Spirit of Capitalism," *New Left Review* January-February. 61 (2010): 117-31. A more comprehensive version of the essay appears in Chapter V ("Ibsen and the Spirit of Capitalism") in Franco Moretti's book, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (New York: Verso, 2013), 169-89.

¹⁶ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 205.

to solicit travel grants, a writer's pension in order to devote his full time to playwriting, and an increase in both his and Bjørnson's pensions. In a letter to Hagbard Berner, the Norwegian State Comptroller, Ibsen persuasively argued that the government should raise their pensions so as to make up for the money that the two playwrights had lost due to a lack of a literary copyright agreement between Norway and other countries where their plays were translated and performed, most notably other countries of Scandinavia and Germany.¹⁷ In these countries it was the translators or their publishers who reaped all the benefits, and Ibsen and Bjørnson had no legal means of protecting their authorial property rights. They could, of course, commission translations to be made of their plays at their own expense, as Ibsen often did with his German translations, but this proved useless in the long run as cheaper translations would eventually appear on the market. Ibsen and Bjørnson would have to wait until Norway was accorded the copyright protection of the Berne Convention after the Paris conference of 1896.¹⁸ Moreover, Ibsen asserted "in good conscience that Bjørnson and he [were], comparatively speaking, the two most heavily taxed men in Norway."¹⁹ He even provided the Norwegian government with an estimate of his financial loss due to copyright issues—25,000 kroner [\$50,000].²⁰ His plea was successful. In 1875, the Norwegian government increased the writers' pensions for Ibsen, Bjørnson, and Jonas Lie from four hundred to six hundred kroner [\$3000 to \$4500].

With the help of Bjørnson, Ibsen secured the representation of Frederick Hegel, Bjørnson's own publisher and head of the house of Gyldendal in Copenhagen, which was fast

¹⁷ Ibid., 193.

¹⁸ Robert Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography* (London: Richard Cohen Books, 1996), 408. The Berne Convention, first accepted in 1886, requires its signatories to recognize the copyright of works of authors from other signatory countries of the Berne Union in the same way that it recognizes the copyright of its own nationals.

¹⁹ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 193.

²⁰ Calculated from Evert Sprinchorn's figures listed in 1964, using an approximation of annual inflation at 4.12%.

becoming the most prominent publishing house in Scandinavia.²¹ Hegel not only helped Ibsen manage the publication of his plays but also encouraged Ibsen's investment activities that paved the way to the playwright's eventual economic independence. In fact, Ibsen's theatre output was at times directly connected to his investment activity, as he was prone to invest part of the royalties earned from his plays into bonds and stocks. For instance, in a letter of 12 October 1873, Ibsen asks Hegel to purchase shares for him in the Swedish State Railways. In 1875, Ibsen buys shares in the new Christiania railway project and takes the fee for the revision of *Catiline* (1849), his first play, in the form of shares in the New Zealand railway.²² During this time Ibsen was at work on *Samfundets støtter* (1877; *The Pillars of Society*), the financial plot and the railway setting of which was no doubt at least partially informed by Ibsen's coming into contact with the world of investment and speculation. Moreover, as Ibsen's biographer Robert Ferguson notes, the socio-economic structure of Grimstad, the sea town where Ibsen spent his adolescence as an apothecary's apprentice, might have inspired "the microcosmic framework" of the dramatic setting in *Pillars of Society* and *An Enemy of the People*. For most citizens of Grimstad, "regardless of class, were small investors in the shipping trade," and thus shared the risks of the enterprise, the success or failure of which directly affected their livelihood.²³ Hence, in a letter to Hegel, Ibsen writes: "I am now, of course—thanks to you—a capitalist!"²⁴ Ibsen continued looking out for investment opportunities throughout his career, especially when he came into wealth. When *Lille Eyolf* (1894; *Little Eyolf*) was published simultaneously in Christiania, Berlin, and London, Ibsen wrote to his wife Suzannah that he was investing for them "10,000

²¹ Ferguson, 115.

²² *Ibid.*, 216.

²³ *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

kroner [\$20,500]” from the royalty.²⁵ Ibsen even got into a dispute over royalty for *Bygmester Solness* (1892; *The Master Builder*) with his lead champion, the Swedish theatre director and actor, August Lindberg. Ibsen refused to grant Lindberg the rights to his play if the latter did not pay the royalty in advance. In a letter to Lindberg, Ibsen curtly explained why postponement was impossible: “I sent a large sum of money last week to Copenhagen for the purchase of bonds, with the result that I am now very short of cash.”²⁶

Ibsen clearly understood his literary travails as taking part in a market system of supply and demand. He encouraged the advertisement of his plays in newspapers, which he read voraciously, especially the advertisement section.²⁷ Ibsen was adamant about his plays being published in November so as to catch the full Christmas market, and he considered it “injurious to a dramatic work that it should first be made accessible to the public by means of a stage performance.”²⁸ Otherwise, there was risk of piracy. The printed text also served as publicity for future performances to which members of his audience were known to show up with scripts in hand. For all his pronouncements of challenging his audience, Ibsen at times chose to cater to it. When he could not stop the performances of *A Doll’s House* in North German theatres that featured an alternative ending where Nora does not leave Torvald after all, he wrote a different ending himself and sent it to them. As Ibsen explained to his German translator and business manager Wilhelm Lange of Berlin, he feared that a version with an alternative ending penned by someone else would be published and become more popular with the North German theatres. To

²⁵ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 309-10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 169. In a letter to Edvard Fallesen, the head of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Ibsen writes, “Generally speaking, November is a very good month for the publication of books; but it is not the best month for a play. It has no chance of being produced before the best part of the theatrical season is over.” Hence, there was an optimal time to publish the plays and an optimal time to stage them.

prevent this from happening, Ibsen caved in and met the theatres half way. The altered scene written by Ibsen went as follows: “Nora does not leave the house but is forcibly led by Helmer to the door of the children’s bedroom. A short dialogue takes place, Nora sinks down at the door, and the curtain falls.”²⁹ According to Ibsen, this was by far a much weaker ending, but at least it portrayed Nora as collapsing physically rather than failing in her will or drastically changing her intention.

Until the financial success of his later years, however, Ibsen remained perpetually in debt. In 1866, when Ibsen was living abroad, an auction of his belongings took place to placate his creditors in Norway. Ibsen did not find about it until it already had happened. In a letter to Bjørnson in 1867, Ibsen reproached his friend with inaction: “It was not kind of you to allow, through negligence, this attempt to sell my literary reputation to the highest bidder in my absence.”³⁰ In fact, one of Bjørnson’s most successful and popular plays, *En fallit* (1875; *A Bankrupt*), mentions in its very first scene precisely the kind of auction that happened to Ibsen. When the play’s main protagonist, merchant and brewer Henning Tjælde, first appears on stage he announces that he has just been to an auction where a ruined merchant’s possessions were all sold to satisfy his creditors. Tjælde shows no signs of sympathy and neither does Bjørnson’s play that places the fault of bankruptcy on morally reprehensible financial dealings such as reckless speculation and cooking the books. Bjørnson, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1903, rose to success sooner and quicker than Ibsen. Even when Ibsen attained early success with his *Pillars of Society*, which by the end of its first year was produced by twenty-seven theatres in Germany alone, his play still did not match the popularity of Bjørnson’s *A Bankrupt* that premiered a couple of years earlier. According to Evert Sprinchorn, Ibsen read

²⁹ Ibid., 183.

³⁰ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 69.

Bjørnson's play straight off the press in March 1875 and the final version of *The Pillars of Society* borrows much from Bjørnson's work.³¹ The success of Bjørnson's *A Bankrupt* abroad helped to pave the way for Ibsen's drama in Germany. To be sure, there are echoes between Ibsen and Bjørnson's plays, particularly in their focus on financial speculation. There are, however, even more intriguing parallels to be drawn between Bjørnson's *A Bankrupt* and Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896). The latter can even be read as a response to the former. A comparison between Bjørnson's *A Bankrupt* and Ibsen's drama can help highlight Ibsen's formal innovations and overall attitude toward capitalist culture that could not be more different from Bjørnson's treatment of the subject. While *A Bankrupt*, Bjørnson's greatest international success, is often regarded as the first realistic drama in Nordic literature to take on pressing social issues of the day, compared to Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, it still relies heavily on melodramatic conventions and sensationalism. Whereas Ibsen dramatizes the pervasiveness of the market, the constantly fluctuating values, the sheer difficulty of attributing moral responsibility in the new financial climate, and the inescapable theatricality of capitalist modernity, Bjørnson reverts to conventions of melodrama to make moral accountability in the market visible and to place the blame on identifiable villains of finance. The difference between Bjørnson and Ibsen's representation of capitalist culture can be in part traced to their different socio-economic backgrounds. Bjørnson was the son of a Lutheran pastor, an idealist, and a practical politician devoted to the Norwegian Left-wing movement. Indeed, Bjørnson's drama often betrays a streak of cultural and political idealism.

³¹ Ibid., 170.

Financial Melodrama

Like Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, the main protagonist of Bjørnson's *A Bankrupt* is a businessman who loses his fortune and reputation when he is caught illegally speculating with money. In Ibsen's play, John Gabriel Borkman, a former bank president, asserts to his friend, poet Vilhelm Foldal, that he was merely using the bank securities in an audacious and aggressive manner:

Tænke sig til. Så lige var jeg ved målet. Havde jeg bare fåt otte dages frist til at område mig. Alle deposita skulde da været indløste. Alle de værdier, som jeg med modig hånd havde gjort brug af, de skulde da igen ha ligget på sin plads, som før. De svimldende store aktieselskaber var dengang lige på et hængende hår kommet istand. Ingene eneste en skulde ha tabt en øre—

[Just think. How close I was to my goal! If I'd only had eight days' respite to cover myself. All the deposits would have been redeemed. All the securities that I with a bold hand had made use of would have been back in their places as before. That entire enormous stock pool was within a hair's breadth of being repaired. No one would have lost a penny—]. (97)³²

In other words, Borkman was waiting on a return on his speculations to balance the books. And, as Borkman explains, the reason why he got into trouble in the first place was that his friend and rival in love, Hinkel, betrayed his trust and published correspondence that was not meant for public knowledge (most likely insider information). According to Borkman, although he got caught, he was not doing anything different from others in his line of work. Likewise, early on in Bjørnson's *A Bankrupt*, when the main protagonist's daughter speaks ill of a merchant who was recently convicted of financial fraud, her father tries to reason with her:

TJÆLDE: Du fatter vistnok ikke, hvad handel er. I dag hæld, i morgen uhæld.

VALBORG: Aldrig skal nogen få inbildt mig, at handel er lotteri.

TJÆLDE: Den sunde ikke.

[TJÆLDE: You evidently don't understand what business is. Down today, up tomorrow.

VALBORG: No one will ever convince me that business is a lottery.

³² Ibsen, Henrik. *John Gabriel Borkman* (København : Gyldendalske Boghandels Forl., 1896). Unless otherwise noted translations from the original are my own.

TJÆLDE: The sound one is not]. (21)

Henning Tjælde, a merchant and brewer, has reason to worry because his own business is on shaky grounds. It is soon revealed that Tjælde has been cooking the books and is on the brink of a bankruptcy. Like in *John Gabriel Borkman*, it is a lawyer who exposes the main protagonist's financial situation. Tjælde finds himself in a quagmire when Berent, a lawyer in charge of inspecting the financial stability of local businesses, requests to see Tjælde's financial statements. According to Berent's interpretation of Tjælde's balance sheet, Tjælde overestimates his assets and underestimates his liabilities. Counting future returns on investments as actual assets, Tjælde makes his business appear prosperous. In doing so, the businessman does not think he is doing anything wrong. In the very first scene, Tjælde explains to his daughter that an optimistic attitude toward potential future returns *is* the way of the business world:

For at optage tråden: Du misforstår, hvorledes en købmand kan have håb fra den ene dag til den andre, bestandig nyt håb. Han er derfor ingen bedrager. Han er en sangviniker, en digter, om du vil, som lever i en tænkt verden, — eller han er et virkeligt geni, som ser land, hvor ingen andre øjner.

[To take up the thread: you don't understand how a businessman can have hope from one day to the other, a constantly new hope. He is not therefore a swindler. He is sanguine, a poet, if you like, living in an imaginary world—or he is a real genius, who sees land ahead when no one sees it]. (24)

What is the difference between a self-serving swindler and a dreamer who makes innovations happen for the general good? Where does one draw the line between a reckless speculation and a farsighted investment that has the potential to benefit the whole community? These are all important questions that Bjørnson's drama seems to invite from the onset, especially during Tjælde's moments of self-justification. Yet a serious exploration of these questions would require considering the alarming possibility that the boundary between a conscientious business and a corrupt one has become vexingly difficult to determine in theory or to maintain in practice.

This is not a possibility that Bjørnson's drama is ready to entertain. Instead, the capitalist must be punished and the frontier between sound and unsound business practices must be policed, if only in the scope of the play. Bjørnson's *A Bankrupt* thus relies on melodramatic conventions to distinguish between the bad capitalists who irresponsibly gamble with their investors' money and the good bourgeois who know how to run an honorable small business that is beneficial for the entire community. Put simply, *A Bankrupt* elicits anxieties over the financial machinations of laissez-faire capitalism, such as speculation and investment, but then chooses to attribute the vagaries of the market to identifiable human agency, specifically to the moral faults of the greedy and the reckless. In this manner, *A Bankrupt* is part of the modern melodramatic tradition that Peter Brooks identifies as being prevalent on the stage as well as in the novel from the French Revolution onward.³³ Brooks writes:

Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible. (20)

A Bankrupt expresses the collective unease over the new world of high finance and giant corporations where moral responsibility is dispersed among many shareholders and customers who knowingly or unknowingly participate with their wallets in the injustices of capitalism. Because "melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized," the melodramatic mode allows Bjørnson to reveal the human factor and to assign blame in the context of the morally ambiguous economic forces of the market.³⁴

³³ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). For an excellent survey of financial melodramas in Victorian theatre, see Jane Moody, "The Drama of Capital: Risk, Belief, and Liability on the Victorian stage," *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91-109.

³⁴ "Melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized: they are assigned to, they inhabit persons who indeed have no psychological complexity but who are strongly characterized." Brooks, 16.

While employing the techniques of melodrama, Bjørnson associates irresponsible speculation with a kind of sham spectacle (indeed both words stem from the Latin *specere* meaning “to observe”) and with theatricality, so that his critique of corrupt business practices relies on what Jonas Barish has famously called “the antitheatrical prejudice.”³⁵ In order to balance his overestimated books and achieve liquidity, Tjælde needs the financial support of a powerful banker, Mr. Lind from Christiania. With Mr. Lind’s capital, Tjælde can cover up his deficit and pass Mr. Berent’s audit. Yet in order to gain Mr. Lind’s capital, Tjælde must win his trust first by showing him that his company is on sound footing, which he does by means of an elaborate performance of success and wealth.

Indeed, the dinner party that Tjælde throws in the honor of Mr. Lind and that takes up the entire first scene of Act Two is rendered as a metatheatrical escapade of fake-it-till-you-make-it. Tjælde even refers to his comportment at the dinner as his “last pretense” [*siste forstillelse*] meant to capture Mr. Lind’s capital (60). For this purpose, Tjælde acts as a kind of theatre director making sure his set includes lavish food and drinks, orchestrating cannon salutes, and prompting other guests to speak on his behalf as though they were mere actors in his production. For example, Tjælde encourages his employee, the brewery manager Jakobsen, to raise a toast and to tell the story of how Tjælde “pulled him out of the gutter” [*drog mig op af skarnet*] by giving him his first job (70).³⁶ While some of the guests at the dinner, in particular Tjælde’s business competitors, see through his Potemkin village, Mr. Lind initially buys into the performance and places his trust (and capital) into Tjælde’s teetering firm. The entire scene seems to play on the shared etymology of “banquet” and “bankrupt,” both stemming from the Old Italian word for “bench”—*banco*. “Banquets” were originally small snacks eaten on a bench

³⁵ Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

³⁶ In Danish *skarnet* literally means “dunghill.”

rather than a table, whereas “bankrupt” comes from *banca rotta*, literally “a broken bench,” so called from the custom of breaking the bench of bankrupts.³⁷ Tjælde needs to throw the most sumptuous of banquets to disguise his imminent bankruptcy and to earn the support of a powerful banker that will make his business solvable. He has carried out such performances before. Thus, in *A Bankrupt*, theatricality is treated with suspicion and presented in an unflattering light as a calculating craft meant to impress and even swindle an audience.³⁸ This suspicion of theatricality is present today as well in the term “success theatre”—a vanity practice by which entrepreneurs make their businesses appear more successful than they probably are, thereby often turning success theatre into a self-fulfilling prophesy. Mr. Berent, who becomes the personification of Tjælde’s moral conscience, however, refuses to bite the bait and confronts Tjælde in private about his theatrical duplicity.

The scene between Tjælde and Berent that immediately follows the spectacular dinner party takes on the form and tone of a religious confession where Berent figures as a kind of minister who encourages and even demands that Tjælde acknowledge his wrongdoings and repent: first in private to him and then in public. At first blush, this confessional episode seems to offer a stark contrast to the metatheatrical exuberance of the previous scene’s banquet. Instead of hyperbolic toasts, words of flattery, and the roar of cannons, we witness Berent solemnly read off to Tjælde the litany of his assets and liabilities. Berent claims to be able to correctly measure and to provide both Tjælde and the audience with real, solid estimates of the net worth of his businesses, i.e. values based on how things stand in the present rather than on speculation. In this

³⁷ “bankrupt, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 2010. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 30 April 2014. “banquet, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 2010. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 30 April 2014. In Danish, this shared etymology carries through as well: *banquet* means “banquet” and *bankerot* means “bankruptcy.”

³⁸ See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 163. Fried understands “theatre” and “theatricality” as art produced specifically to impress an audience.

scene, we seem to have left the public space of the theatre for the semi-private space of the confessional booth. The spectators are construed as voyeurs of Tjælde's eventual conversion from an inveterate speculator to a virtuous investor who learns to handle his clients' money responsibly. But what does it mean to be a virtuous and responsible investor in practice? *A Bankrupt* dodges this question by relying on vague definitions of speculation and investment while at the same time trying to maintain a clear boundary between the two activities. Berent demands that Tjælde drop all masks, stop performing, and come clean for once in his life: "Jeg har k ent flere spekulanter i mine dager og har f at mangen tilst else." ["I have known several speculators in my days and have received many confessions"] (101). In return for Tjælde's confession and his public declaration of bankruptcy, Berent promises him a life of honest, hard work, a clean conscience, and a good night's sleep. Later on, the play offers us an example of such a moral businessman restrained in his ambition, to which we will get to in a moment. What is striking about the episode of Tjælde's conversion is that Bj rnson's drama displays the antitheatrical prejudice in its attempt to repress theatricality, but the repressed theatricality returns to the scene with a vengeance.

Here is a scene that wants to transport the spectator as far away from the theatrical stage as possible into a kind of confessional booth where the evil capitalist can bare his soul and exit a transformed man with the help of one scrupulous attorney's moral compass. Berent takes on not only the role of the confessor but also the play's would-be realist who can tell Tjælde the real values of his assets and liabilities. Yet this supposedly solemn and sensible exchange between the two characters soon turns into the most melodramatic scene in the whole play: repressed theatricality comes back as over-the-top theatrics and a full-blown farce. In his initial phase of resistance, Tjælde locks the door, pulls out a revolver, and threatens to first shoot the messenger

of morality (Berent) and then himself if he is not allowed to continue his business as usual. Tjælde objects to Berent's evaluation of his accounts by noting (not unconvincingly) that if Berent plans on testing every business in his over-scrupulous manner, "everybody in the place will have to go bankrupt" [*behandlet på den måde, er hele kysten bankerot*] (81).³⁹ According to Tjælde, financial values (such as property rates and stock prices) are perpetually in flux. That values—financial as well as potentially moral—are fluctuating and that the entire community may be complicit in the new culture of speculation are troubling suppositions that Bjørnson's drama evades. According to Moretti, one of the political lessons that Ibsen has left us with is that "the good *Bürger* will never have the *strength* to withstand the creative destruction of capital; the hypnotic entrepreneur will never yield to the sober Puritan" (131). By contrast, Bjørnson's play chooses to fantasize about the possibility of converting a megalomaniac capitalist into a conscientious bourgeois. Thus, when Tjælde remarks that every business will go bankrupt under Berent's rigid and fixed system of values, Berent is prepared to risk just that. In other words, if needed, the likes of Berent will launch a whole crusade against speculators. At this moment in the play, one may be tempted to ask who is the play's realist: Berent who dreams of appealing to the collective conscience of capitalists on a global-scale or Tjælde who knows what it takes to run a business. At the time of the play's publication, Bjørnson underwent a spiritual crisis and eventually abandoned hope in institutionalized religion, yet official Lutheran ideology concerning money and commerce still permeates his play. The traditional doctrine of Luther, as expressed in his *Long Sermon on Usury* in 1520 and on *Trade and Usury* in 1524, insisted that prices were to be fixed by public authorities and that sellers could not deviate from them in order

³⁹ Literally: "treated that way, the entire coast is a bankruptcy."

to accumulate capital beyond what was necessary to maintain their station in life. Merchants were not to manipulate scarcity to raise prices, corner the market, or trade in futures.⁴⁰

A Bankrupt drives its ideological point home by bringing onto the stage tangible money supposedly earned by honest work and prudent saving. The capital with which Tjælde will build his life anew must come from virtuous sources (Bernard Shaw would show how such a virtuous source of money is an illusion in a capitalist economy where all money is essentially tainted). When Tjælde's wife finds out that her husband will have to declare bankruptcy, she gives him a bag of gold coins that she has hoarded from the odd times that Tjælde would give her pocket money. In an intriguing manner, she prefigures Ibsen's Nora in her endeavor to save her husband except that, in contrast to Nora, who commits forgery and goes into debt, Mrs. Tjælde's prudent saving of tangible money is within the bounds of the law. The main source of Tjælde's new, clean capital comes from his faithful clerk who has saved up some money from scrupulous business practices. Young Sannaes saves the day by offering Tjælde a lump sum of tangible money that he has earned by looking out specifically "for such business that would not be affected by major trading" [*de forrætninger, som den store handel ænnu ikke har ordnet*] (134). With this respectable capital, the ever hard-working Sannaes and Tjælde's daughter, whom Sannaes eventually marries, rebuild the family business on a sound foundation beneficial for the entire community. And everyone lives happily ever after. The moral message of this melodrama is delivered by banishing speculation, reining back the accumulation of capital, and replacing high finance with a small family business. Yet, just as Bjørnson's *A Bankrupt* cannot entirely get rid of theatricality during the very moments that it tries to repress it, so the play has difficulty curbing questions about its melodramatic representation of finance. What kinds of businesses are

⁴⁰ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 1926 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 104.

not affected by the fluctuations of the market? How exactly does Sannaes restrain greed and the accumulation of capital in his company? These questions are left unanswered by Bjørnson's drama that, in wishing to exorcise speculation from its own internal economy, ends up paradoxically perpetuating the ideology of unbridled capitalism. After all, the search for sure-fire, safe investments that Sannaes claims to have identified is one of the staple dreams (and delusions) of the capitalist.

It is not difficult to see why *A Bankrupt* was a favorite with the audiences when it premiered. The 1870s saw a wave of financial scandals in the then rapidly industrializing countries of Scandinavia, which no doubt served as a source of inspiration for both Bjørnson and Ibsen. Bjørnson's melodrama displays public anxieties about the culture of high finance but ends up reassuring its audience that it is possible to control the accumulation of capital so that it benefits the entire community and not just the profit-seeking and the power-hungry. In other words, it shows its spectators the possibility of capitalism with a human face.

Melodrama, coupled with a paradoxical suspicion of theatricality, would become a favorite go-to mode for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American and European novelists as well such as Émile Zola, Anthony Trollope, William Dean Howells, Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, and Theodore Dreiser.⁴¹ In his study of the American panic novel, David A. Zimmerman has shown how novelists often represent the market and the world of finance as a kind of theatre of sham performances meant to seduce the public into participating in speculative bubbles or to throw it into a financial panic.⁴² In this manner, these writers joined a public

⁴¹ See in particular: Émile Zola's *La curée* (1871) and *L'Argent* (1891), Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) and *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1903), Upton Sinclair's *The Moneychangers* (1908), Joseph Conrad's *Chance* (1913), and Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914).

⁴² David A. Zimmerman, *Panic! : Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

discourse that often equated financial crises to scripted melodramas staged by powerful financiers and their conspirators. For example, in the conspiracy theories of the time, influential capitalists were often portrayed as abetting panics for their own monetary gains. According to senator Robert La Follette from Wisconsin, the panic of 1907 was a “carefully planned and skillfully staged” financial melodrama by J.P. Morgan who managed as a result to “squeeze small investors and gain control over the public’s bank and insurance deposits.”⁴³ Drawing on Peter Brooks’ study of melodrama, Zimmerman argues that these novelists employ “sentiment-saturated melodramas of panic” to encourage their readers to view the free market not simply as a theatrical stage managed by powerful tycoons but as a “sentimental community” where moral accountability could be assigned to human agents.⁴⁴ In other words, Zimmerman suggests that a kind of re-writing of financial melodrama takes place in the panic novel. By highlighting its own artifice and its melodramatic register the panic novel draws its reader’s attention to how the greedy financiers script financial dramas and manipulate citizens like puppets on a string. Most important, the panic novel articulates the ethical stakes and human costs in an increasingly reified economy, the boom and bust cycles of which were producing more anxiety than understanding. The panic novel partially abates these anxieties by connecting the unpredictable forces of the market to the universal struggle between good and evil and by linking financial crises to the machinations of identifiable human agents.

At first blush, it might appear that this is what Ibsen is up to in *The Pillars of Society* when he has his capitalist, the shipping magnate Karsten Bernick, undergo a moral awakening and suppress his personal greed for the welfare of the community. Initially, Bernick tries to garner support for the scheme of building an inland railroad branch that will connect his town to

⁴³ Ibid., 155-56.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

the main line. Bernick needs both private and public funding: individual subscribers as well as the backing of the municipal corporation. This dramatic background realistically captures the manner in which public railways were financed in Norway during Ibsen's time. The capital for Norway's first public railroad, which opened on 1 September 1854, was raised by issuing two million shares. Half the capital came from British shareholders and the other half was provided by Norwegian subscriptions, of which the State owned over half.⁴⁵ Moreover, Ibsen penned *Pillars of Society* in 1877 at the height of the railroad development in Norway when the *Rørosbanen* (the Røros Line) connected Central Norway to its capital. In order to understand how Ibsen interweaves economics and ethics in his drama, we need to look attentively at Bernick's financial maneuvers as well as his justifications.

Bernick has two related business goals: to protect his shipping empire and to branch out into the railroad business that is picking up steam. This is why, as we find out later in the play, Bernick initially opposed a rail line along the coast, as he argued that it was superfluous given the town's steamboat service (provided by his powerful corporation *Bernick & Co*). In order to win the trust of the public and the press, Bernick withholds the fact that he has been quietly buying out the land, mines, and waterfalls adjacent to the future railroad before the proprietors have the chance to ask for exorbitant prices. To gain the support of other powerful businessmen of the community—Rummel, Sandstad, and Vigeland—Bernick lets them in on the secret (essentially insider information) and offers in exchange for their silence a fifth of the profits. Bernick knows that the public will eventually find out about his purchases, but hopes that, given his impeccable reputation, his status of “a pillar of society,” the town will see his actions in the most positive light. As Bernick confesses to Lona, a former lover whom he forsake for a lucrative marriage and capital, his land acquisitions could be “constructed in different ways—a

⁴⁵ Norsk Jernbanemuseum [Norwegian Railway Museum] <http://www.norsk-jernbanemuseum.no>. 10 Oct. 2013.

thing to which, in [their] community, a man could only confess if he had an untarnished name to take his stand upon” (107). Bernick admits that he has risked his entire fortune on this potential railroad branch, that if realized would make him a millionaire. If the project falls through then Bernick stands to lose everything. It is through Bernick’s management of and conception of financial risk that Ibsen throws into relief the overpowering seductions of capital and the pitfalls of socio-corporate ethics.

Bernick’s public speech at the end of the play, where he announces the dawn of “a new era” that is to be built on truth and mutual trust, has often been read as a streak of political idealism in Ibsen. And *The Pillars of Society* has often been unfairly dismissed as a sophomoric attempt of Ibsen precisely because of Bernick’s sudden change of heart. Yet a closer look at Bernick’s speech during the last act shows it to be a carefully choreographed theatrical performance that starkly contrasts with Tjælde’s moral conversion during his tête-à-tête with an agent of morality in *A Bankrupt*. Instead of associating financial machinations with melodramatic scripts, Ibsen explicitly links the difficulty and futility of separating theatre from reality to that of distinguishing between corrupt business practices and conscientious ones.

Several attentive critics have noted the metatheatricality of Bernick’s public announcement. As Toril Moi points out, “reference to theatre [...] extends through the whole of the last act,” where Rummel, Bernick’s business partner, acts as a kind of stage-manager, orchestrating a brass procession to celebrate Consul Bernick in order to promote public support and trust of him.⁴⁶ It is in this theatrical setting that Bernick supposedly says “farewell to the theatricality produced by the unlivable ideals of idealism” (221). Moi reads this scene as an instance where Ibsen “uses the stage and its resources (particularly the set) to expose the concealments of theatricality” and to criticize, in particular, the self-theatricalization of men that

⁴⁶ Moi, 219.

prevent them from knowing the women in their lives (221-22). While I agree that Ibsen uses the resources of the theatre to draw our attention to theatricality and that Ibsen criticizes self-theatricalization when it comes to the relationships between men and women, I would suggest that his attitude toward theatricality in the public arena goes beyond mere critique. *The Pillars of Society* does not condemn all forms of theatricality in part because it is aware that it is impossible to repress theatricality in the public arena of politics and in the economic life of a given community. Is Bernick really giving up “the old era, with its make-up, its hypocrisy and its hollowness, its sham propriety and its pitiful calculations”?⁴⁷ Or is he merely using theatrical techniques for a new business plan? If the ultimate aim of the theatrical celebration of Bernick is to bolster the public image of *Bernick & Co*, then it is highly doubtful that Bernick’s last-minute moral transformation into an honorable CEO looking after the public good relinquishes theatricality or a concern for his public persona.

When Bernick publically admits that he now recognizes “that a craving for power, influence, and prestige have been the driving power of most of [his] actions,” he also informs the town that, although his original intention was to keep the whole thing to himself, he now will disband his monopoly: “... I have tonight come to the decision that these properties shall be exploited as a company of which the shares shall be offered for public subscription; any one that wishes can take shares” (199).⁴⁸ With this pronouncement, Bernick essentially throws his three former business conspirators under the train (hence, their protests during his speech) and at the same time offers an advertisement for *Bernick & Co* shares. The project will go on and it will be

⁴⁷ Moi points out that Bernick’s reference to makeup (*sminke*) is associated with a particularly bad and particularly theatrical melodrama (221).

⁴⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *Samfundets støtter* (København: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1877). “...at et begær og eii higen efter magt, indflydelse, anseelse, har været drivkraften i de fleste af mine handlinger.” “... at jeg iaften er bleven enig med mig selv om, at disse ejendomme skal udbydes til almindelig aktietegning; enhver, som vil, kan få del i dem.”

financed with the money of the town citizens. Bernick might not gain as much as he initially had hoped, but he no longer faces a colossal loss. In fact, Bernick is so successful with his speech that he has not only seduced his fellow-citizens to get onboard with him, but also literary critics who claim that his supposed moral transformation is an unbelievable plot twist and a shortcoming on the part of Ibsen.⁴⁹ The spirit of the corporation haunts the entire play and returns with a vengeance at the very end in the way that a slain monster reappears in the last scene of a horror film just when the audience thinks that the survivors are safe and sound. Is Bernick's last speech then a mere hypercritical performance? Instead of condemning and punishing his lead capitalist as Bjørnson does in *A Bankrupt* or as Arthur Miller would in *All My Sons* (1947), Ibsen allows Bernick to remain on stage with all the contradictions of his character. The point is that Bernick stands neither for melodramatic villainy nor its transformation into virtue, but emerges as a modern capitalist par excellence. Bernick looks after his own private interests *and* believes that in doing so he is acting in the best interests of his community, his beloved hometown. His decision to confess his past greed is at once a moral transformation *and* the smartest business choice in his circumstances. Unlike Bjørnson's melodrama that sees financial maneuvers in black-and-white, Ibsen presents a more nuanced portrayal of the capitalist mind and a multifaceted understanding of theatricality. Ibsen does not identify whether Bernick's moral transformation at the end of *Pillars of Society* is a genuine change of heart or a mere

⁴⁹ By contrast, in his biography of Ibsen, Robert Ferguson reads Bernick's public confession as a cynical "object lesson in opportunism and finely judged business acumen" (*Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*, 219). Ferguson writes about Bernick in the following manner: "A hundred years on he would be a television evangelist and make himself a great deal more money out of religion than ever he made out of shipping" (220). While such a reading is not uncalled for, it tends to flatten Bernick's character to a mere hypocritical villain—precisely the kind of melodramatic type that Ibsen's drama resists. The power of the ending of *Pillars of Society* lies in the ambiguity of Bernick's competing motives. Cf. Bernard Dukore who takes Bernick's moral transformation at face value in *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht*: "In *Pillars of Society*, Ibsen spells out the deficiencies of both his protagonist and his protagonist's society; he has this protagonist see the light, confess his guilt publicly, and take what remedial steps he is capable of taking; and the playwright provides a pithy moral to the tale, that the spirits of truth and freedom should become the real pillars of society" (165).

theatricalized performance meant to sway the public to buy shares for his company. The boundary between the two is no longer so easily traced. In the brave new world of capitalist modernity the public image of corporations and public trust are matters of spectacle. In other words, a company's success depends on how well it can perform its financial welfare, thereby making it a self-fulfilling prophecy by attracting more shareholders. The railroad branch in *The Pillars of Society* and the health and spa resort in *An Enemy of the People* are two salient examples that reveal how large-scale public development projects galvanize entire communities and involve a complicated network of competing private and public interests.⁵⁰ In *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen would show how the use of theatricality, the calculating performance of financial security and success in front of the public, could actually attract more subscribers and more capital, thereby realizing projects and manipulating the very meaning of truth.

Or take, for example, Ella's securities in *John Gabriel Borkman*, the only securities that the titular banker did not touch and that remained safe after the crash. Why didn't he speculate with them as well? Ella reads it as a sign of his lingering affection for her, and Borkman wants to agree with her, as he tells her that he could not take what was "most precious onboard" [*det dyreste med ombord*] with him on his journey (127). All this is to say is that in Ibsen's original text there often lurks an ambiguity between financial and moral values. And the characters struggle to differentiate between the two as both compete for influence in their lives. As we will later see, when this happens, characters revert to metaphorical language that often includes allusions to money. Yet it is never clear whether they are speaking of higher, moral concepts using monetary metaphors, or if they are merely cloaking their material concerns about money in poetic language. A sense of anxiety persists, as when Borkman feels compelled to ask Ella as though placating some anxiety of his own: "Du tænker kanske, at det var for at jeg kunde ha

⁵⁰ See Chapter Two.

noget at falde tilbage på—om det skulde gå galt?” [“You think perhaps that it was so that I might have something to fall back on, if things went wrong?”] (126) Ella quickly brushes off Borkman’s fears, validating his idea of himself as an audacious speculator who would never stoop so low as to hold Ella’s securities in reserve for a rainy day and then manipulate her emotionally into using those securities to save him from utter poverty. Yet it is Ella’s capital that ultimately saves Borkman’s house from foreclosure, pays his family’s bills, and finances his son’s education. The creditors did not take Ella’s resources away because, being neither directly related nor married to Borkman, she figured merely as a client on the bank’s balance sheets. Not touching Ella’s securities was the smartest business choice in Borkman’s high-stake speculations. Ibsen resists, however, casting Borkman in an unflattering light as a mere calculating deceiver: Borkman does seem to harbor a strong, emotional attachment to Ella. In other words, Ibsen refuses to paint a portrait of a hypocritical, self-serving capitalist or a high-principled bourgeois, the stock characters found in nineteenth-century melodramas with a strong moralizing impulse, such as those written by Émile Augier and Victorien Sardou.⁵¹ Rather, what makes Ibsen’s characters modern is precisely their way of vacillating between different value systems and their attempts to come to terms with the new economic forces invading their lives.

According to Franco Moretti, Ibsen’s great intuition about bourgeois life is an elusive “grey area,” which Moretti defines as the intra-bourgeois combat that is “ruthless, unfair, equivocal, murky—but seldom actually illegal” (124). Although Moretti concedes that at times the actions of Ibsen’s characters are, in fact, illegal (Nora’s forgery in *A Doll’s House*, the poisonous baths in *An Enemy of the People*, John Gabriel Borkman’s financial schemes), he maintains that “what’s characteristic of Ibsen’s wrongdoings is that they inhabit an elusive grey

⁵¹ For a survey of Victorian melodrama’s treatment of financial plots, see Jane Moody, “The Drama of Capital: Risk, Belief, and Liability on the Victorian Stage,” *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. Francis O’Gorman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 91-109.

area whose nature is never completely clear” (118). Encompassing disloyalty, slander, negligence, barely legal maneuvers, and half-truths, this grey area is another term for a “perfectly lawful injustice” (124). In other words, the actions of Ibsen’s characters, which often involve money matters in a rapidly changing financial world, can be said to be wrongful deeds that the law has not caught up to yet.⁵² This abstract “grey area,” however, is how the moral landscape of Ibsen’s drama looks from a distance. The “grey area” is often the unease that we, the audience, experience when we witness Ibsen’s characters do what they rationalize is the right thing to do. If we move closer and look at how individual characters in Ibsen’s drama justify their actions to themselves and to those around them, the “grey area” acquires more nuance. Ibsen’s protagonists do not necessarily think of their deeds as morally ambivalent or “grey.” In *The Pillars of Society*, for example, none of the play’s characters deliberately wants to commit evil. In fact, everyone feels that he or she is doing the proper thing.

Something more problematic and sinister is at stake than the mere hypocrisy of a society where each person follows his or her selfish interests. More often than not, the likes of Bernick and Borkman maintain that their actions represent public interests and serve the common good. Ibsen’s protagonists are moral agents who listen to their consciences and follow a set of moral guidelines in making their decisions. This is precisely why we relate to them and why at the same time their actions strike us as questionable. They carefully weigh their options before they commit to anything. Their deeds are not crimes of passion, but undertakings of rational calculations and moral considerations. Ibsen’s great intuition about capitalist modernity was that the emerging culture of financialization, marked by the nebulous difference between investment and speculation, the limited liability of shareholding, the blurry line between private and public

⁵² I am grateful to Martin Puchner and the participants of the “Literature of Capitalism” seminar held during the Institute for World Literature 2012 for this insight about the grey area and the law.

interests, fierce competition, and the emphasis of treating future profits as actual numbers, was profoundly affecting how people made moral decisions, treated others, and conceived of authority and responsibility for their actions. If future profits (for everyone involved) could override past crimes that led to them, then the definition of what constitutes a crime itself becomes porous. In Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (composed in part as a response to Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*), the seemingly impeccable politician Sir Robert Chiltern tries to take back his initial act of corruption and keep his moral qualms at bay by doing good deeds with his capital in the present. Chiltern, who rose to power by selling a Cabinet secret to a stock exchange speculator, now gives back to charity. As he confesses to his confidant Lord Goring: "The sum Baron Arnheim gave me I have distributed twice over in public charities since then" (62). If one's responsibility for debt only extends as far as one's value of investment, then the concept of responsibility itself is destabilized. Note how Karsten Bernick describes his responsibility in spreading false rumors about an embezzlement that never took place in his company (it simply was on the brink of bankruptcy): "Jeg har min del i, at rygten blev undspredt" (128). The literal English translation of the turn of phrase is: "I have my *share* in that that rumor was spread" (my ital.). The present tense signals that Bernick accepts the fact that he is still responsible for the consequences of the rumor, while the use of the noun "share" or "part" reveals that Bernick does not take *full* responsibility. Bernick did not start the false rumor that his wife's youngest brother, Johan Tønnesen, was having an affair with a married actress and making free with the company's cash-box, but neither did he contradict these allegations, letting an innocent man take the blame both for Bernick's transgression and for the financial difficulties of his company. This slander helped Bernick buy time to repay his creditors and set *Bernick & Co* on sound footing again. Thus, Bernick accepts *partial* responsibility for a wrong committed in the manner that a

shareholder's financial liability is limited to a fixed sum, most commonly the value of his or her investment in the company. Ibsen's characters do not simply believe that they are above the law or that they are clever to find loopholes in it. They do accept responsibility and do feel guilt, but partially and only up to a certain point. Ibsen intuited and captured in his drama the birth of what we may call socio-corporate ethics, a new moral code promoted by the growing importance of the corporation. One of Ibsen's greatest achievements as an artist was to dramatize this socio-corporate ethics on stage and to put it on trial before his audience.

Take, for example, John Gabriel Borkman. Ambitious as Borkman is, nowhere in the play do we hear him deliver a soliloquy where he confesses in the manner of Shakespeare's Claudius that his "offense is rank it smells to heaven." After years of imprisonment for illegal speculation, Borkman does not repent, but instead maintains that had he been allowed to continue his financial schemes, his clients would have gotten all their money back. In *Pillars of Society*, Karsten Bernick does not believe that he is committing first-degree murder by allowing Johan Tønnesen to board a ship that he knows has a rotten bottom and will most likely sink in the impending storm. Unlike Macbeth, the shipbuilding magnate does not fear that "all the water in the ocean will not wash the blood of his hands." In fact, Bernick asks himself a whole set of moral questions in the utilitarian vein that eventually lead him to equate the particular case of Johan with the countless deaths of humans in work-related accidents in factories. Bernick concludes that this is the way of the world and his decision is on the side of progress. And it's not only businessmen who subscribe to the tenets of socio-corporate ethics. In *A Doll's House*, Nora admits to Mrs. Linde that she has not told her husband about her forgery and the money that she borrowed to save his life not only because it would upset their relations, but also because

“it may be a good thing to have something in reserve.”⁵³ That is, if one day Nora ceases to be as appealing to Torvald as she is in the present and his devotion to her wanes, she might be able to put him in her power yet again by revealing the debt that he owes her.

To be sure, there is nothing new in people picking and choosing among myriad of moral guidelines the ones that conveniently justify their deeds. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), Bernard Shaw admits as much when he writes that the pious person “searches the Scripture until he finds a text that endorses his action,” while the rationalist “for whom the Bible has no authority” looks toward Kant and the categorical imperative, or “calculate[es] the effect of his action on the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (61-62). “Most men are ingenious enough to pass examinations of this kind successfully in respect to everything they really want to do,” concludes Shaw. In surveying the moral landscape of Ibsen’s drama, however, Shaw discerns that characters display a certain anxiety and disquietude about their actions, no matter how well rationalized:

But in periods of transition as, for instance, when faith in the infallibility of the Bible is shattered, and faith in that of reason not yet perfected, men’s uncertainty as to the rightness and wrongness of their actions keeps them in a continual perplexity, amid which casuistry seems the most important branch of intellectual activity. Life, as depicted by Ibsen, is very full of it. (62)

What is fascinating about Ibsen’s drama is that it captures a modern world in transition, where elements of Christian ethics co-exist with an emerging secular, socio-corporate ethics. At times these social systems of morality clash, as in *Gengangere* (1882; *Ghosts*) when Pastor Manders insists on not insuring Mrs. Alving’s Orphanage lest their community think that they do not have proper faith in Providence. At other times, Christian ethics and socio-corporate ethics work in harmony, as in *Pillars of Society*, when *Bernick & Co* sends its ships out into the storm. If the

⁵³ In the original, Nora says: “Da kunne det være godt å ha noe i bakhånden,” which translates literally as “Then it might be good to have something in the backhand.” “Backhand” here means “up one’s sleeve,” as one could have a trump card in the reverse during a card game.

shipping corporation waits out the weather, it stands to lose money from competition. If the ships sink, they will make profit off the insurance claim. Either way—the consideration of human lives notwithstanding—sailing in the storm is the safe and sound business choice. Moreover, this commercial decision conveniently shows the tradesmen’s “trust in Providence” and what Marx and Engels, Ibsen’s illustrious contemporaries, identified as the ideology of associating financial speculation with “a confirmation of the Calvinist doctrine that predestination (alias chance) decides, even in this life, blessedness and damnation, wealth, i.e., enjoyment and power, and poverty, i.e., privation and servitude.”⁵⁴ When Bernick consults schoolmaster Rørlund about his moral qualms concerning the railroad enterprise, the latter declares that the affair is entirely “in the hand of Providence” and that Bernick is “blameless” (119). Still, we see Bernick struggle with his conscience.

The Invisible Hand

Bernick’s business partners and schoolmaster Rørlund interchangeably use the term “Providence” [*Forsynet*] and “the hand of Providence” [*forsynets hånd*] to justify their financial decisions and to essentially cloak the pursuit of their private interests with reference to a higher divine order. These instances serve to highlight the self-serving hypocrisy of the merchants. Yet Bernick himself resists alluding to Providence. His manner of self-justification and of conceiving of agency is more complicated and deserves a closer examination. Before Bernick even appears on stage, we find out through the words of his wife that he once helped prevent the construction of a coastal railway. Schoolmaster Rørlund quickly corrects Bernick’s wife and adds that it was

⁵⁴ Friedrich Engels, “Stock Exchange,” *Supplement to Capital, Volume III*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/supp.htm><http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/supp.htm>. Web. 20 Sept. 2013.

“Providence” [*Forsynet*] that curbed the project, not Bernick, who was but a tool in a higher hand [*redskab i en højeres hånd*]. This wording has the advantage of masking any ulterior motives that may have played a part (a coastal railway would be competing with Bernick’s shipping empire) and of placing economic forces under the domain of Providence. When Vigeland, one of Bernick’s conspirators, again brings up Providence as having had a hand in the inland railway project, Bernick seems to agree with him. Bernick, however, uses a slightly different wording to explain how it came about that he stumbled upon a valley where the idea for the inland branch first came to him. The discovery of this valley is an important occasion, as Bernick eventually decides to buy out the land, mines, and waterfalls adjacent to the future railroad before the proprietors have the chance to ask for exorbitant prices. In response to Vigeland’s use of “Providence” [*Forsynet*], Bernick responds: “Ja, jeg må tilstå, at jeg også betragter det som en styrelse, at jeg ivåres rejste opover i forretninger, og så tilfældigvis kom ind i et dalføre, hvor jeg ikke tidligere havde været.” [“Yes, I must confess that I also consider it as an agency that I was traveling inland for business in the spring and so happened to come across a valley through which I had not previously been”] (41). Ibsen’s early English translators, William Archer and Robert Farquharson Sharp, both translate Bernick’s explanation of what was guiding him as “the hand of Providence,” although Bernick never uses this exact expression. Their choice is understandable given how frequently this phrase appears in the play, albeit spoken by other characters. Rolf Fjelde renders Bernick’s words as: “Yes, I must say I also find it *providential* that I traveled inland on business last spring and happened to go down a valley where I’d never been before” (32, my ital.). Again, this is a valid choice given the context and how often Providence is evoked in the play. Bernick himself, however, does not use *forsynet*, a word that has a religious connotation akin to the English “Providence.” Instead, he goes with *styrelse*, a

more general and secular term that can mean a range of things such as steering, agency, administration, management, corporation, and board of directors. It stems from the noun *styre*, meaning “rule, government, management.”⁵⁵ Put simply, what Bernick is literally saying here is that it was some kind of agency or management that was steering his business trip when he stumbled upon the natural resources of the aforementioned valley. The question that is left open by Bernick’s ambiguous use of language is whether it was divine management (Providence) or the management of *Bernick & Co* (i.e. he was looking out for new opportunities for expansion) that ultimately *steered* Bernick to consider an inland railway project. It is only toward the end of the play, when Bernick needs to abate his moral qualms about knowingly allowing an innocent man to board a doomed ship that he evokes *forsynet* (Providence) and then only as an echo of Rørlund’s words. In contrast to financial melodrama that associates the forces of the market to strings pulled by namable villains, Ibsen represents the laissez-faire market of capitalism as something at once more rational and more mysterious: rational because Bernick’s motives can be in part explained by his looking out for his interests (which does not necessarily make him a villain) and mysterious because there still remains something unexplainable and irrational in the whole process, something akin to chance. Moreover, in contrast to his business partners who hypocritically evoke divine order, Bernick’s vocabulary is replete with such words as “luck” and “accident” [*lykke, uheld*], which he does not then immediately link to Providence. Although various Christian doctrines differ in their explanations of Providence, most agree that what might appear to humans to be a matter of accident or chance is part of the divine “scheme of things,”

⁵⁵ *Styrelse* can acquire a religious connotation in certain expressions when coupled with specific modifiers. For example, *guddommelig styrelse* means “divine dispensation” and *ved forsynets styrelse* means “by an act of Providence.” Alone, however, the word *styrelse* is more generic than *forsynet*, which has a strong religious significance. I thank Elizabeth Li for helping me with the connotations inherent in these Danish terms.

and that human times are in “God’s hands.”⁵⁶ Thus Bernick’s moral struggle circles around the meaning of chance that has become divorced from its providential context. What is chance and how should it be taken into moral consideration when making economic decisions?

Finally, in contrast to financial melodrama, Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society* shows the difficulty of assigning moral accountability to individual human agents in the market. Bernick’s entire prehistory of blaming an innocent man for his company’s financial troubles begins with the simple fact that *Bernick & Co* was on a brink of bankruptcy because of “all sorts of bad luck” [*uheld af forskellig slags*]. Instead of pointing at an identifiable human scapegoat to explain the financial crisis, the play traces all of the economic mayhem and Bernick’s subsequent machinations to this initial secret of “bad luck.” Bernick inherits a ruined business because his mother had little business acumen and got involved in a mesh of foolish ventures [*ukloge foretagender*]. Note that Bernick’s mother is not referred to as greedy or corrupt, but simply as unwise and lacking an aptitude for business. Bernick explains to Lona Hessel that the only way to placate his creditors was to not contradict the rumor that his wife’s younger brother, Johan, stole all the money. Johan himself was a willing conspirator in the rumor mill in order to save *Bernick & Co*, the collapse of which would destabilize the entire community. Thus the fiction of making Johan into a villain works for the benefit of the capitalist community: it allows its most powerful corporation to survive and soothes public anxieties about the uncontrollable boom and bust cycles of capitalist modernity. Whereas financial melodramas often seek to identify the human culprit behind a financial crisis, Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society* unveils and thus demystifies the process by which Johan is cast as the villain, the would-be evil thief and seducer, whose crimes supposedly help explain the economic disturbances of their small coastal town in Norway. By showing Johan’s guilt to be a communal fiction Ibsen highlights the complicity of the

⁵⁶ *Ecclesiastes* (7:24-28) and (9:1).

community at large at covering up the irresolvable contradictions of capitalism that it grapples to understand.

In a fascinating essay for *Modern Drama*, Joseph Roach has linked Adam Smith's "invisible hand," which he identifies as the self-regulating mechanism of the free market, to the system of gossip at work in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777). Like the invisible hand, argues Roach, "the exchange of information at each transaction [in these plays] adds up to a total effect far larger than the sum of its parts, pooling into ever-deepening truth-effects—celebrity, notoriety, urban legends, ethnic stereotypes."⁵⁷ Although, as we have seen, rumor plays a pivotal role in *The Pillars of Society*, there are more explicit mentions of invisible hands in Ibsen's drama that act as metaphors for the economic forces of the market.

Another invisible hand, for instance, appears in *John Gabriel Borkman*. Here the invisible hand at stake is enigmatically described as "an icy metal hand" that moves John Gabriel Borkman in his relentless pursuit of capital and that ultimately leads him to his death. Yet what exactly is this "icy metal hand"? It is first and foremost a metaphor that is created through the verbal exchange between characters in the play. In the final scene, Ella Rentheim and John Gabriel Borkman take a walk in the freezing cold up to a slope from which Borkman takes in the expansive landscape of the surroundings. Looking down, Borkman tells Ella that in the far-off mountain ranges lies his "deep, endless, inexhaustible kingdom" [*dybe, endeløse, uudtømmelige rige*] (237). It remains ambiguous whether Borkman refers here to all the natural resources that he envisions unearthing in the future or if he intuits that he is close to death and thus brings up the heavenly kingdom. The enigmatic atmosphere of the scene intensifies still yet when Borkman

⁵⁷ Joseph Roach, "Gossip Girls: Lady Teazle, Nora Helmer, and Invisible-Hand Drama," *Modern Drama* 53.3 (Fall 2010): 297.

collapses and says: “Det var en ishånd, som greb mig i hjertet.” [“It was an ice hand that grabbed my heart”] (239). Ella first interprets this metaphorically as verbal proof that Borkman is implicitly acknowledging that he murdered her capacity to love when he traded her for his “cold, dark kingdom” [*kolde, mørke rige*] (239). Borkman’s last words correct his previous statement, however: “Nej.—Ingen ishånd.—En malmhånd var det.” [No—no ice hand. A metal hand it was] (240). The audience may surmise that John Gabriel Borkman dies from a heart attack induced by the chill air or by the excitement of surveying his latent resources of wealth, or some combination of the two potential causes. In this late symbolist play of Ibsen, many details remain cryptic and what matters is how metaphors are created and exchanged between characters. Why, for example, “a metal hand”? From his very first appearance on stage, Borkman emphasizes that he is “a miner’s son” [*en bergmands søn*] and his insatiable desire for more capital is linked to his idea of excavating metal in the mountain ranges. Surveying the wintry landscape around him he says to Ella: “Det pust virker som livsluft på mig. Det pust kommer til mig som en hilsen fra underdanige ånder. Jeg fornemmer dem, de bundne millioner; jeg føler malmåerne, som strækker sine bugtede, grenede, lokkende arme ud efter mig.” [The air acts like a breath of life on me. The blast comes like a greeting from captive spirits. I sense them, the buried millions; I feel the veins of metal stretch out their curving, branching, luring arms to me] (237). Borkman then adds that he saw the metal arms before him like “living shadows” [*levendegjorte skygger*] in the vault of the bank when he was speculating with his clients’ securities. This is a strange and paradoxical remark to make given that Borkman was not using metal money in his machinations but rather intangible forms of money—securities. It is as though Borkman fantasizes about going back in time to an earlier period when money chiefly meant coined money and not the intangible forms of stocks and bonds. The mention of the metal hands and Borkman’s desire to unearth

metal may also point to his desire for liquid capital. The living shadows of the metal arms projected onto the walls of the vault may also echo Plato's Allegory of the Cave, as Borkman is so entranced with the illusions of capital that he does not see the reality of his situation.⁵⁸ An intriguing parallel can be drawn between Borkman's study of these "living shadows" to the manner in which the cave prisoners in Plato's parable assign credit and prestige to those who can quickly remember the shadows that came before and predict which shadows will follow. Speculation thus figures as far removed from the true form of reality.

Earlier in the play, Borkman explains to poet Foldal that he made use of "all the values" [*alle de værdier*] with "a bold hand" [*med modig hånd*] (97). William Archer translates this turn of phrase as "all the securities" that Borkman "had so daringly dealt" and Rolf Fjelde renders it as "all the securities" that Borkman "so audaciously used" (975).⁵⁹ Yet in Ibsen's original the meaning is more ambiguous and broad: the agency of that "bold hand" is not entirely evident, since Borkman does not use a first person possessive. The image of the hand reappears at the very end when Mrs. Borkman asks Ella about the cause of her husband's death: "Altså ikke ved egen hånd?" ["Then not by his own hand?"] (242). Ella tells Mrs. Borkman that her husband did not commit suicide, but rather that "an icy metal hand" [*en isnende malmhånd*] seized his heart, thus synthesizing her earlier hypothesis ("icy hand") and that of Borkman's last words ("a metal hand"). Mrs. Borkman literalizes this metaphor and infers that it must have been the chill night air that caused the heart attack: "Natteluften har altså dræbt ham." But then she too reverts to metaphorical language, adding: "Kulden, siger du? Kulden,— den havde dræbt ham for længe siden." ["The cold, you say? The cold—that killed him a long time back"] (244). The "hand" in

⁵⁸ For more on Plato's influence on the major European dramatists of the twentieth century, see Martin Puchner, *Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵⁹ *Værdier* is a generic term that can indeed mean financial "securities" (though a more precise word is more often used for that—*værdipapirer*) and also "values" in general.

this last scene can mean several things: Borkman's longing for more capital that serves as the main motive for his actions; his choice to freeze his heart, so to speak, so as to be able to exchange Ella for the promise of more wealth; or the grip of death. Each character interprets the meaning of the invisible hand in a different way. For Ella, it is primarily "an icy hand" that kills the capacity to love, that congeals love into a commodity for sale. For Mrs. Borkman, "the cold" seems to refer to her husband's tarnished reputation and fall from grace. For Borkman, it is "a metal hand" that lures him to expand capital in order to achieve what he calls "the kingdom—and the power—and the glory" [*for rigets—og magtens—og ærens skyld*] with its inescapable allusion to the *Lord's Prayer* (238).⁶⁰ Thus it might also stand for Borkman's hubris in particular and the capitalist megalomania of relentless expansion and capital accumulation in general.

In trying to figure out what the final metaphor of the "icy metal hand" refers to, the reader and spectator engages in a kind of speculation as well. To be sure, this speculation—in the intellectual sense of the word—is different from Borkman's financial speculation, yet there are still intriguing parallels worth considering. As Marc Shell has argued, metaphor is itself an exchange, and language and thought internalize money into what he calls "money of the mind."⁶¹ In the *Economy of Literature*, Shell persuasively traces the shared historical origins of both philosophy and coined money and shows how linguistic products often interiorize aspects of the political economy.⁶² Focusing largely on non-dramatic literary texts, however, Shell's analysis privileges material forms of money (such as coins and paper notes) and the written word. Thus, in his account, money and language are associated because both are mediums of exchange.

⁶⁰ "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever."

⁶¹ See Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 11; and *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophic Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1982), 131.

⁶² Shell, *The Economy of Literature*, 8-10.

Ibsen's drama, most of which was written to be performed, intuits something else about the meaning of money: that it is not merely a medium of exchange and that it is not merely a physical object.⁶³ In fact, when we scan Ibsen's dramatic oeuvre, we quickly discover an arresting paradox. For all the discussions centered on money, money itself, whether in the form of coins or banknotes, rarely appears as a prop on stage. Ibsen's stage directions rarely indicate the presence of—or exchange of money as a physical object. This is also what differentiates Ibsen from Bjørnson whose aforementioned play *A Bankrupt* makes it an ideological point to bring out physical money on stage to mark the ethical, non-speculating bourgeois. In Ibsen money appears largely in intangible forms: as financial instruments of the market (bonds, stocks, securities), as metaphors, and as topics of conversation. Ibsen's capitalist drama thus offers us a way to rethink the meaning of money as a performative value. In fact, there is an entire school of economic thought, known as the credit theory of money, that posits that money is not actually a “thing”—“a commodity chosen from amongst the universe of commodities to serve as a medium exchange,” but rather “the social system of credit accounts and their clearing.”⁶⁴

There are a couple of exceptions to this intangible nature of money in Ibsen, the most conspicuous of which is the opening scene of *A Doll's House* where Nora tips the delivery boy with fifty øre (coins). One of the first spoken lines of the play is Nora's question addressed to the delivery boy: “Hvor meget?” [“How much?”]⁶⁵ Indeed, this question pervades *A Doll's House*, a play that revolves around how much the characters are willing to give, sacrifice, or take from others for their own survival and independence. Later in the play, Torvald hands Nora forty

⁶³ *Brand* (1865) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) were originally written as closet dramas.

⁶⁴ Felix Martin, *Money: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2014), 12 and 14. Martin brings up the example of the economy of Yap, which relied on *fei*—“large, solid, thick stone wheels ranging in diameter from a foot to twelve feet.” Martin bases his account largely on Henry Dunning Macleod's *The Theory of Credit* (1889).

⁶⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *Et dukkehjem* (København: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1879).

banknotes to manage the household during Christmas time. Yet these instances of small change passing through the hands of characters on stage only highlight the larger sums that hang above their heads as past debts or future profits—the money *offstage*. Nora still needs to supplement the pocket money that Torvald gives her from time to time with her copying work in the evenings to meet the payments on the loan that she took out to save his life. And both, Nora and Torvald, put their hope in Torvald's future salary—the raise that is supposed to come through in three months. Thus, throughout the play, money appears in intangible forms: not as a physical object held in the present moment, but rather as something owed or something anticipated.

Another intangible form of money appears in the metaphorical language that Ibsen's characters use. In *Rosmersholm* (1886), for example, Rosmer's impoverished childhood tutor Ulrik Brendel asks him to spare him "seven or eight shillings." Yet the dramatic point of Brendel's economical situation is to echo his intellectual bankruptcy, as later in the play he will ask Rosmer to spare him "an ideal or two" when he discovers that he is spiritually and intellectually "bankrupt." It is striking how often characters in Ibsen's drama revert to metaphors of money to express their emotional, moral, or spiritual states. In the last scene of *A Doll House*, Nora tells Torvald: "Du skal bare høre på hva jeg sier.—Dette er et oppgjør, Torvald." William Archer translates this remark of Nora's as: "Only listen to what I say. — We must come to a final settlement." The literal translation is: "You just listen to what I say. This is a settlement, Torvald." Rolf Fjelde is justified in translating the last phrase as, "We're closing out accounts, Torvald," since the Norwegian *oppgjør* can mean "a settlement between warring parties," "a financial settlement," and "a final account regulation of a company."

Moreover, in the plays of Henrik Ibsen, money talks. Conversations of characters often veer toward and circle around the topic of money. Issues of money and capital not only pervade

plays whose plots explicitly hinge on financial machinations such as *A Doll's House* or *John Gabriel Borkman*, but also make up the emotional and moral undertow of dramatic works that at first blush seem to deal more with idealism than materialism such as *Fruen fra havet* (1888; *The Lady from the Sea*) or *Hedda Gabler* (1890). Even in those dramatic works of Ibsen that focus chiefly on questions of spirituality and existential angst, it is striking how often conversations will swerve to the run-of-the-mill subject of money. For example, the exchange, in which George Tesman's aunt congratulates her nephew on his recent marriage and, more specifically, on the impressive manner with which he was able to make Hedda Gabler his wife, quickly turns to the question of money:

FRØKEN TESMAN. Ja visst gør jeg så. Du har ret i det. (slår over.). — Men det var rejsen, vi snakked om. — Den må da ha kostet svært mange penge, Jørgen?

[MISS TESMAN. That's right, so I do. (*Changing the subject.*) But we were talking about your trip. It must have cost a lot of money.] (93)

Miss Juliana Tesman and George Tesman then proceed to discuss how they will afford the lavish lifestyle that Hedda is implicitly expecting in return for settling for Tesman.

Similarly, the marital drama at the heart of *The Lady from the Sea* arises, as Toril Moi elegantly shows, from "Ellida's yearning for the infinite and the absolute," personified by the mysterious Stranger for whom she pines away (296). Yet the pivotal heart-to-heart talk between Ellida and her husband Dr. Wangel in Act Four has as much to do with the issue of money as it does with Ellida's desire for freedom. Ellida confesses to her husband that she did not marry him from a free choice but rather "sold herself" to him. She may have well felt real affection toward him, but the very necessity to support herself and her family frustrated her ability and right to choose freely. This is not to suggest crudely, that in Ibsen materialist conditions directly influence the characters' ideals or motivations. Rather, Ibsen's dramatic oeuvre explores the

relationship between materialism and idealism through the representation of and the meaning of money.

There is no direct evidence that Ibsen ever read Adam Smith or that he was familiar with Smith's invisible hand. In any case, the influential economic principle of the invisible hand of the free market as we know it today—that is, the self-regulating nature of the marketplace by which individuals act in their own self-interest and end up unwittingly benefiting society as a whole—is a thoroughly modern concept dating from the mid-twentieth century. Economists have long bemoaned its imprecise use and the attribution to Adam Smith who only used the phrase three times in all of his writings for three different effects (twice as “*an* invisible hand” and only once as “*the* invisible hand”).⁶⁶ “The invisible hand of Jupiter” appears in Smith's essay *History of Astronomy* (posthumous 1795) as a reference to pagan superstitions about phenomena that have a scientific explanation; once in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) where Smith argues that feudal lords are led “by an invisible hand” to divide with the poor “the produce of all their improvements”; and once in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) where Smith alludes to the caution and the risks that induce some merchants to prefer domestic trade over foreign, thereby unintentionally benefiting their native country's economy. There is much speculation and little consensus among historians of economics what Smith might have meant by his reference to an invisible hand. According to Emma Rothschild, Smith merely meant the phrase as “an ironic joke.”⁶⁷ Taking Smith's invisible hand seriously,

⁶⁶ For an excellent and invaluable survey of the myth of “the invisible hand” in economic theory as well as the current debate about what Adam Smith might have meant, see the exchanges between Gavin Kennedy and Daniel Klein in *Econ Journal Watch*. Galvin Kennedy, “Adam Smith and the Invisible Hand: From Metaphor to Myth,” *Econ Journal Watch* 6.2 (May 2009): 239-63. Daniel Klein, “Adam Smith's Invisible Hands: Comment on Galvin Kennedy,” *Econ Journal Watch* 6(2): 264-79. Gavin Kennedy, “A Reply to Daniel Klein on Adam Smith and the Invisible Hand,” *Econ Journal Watch* 6(3): 374-88.

⁶⁷ Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 138.

R.H. Tawney argued in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* that by alluding to “an invisible hand” Smith sees “in economic self-interest the operation of a providential plan”: “The existing order, except insofar as the short-sighted enactments of Governments interfered with it, was the natural order, and the order established by nature was the order established by God.”⁶⁸ Smith’s references to this mysterious invisible hand, especially those from *Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, deserve to be quoted at length for their relevancy to Ibsen’s manner of representing the economic forces of the market. Indeed, in *Moral Sentiments*, when Smith claims that the feudal lords divvy up with the poor “the produce of all their improvements,” he explicitly references Providence:

They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labors of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition. These last too enjoy their share of all that it produces. (215-16)

There is an implicit calculation of risks in this passage: the feudal lords share their produce with the general population for their own safety (to prevent peasant revolts) and for their own stability (to encourage the continual flow of labor that bolsters their wealth). This assessment of risk

⁶⁸ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* 1926 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998): 191-92. For similar assessments of “the invisible hand” as having a spiritual or theological component, see: David A. Martin, “Economics as Ideology”; Andy Denis, “The Invisible Hand of God in Adam Smith,” *Research in the History of Economic Thought: A Research Annual* 23A (2005): 1-33; Charles Clark, *Economic Theory and Natural Philosophy* (Hants: Edward Elgar, 1992), 97; Patricia Werhane, *Adam Smith and his Legacy for Modern Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 102; Jerry Evensky, “Ethics and the Invisible Hand,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7 (1993): 197-205, 200. See also Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” in *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government (Homo Sacer II, 2)*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). Citing Didier Deleule, Agamben writes: “If it is probable that the Smithian image of the invisible hand is to be understood, in this sense, as the action of an immanent principle, our reconstruction of the bipolar machine of the theological *oikonomia* has shown that there is no conflict between ‘providentialism’ and ‘naturalism’ within it, because the machine functions precisely by correlating a transcendent principle with an immanent order (284).

reappears in Smith's use of "an invisible hand" in *The Wealth of Nations* where he explains why some merchants (but not others) choose domestic over foreign trade even though the latter has the potential to be more lucrative. Their decision boils down to the perils involved in the foreign trade where losses often prove to be more detrimental than the ones in domestic trade:

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it. (32)

There is a trace of unmistakable irony in Smith's voice ("an affection, indeed, not very common among merchants") that signals that an invisible hand may be a kind of social mechanism, a social sleight of hand, that by allowing the merchant to believe that he is pursuing his own goals inadvertently directs his enterprise toward benefiting society as a whole. According to Smith, the alternative—that of a merchant "who affected to trade for the public good" is at best naïve and at worst hypocritical. From the mid-sixteenth century the word "affectation" acquires its meaning of "an artificial or studied assumption of behavior."⁶⁹ Thus, in Smith's account, merchants who claim to supposedly trade for the public good are performing and putting on airs instead of being genuine in their intentions. Such is the case with Bernick who affects the image of the pillar of society who claims that his every economic move is for the alleged good of the community. And Bernick's final change of heart can be understood as an assessment of risks: he stands to lose everything if the townspeople do not support the inland project into which he has invested all of his capital. Neither the feudal lords nor the merchants figure as moral heroes in Smith's narrative. Nowhere in these two passages do we find the

⁶⁹ "affectation, *n.*" *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 2010. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 30 April 2014.

neoliberal doctrine of the self-regulating market where economic appetites are given free reign and even moral consecration. On the contrary, as a metaphor, Smith's invisible hand figures as a kind of compromise, a self-imposed check on the insatiable economic appetites of those in power (be it feudal lords or merchants) elicited by an assessment of risks. Yet the question still stands: what is this elusive invisible hand? There is a curious ambivalence in Smith's language that echoes the ambivalence of language mentioned earlier in Ibsen's drama. Are characters moved by Providence or by their own economic impulses? And if the latter, what are these economic impulses: natural instincts or moral considerations?

In *Moral Sentiments*, Smith indeed seems to link the workings of "an invisible hand" to a natural instinct. In this manner, he displays the eighteenth century's widespread adoration of the idea of nature.⁷⁰ The division of product carried out by the feudal lords themselves "would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending, without knowing it, [they] advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species." This is a curious turn of phrase. Another way of phrasing this claim would be to say: The earth would not have been divided into equal portions among its inhabitants had the feudal lords not divvied up their products. But, of course, we also know that Smith qualifies his remark by noting that it is "*nearly* the same distribution of the necessaries of life" (my ital.). Moreover, he shifts from a discussion of labor as work to labor as childbearing ("multiplication of species"). This reference to the workings of nature reappears in Chapter Two of *The Wealth of Nations* titled "Of the Principle which Gives Occasion to the

⁷⁰ "The first point to make about the eighteenth century's cherished natural history is that it is part and parcel of that century's general adoration of the idea of nature. There are many meanings of the word "nature" with reference to man and society. But by all odds the most encompassing, the most widely used, is clearly that of the pristine condition of a thing, be it an organism, man himself, or an institution" (Nisbet 140-41).

Division of Labor,” where Smith tries to explain how the division of labor that is pivotal to his overarching argument came to be in society:

This division of labor, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual, consequence of a certain propensity in human nature, which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another. Whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature, of which no further account can be given, or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to our present subject to inquire. (117)

Thus Smith believes that “the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange” is part of human nature, whether innate or developed through time. At first blush, this scientific explanation of economic exchange seems to be at odds with Smith’s remark that Providence had divided “the earth among a few lordly masters” but not forgotten the poor by way of instituting a trickle-down economics. But the laws of nature are not inconsistent with the concept of Providence, as the archeology of the metaphor of the invisible hand shows.

Before Smith’s use of the metaphor it already had a widespread resonance. As a metaphor, however, Smith’s invisible hand poses certain interpretive challenges similar to those beckoned by the invisible hands we find in Ibsen’s drama. According Galvin Kennedy, for example, “the invisible hand” was merely a popular literary metaphor used by Smith to “assist his less sophisticated readers” that was later blown out of proportion by modern economists.⁷¹ Kennedy lists a myriad of literary instances where the metaphor appears before it does in Smith’s writings such as “the mighty hand” of Zeus in Homer’s *Iliad*; Augustine’s “hand of God,” “which moves visible things by invisible means”; “Thy Bloody and Invisible Hand” in

⁷¹ Galvin Kennedy, “Adam Smith and the Invisible Hand: From Metaphor to Myth,” *Econ Journal Watch* 6.2 (May 2009), 254. Galvin Kennedy places the blame of blowing Smith’s allegedly innocuous metaphor out of proportion onto Paul Samuelson and his influential textbook *Economics* (1948): “Modern economists have projected onto a venerable literary metaphor a significance well beyond anything implied by Adam Smith, who, they allege, was the originator of their modern version of the metaphor” (250).

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; William Leechman's "the silent and unseen hand of all wise Providence," etc.⁷² Smith owned many of these books and thus could have been familiar with the use of the metaphor from a number of key texts. The prevalence of this literary trope leads Kennedy to downplay Smith's use of it: "The metaphor of an invisible hand is just a metaphor and modern wonder over its meaning is, well, meaningless" (254). Not all historians are so unfair to the figure of metaphor. Peter Harrison has majestically traced the history of the invisible hand as an important intellectual idea, showing that "by far the most common" use of it "involved reference to God's oversight of human history and to his control of the operations of nature."⁷³ What is more interesting still is that the invisible hand could signify two types of providential agency. On the one hand, the Calvinist doctrine of *special* Providence asserted that while many events that occur are neither intended nor predicted by humans, such events were not merely accidents or chance but God's invisible hand carrying out the divine plan.⁷⁴ On the other hand, God's *general* providence referred to God's "instantiation of laws of nature which produced particular ends and to his design of certain features of the natural world."⁷⁵ It is this latter, general Providence, that Harrison emphasizes as potentially lurking in Smith's "invisible hand" that helped perpetuate the very idea of economics as a science that studies the ineluctable laws of supply and demand akin to those found in nature such as Newton's law of gravitation, his three laws of motion, the ideal gas law, etc. It should be noted, however, as Harrison does, that for a long time Newtonians believed that gravity was the sign of God's invisible and constant activity.

⁷² Ibid., 242. For a discussion of "Thy Bloody and Invisible Hand" and its pertinence to Smith's "invisible hand," see Martin Harries, *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 200): 14-18.

⁷³ Peter Harrison, "Adam Smith and the History of the Invisible Hand," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72.1 (2011): 29-49, 31.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 39.

Reading Adam Smith with Ibsen highlights the oscillation between the providential (i.e. divine) meaning of the invisible hand and its secular sense relating to the free market. More important still, the metaphor of the invisible hand points to the sheer challenge of understanding and representing the nature of economic forces of the marketplace. Characters in Ibsen, just like his readers and spectators, have to pause and speculate about the meaning of the invisible hands that are motivating the characters and moving along the dramatic plot. What ultimately moves Bernick to discern in the valley that he stumbles upon during his business trip the potential for urban development? He was, after all, not simply being a flâneur, but travelling somewhere for the purpose of profit making. As mentioned earlier, Bernick cannot identify the exact nature of the impetus and so he too reverts to metaphor. To be sure, in Bernick's case, it is not a metaphor explicitly laden with providential connotations, but it is a metaphor of some unidentifiable "agency" and "steering" [*styrelse*] nevertheless. Despite Kennedy's dismissal of metaphor, metaphor is doing some kind of work in Smith's theoretical writings and in Ibsen's drama. It is productive then in the given context to remember sociologist Robert Nisbet's seminal explanation of metaphor:

What is a metaphor? Much more than a simple grammatical construction of speech. Metaphor is a way of knowing—one of the oldest, most deeply embedded, even indispensable ways of knowing in the history of human consciousness. It is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. It is a way of cognition in which the identifying qualities of one thing are transferred in an instantaneous, almost unconscious, flash of insight to some other thing that is, by remoteness or complexity, unknown to us." (4)

Victor Turner agrees with him, underlining that metaphor is essentially transformative, a kind of metamorphosis.⁷⁶ In the context of Ibsen's drama, the meaning of Bernick's *styrelse* or Borkman's "icy metal hand" is ambivalent and ultimately up for grabs. What is important,

⁷⁶ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1974), 25.

however, is not simply that the invisible hands in Ibsen are ambiguous or that they may or may not carry a providential connotation. What is significant is that characters and the spectators along with them have to think about what economic forces ultimately amount to through metaphor. Bernick and Borkman do not revert to metaphorical language simply to cloak their private interests. The movement from the known to the unknown, which Nisbet identifies as the process at work in metaphor, echoes the characters' speculation. They speculate in order to expand their capital, literally moving from known territories to unknown territories (Bernick's valley; Borkman's buried millions in the mountains). And they also speculate in the intellectual sense as they struggle to understand the nature of economic activity and its relation to moral conduct.

As R.H. Tawney has argued, up to the Protestant Reformation, economic activity was long regarded as "one among other kinds of moral conduct."⁷⁷ Thus, economic egotism and desire for money-power was curbed and branded as immoral. The modern, secular doctrine finally silenced all ancient moral scruples with the plea of economic expediency. The business world no longer seeks moral guidelines outside its own bubble, but rather becomes "a closed compartment with laws of its own."⁷⁸ The laissez-faire market takes economic efficiency, economic appetite, and private property as inviolable moral values. How did this happen? Tawney's self-imposed task in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* is to trace the change, from a view of economic activity as one kind of moral conduct to "the view of it as dependent upon impersonal and almost automatic forces; to observe the struggle of individualism, in the face of restrictions imposed in the name of religion by the Church and of public policy by the State, first

⁷⁷ Tawney, 26.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 100.

denounced, then palliated, then triumphantly justified in the name of economic liberty.”⁷⁹

Tawney himself often reverts to metaphor in reference to the economic forces of the market, using phrases like “impersonal and almost automatic forces”; “the infallible operations of the invisible hand”; “the ebb and flow of economic movements”; “the sport of social forces which they could neither understand, nor arrest, nor control,” etc.⁸⁰ In this he echoes Adam Smith who reverts to “an invisible hand” precisely at moments where he is trying to identify the origin and nature of economic impulses.

In Ibsen’s drama we witness characters navigate between the old system of morality, which once subsumed economic conduct, and the laws of the market where economic appetite becomes the guiding principle. Perhaps, what Ibsen’s drama ultimately foreshadows is the neoliberal deification of the market whereby economic expediency becomes the final moral authority. Whether the invisible hand in Ibsen is “the hand of Providence,” “an icy metal hand,” or a desire for more capital dictated by natural instinct, it evidently has a mesmerizing and destructive influence on the characters. Theatre itself is shown to succumb to these economic forces in Ibsen’s drama. In order to see how theatre figures in Ibsen’s portrayal of capitalist modernity it is helpful to first look at how the late nineteenth-century novel, drama’s formidable competitor, represents the market.

Émile Zola and the Novel of the Stock Exchange

As Halina Suwala has shown in her study of Émile Zola, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, there is a cluster of novels focusing on speculative bubbles, financial panics, and money that one may call “the novel of the stock

⁷⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 27, 73, 75, 142.

exchange.”⁸¹ To name but a few examples, among such novels are Émile Zola’s *L’argent* (1891; *Money*), Frank Norris’s *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) and *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1903), Upton Sinclair’s *The Moneychangers* (1908), and Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912). These novels grapple with the capitalist culture of financialization and elicit anxieties over the new ways of manipulating public and private capital. In French literature, one could go all the way back to Honoré Balzac who already portrayed speculators both in the novel (*Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau*, 1837) and in drama (*Le Faiseur*; 1840). Yet Balzac’s association of speculation with bad theatrics reveals a similar reliance on the conventions of melodrama and a strong moralistic streak that one finds in Bjørnson’s *A Bankrupt*. In *César Birotteau*, the titular speculator should have been content with the financial security of his honest bourgeois business in cosmetics, but ventures into the world of property speculation and goes bankrupt as a result. The cautionary, moral tale is complete when César is the only businessman of the novel who chooses to pay all of his debts and dies happy after his good name has been restored.

Likewise, Balzac’s drama *Le Faiseur* shows financial speculation to be largely a sham, a performance that the main protagonist Mercadet puts on to keep his creditors continuously investing more money into his schemes instead of asking for payments. In the very title of his drama, Balzac plays on the double meaning of the French word *faiseur*, which can mean “creator, maker” as well as “braggart, show-off.” Indeed, Mercadet creates his business and fortune out of thin air by performing in front of his creditors: he boasts about his supposedly successful ventures and profit-promising plans. In this way, Mercadet hopes to turn the spectators of his performance into speculators who will willingly trust him with their money. By

⁸¹ Halina Suwala, *Autour de Zola et du naturalisme* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993). See also David Zimmerman, *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

contrast, in *L'argent* (1891; *Money*), Émile Zola presents at once a more nuanced and satirical view of financial speculation by revealing how almost every member of society, not just the greedy high rollers and petty swindlers, are complicit in the new culture of financialization. In this respect, Zola's treatment of money and speculation appears to parallel that of Ibsen, particularly in such works as *The Pillars of Society*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Yet the key difference between Ibsen and Zola, as we will soon see, lies in how Zola positions the art of the novel vis-à-vis the mass hysteria of speculation versus how Ibsen envisions the role of the theatre in capitalist modernity. Both artists not only represent the free market of capitalist culture and its forces, but also theorize the position of their respective artistic genres vis-à-vis the market within their works of art. Put simply, both have something to say about how their works of art function in relation to the market.

Zola is a pivotal figure of comparison to Ibsen for a few reasons. Both contemporaries were interested in rendering a realistic portrayal of the world around them, including the impact of the new economical forces that were invading people's lives. Both struggled in their early years to reach economic security and both achieved unprecedented positions of economic independence and power in the literary field later in their careers. Most important, comparing the two artists allow us to examine similarities and differences between the novel and the theatre at the end of the nineteenth century, at a time when the novel and the theatre are competing for commercial profit, returning clients (readers and spectators), and cultural prestige.

In *The Rules of Art*, Pierre Bourdieu traces how the progress of the literary field toward autonomy is "marked by the fact that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the hierarchy among genres (and authors) according to specific criteria of peer judgment is almost exactly the inverse of the hierarchy according to commercial success" (114). From the economic point of view,

nineteenth-century theatre was at the zenith, bringing in huge profits for a very small number of authors “in return for a relatively small cultural investment,” whereas poetry was at the nadir, promising small profits to a small group of producers. Conversely, “from the point of view of the criteria of appreciation that dominate inside the field,” poetry was at the summit of the hierarchy, consecrated by the romantic tradition, while theatre was relegated to the bottom, catering as it did to the bourgeois public and its values and earning “the institutionalized consecration of the academies and official honors” (114). Most playwrights came from the bourgeoisie. In both of these hierarchies (economic and aesthetic), the novel hovered in the middle. In France, with the rise of Stendhal, Balzac, and especially Flaubert, the novel had captured cultural capital and “acquired its marks of nobility,” yet it still remained linked to “the image of mercantile literature” because of its ties to journalism through serialization.

As for commercial success, the novel could secure large profits for a relatively large number of authors provided it could extend itself beyond the literary world (to which poetry was confined) and beyond the bourgeois world (theatre audience) to the petite bourgeoisie and readers of municipal libraries (Bourdieu 114). Although *The Rules of Art* was originally meant as Bourdieu’s study of Flaubert, Émile Zola emerges as just as important a figure in Bourdieu’s account. According to Bourdieu, it was the unprecedented financial success of Zola’s novels with *L’Assommoir* (1877) onward that finally freed the novel from the press and the serial. Zola’s novels reached a much wider public than any other mode of expression without letting go of formal requirements or aesthetic merits. The novel even managed to secure bourgeois consecration (until then reserved to the theatre) through the society novel (Bourdieu 115). Most important, and Bourdieu underlines this fact, Zola largely managed to escape the destiny of a commercially successful artist of his time—being branded “commercial” and “vulgar” by his

fellow writers inside the literary field, a “chiasmatic structure” in which the hierarchy according to economical profit coexists with an inverted hierarchy of artistic prestige. Zola achieved this by converting the stigmatic categories of “commercial” and “vulgar” into the positive prestige of being a “popular” writer devoted to political progressivism. In other words, Zola dodged the fate of being called a sell-out by assuming the role of a social prophet, thereby inventing nothing less than the figure of the intellectual, an artist with a “mission of prophetic subversion, inseparably intellectual and political” (Bourdieu 129). Bourdieu even attributes Zola’s lifelong interest in the science of heredity not simply to the immense esteem enjoyed by science in the 1880s, but also to the fact that it allowed Zola an opportunity to fend off the suspicion of vulgarity attached to his novels by equipping the “experimental novelist” with the prestige of a doctor’s “clinical gaze” (117).

It is important to qualify Bourdieu’s assessment of Zola’s success in what is essentially a French-centric narrative. After all, long before the rise of Zola in France, there was Balzac. And, in the Anglo-American context, the novels of Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mark Twain enjoyed both commercial success and artistic laurels.⁸² Zola’s good fortune—both his financial profit and his reputation—cannot be explained solely by the manner in which he fashioned his literary persona, however. That is to say, Zola burnished not only his name but also the very meaning of money and financial profit. Part of Zola’s appeal as an artist to his audience came from the fact that he made the reaping of monetary benefits from the sale of his art not only acceptable but even honorable. Bourdieu mentions this in passing when he remarks that Zola did not subscribe to “the opposition between art and money, which emerged as one of fundamental structures of the dominant vision of the world at the same time as the literary and artistic field asserted its autonomy” (91). Most agents and analysts, especially those who

⁸² I would like to thank David Damrosch for this insight.

upheld an idealized vision of the artist inherited from the eighteenth century, failed to perceive what Zola did when he remarked: “Money has emancipated the writer, money has created the modern letters.” In other words, instead of buying into the romantic conception of the artistic vocation, Zola understood that a steady, independently procured income afforded a writer freedom from aristocratic patronage and public powers: “One must accept without regret or childishness, one must recognize the dignity, the power and justice of money, one must abandon oneself to the new spirit” (Bourdieu 91). Indeed, before the publication of *L’Assommoir* made him wealthy, Zola worked for the Librairie Hachette from 1860 to 1865 and contributed to several newspapers to make ends meet. While Bourdieu does not go into *how* Zola promoted this realistic, one may even say pragmatic, attitude toward money to his larger audience, we have a testimony of his attitude from Zola himself in the form of his novel— *Money*—which is nothing if not a meditation on the role of money in society and its relationship to art. Zola was not the sole writer to praise money, however. In his 1844 essay “The Nominalist and the Realist,” Ralph Waldo Emerson already writes: “Money, which represents the prose of life, and which is hardly spoken of in parlors without an apology, is, in its effects and laws, as beautiful as roses. Property keeps the accounts of the world, and is always moral.”⁸³ Still, what is interesting in the case of Zola is that he was invested in writing about the relationship between the novel and speculative capitalism inside the pages of his novel.

Although Zola’s *Money* represents the folly and greed that fuels speculative bubbles, it also exhibits faith in progress, especially in the good works that money can make happen. The last words of the novel associate the ambivalent but still largely positive power of money to that of love: “Pourquoi donc faire porter à l’argent la peine des saletés et des crimes dont il est la

⁸³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 568. I would like to thank David Damrosch for this note.

cause? L'amour est-il moins souillé, lui qui crée la vie?" [Why then should money carry the blame for all the dirt and crimes it causes? For is love less filthy—that which creates life?"] (471). Yet in order to dignify the nature of money, and more specifically the money that he himself had earned as a writer, Zola had to differentiate between different sources of money: most notably between income earned from honest, hard work and easy money gained from speculating on the stock market. Thus Zola's process of fashioning a certain kind of fantasy of dignified money in the novel depends on denigrating the spectacle of speculation.

Ibsen and Zola

At the end of the 1880s, Zola decided that his naturalist portrayal of France in the Rougon-Macquart series had to include a work set in the world of finance. He intended to record and to explain "this mystery of financial operations impenetrable to most French brains, those inexplicable bankruptcies and sudden fortunes, made and lost among barbarous cries and gesticulation."⁸⁴ The echoes between Zola's portrayal of the megalomaniac speculator Aristide Saccard and Ibsen's characters of Bernick and Borkman are not, however, directly caused by literary influence. Zola was interested in the theatre, wrote drama (albeit his plays were not popular outside of France), and was a successful theatre critic who called upon dramatists to take up Naturalism at a time when Ibsen was already revolutionizing modern drama with his realistic representations of society.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, Zola's drama did not live up to his own naturalist tenets, falling as it often did into the trap of melodrama and sensationalism, and Ibsen's fame did not proliferate into France until the 1890s. According to Bourdieu, in his appeal to theatrical

⁸⁴ Cited in Renata Wasserman, "Financial Fictions: Émile Zola's 'L'argent', Frank Norris' 'The Pit', and Alfredo de Taunay's 'O encilhamento,'" *Comparative Literature Studies* 38.3 (2001): 195.

⁸⁵ The second edition to Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), performed as a play in 1873, includes his Naturalist manifesto that championed a realistic stage.

naturalism, Zola was trying to challenge the hierarchy of genres by “transferring onto the terrain of the theatre the symbolic capital acquired with a new audience (who read his novels but who do not go to the theatre)” (119). Zola’s efforts were not totally in vain, as André Antoine founded his Théâtre-Libre in 1887, the first enterprise that sought to defy the economic constraints in a sector of the literary field where until then they had remained unchallenged. These economic constraints would still win, since Antoine was forced to abandon his venture in 1896 due to staggering debts (Bourdieu 119). Zola seems to have become aware of Ibsen as early as 1887, when he read the first French article on Ibsen by Jacques Saint-Cère in the *Revue d’Art Dramatique*, which described the Norwegian playwright as a naturalist and linked him to Darwin. Zola immediately encouraged Antoine to stage *Ghosts*.⁸⁶ As Ibsen admitted to his French translator, Moritz Prozor, who began translating Ibsen into French in 1889, he had no connections to France until then, as he was “fully engaged attending to [his] literary business in Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, England, America, and elsewhere.”⁸⁷ Paris remained for a while inaccessible to Ibsen, and he was grateful to Prozor for enabling him to conquer that elusive republic of letters. Antoine officially introduced Ibsen to the Parisian public by staging *Ghosts* on May 30, 1890, and *The Wild Duck* on April 27, 1891 during the fourth season of the Théâtre Libre. As for Ibsen’s opinion of Zola, it is difficult to gauge how familiar Ibsen was with the latter’s oeuvre. On one occasion, Ibsen seems to have expressed a low view of the French writer: “Zola descends into the sewer to bathe in it; I to cleanse it.”⁸⁸ Yet, Ibsen read the essay

⁸⁶ Michael Meyer, *Ibsen* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 489. For more on Ibsen’s reception in France, see Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, “Ibsen in France from Breakthrough to Renewal,” *Ibsen Studies* 12.1 (2012): 56-80.

⁸⁷ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 283.

⁸⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *Ibsen Plays 1: Ghosts; The Wild Duck; The Master Builder*, 1989, trans. and intro by Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 1983).

“Temperament and Reality in Émile Zola” by Danish critic Georg Brandes “repeatedly” and “with great interest.”⁸⁹

Leaving the question of influence aside, the echoes that one finds between the works of Ibsen and Zola are probably due to the fact that both artists were trying to make sense of the boom and bust cycles of capitalist modernity. In *Money*, for instance, Zola shows how the International Exposition of 1867 in Paris incited a plethora of reckless speculations to finance daring, new projects. Like Ibsen, Zola compares financial speculation and Saccard’s insatiable quest for capital to a kind of poetry that seeks to imagine the potentials of the future. “À large traits, avec sa parole ardente qui transformait une affaire d’argent en un conte de poète, il expliqua les entreprises superbes, le succès certain et colossal.” [In broad outlines and with passionate words, which transformed a pecuniary affair into a poet’s tale, he explained all the superb enterprises, the certain and colossal success] (114).⁹⁰ The many daring plans of Saccard’s Universal Bank include building a network of Mediterranean ports, constructing “the Oriental Railroad,” and restoring papacy to Jerusalem, none of which ever take off in the novel. Listening to Saccard’s wild plans prompts Hamelin, his somewhat gullible business partner, to offer a word of caution: “Tout cela, c’est la poésie des résultats, et nous n’en sommes pas même à la prose de la mise en œuvre.” [“All this is the poetry of results, and we are not yet at the prose of implementation”] (85). Through Hamelin’s prudent remark, Zola plays on the multivalent meaning of the French word *œuvre*, which can signify a task in general, a literary work in particular, and is here used in a turn of phrase (*mise en œuvre*) to connote the actual process of putting a plan into action. Zola’s description of the language of speculation as the capitalist

⁸⁹ Ibsen, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 272.

⁹⁰ Unless otherwise noted translations from French are my own.

poetic tongue par excellence begs the following question: how does sober, novelistic prose represent and at the same time differentiate itself from the seductive poetry of speculation?

The novel does not immediately answer this question, showing us first how the spirit of speculation invades all aspects of the characters' lives. Thus speculation is compared to the desire to live, to love, and to procreate. Here is how Saccard explains the irresistible drive for more capital to his mistress Madame Caroline who is at first afraid of the word "speculation" and is suspicious of Saccard's grandiose plans:

Oui, la spéculation. Pourquoi ce mot vous fait-il peur? ... Mais la spéculation, c'est l'appât même de la vie, c'est l'éternel désir qui force à lutter et à vivre [...] Sur cent enfants qu'on manque de faire, il arrive qu'on en fabrique un à peine. C'est l'excès qui amène le nécessaire, n'est-ce pas? [...] Ah! Dame! Il y a beaucoup de saletés inutiles, mais certainement le monde finirait sans elles.

[Yes, speculation. Why does this word frighten you? ... Why, speculation, it is the lure of life itself, it is the eternal desire that compels us to struggle and to live. [...] For every hundred children that one fails to engender, one barely begets one. It is the excess that brings about the necessary, is it not? Oh! Madame! There are many unnecessary indecencies, but without them the world would certainly come to an end]. (156)

Speculation is not only linked to biological urges; it is also compared to an infernal, man-made machine, especially in the descriptions of Saccard's Universal Bank that is revealed to be a pyramid scheme: "...L'Universelle enfin se mettait en marche, en puissante machine destinée à tout affoler, à tout broyer, et que des mains violentes chauffaient sans mesure, jusqu'à l'explosion." [...The Universal was at last under way, in a powerful machine destined to make everyone mad and crush everyone in its wake, and which violent hands were heating without restraint until explosion] (199). And, finally, the world of financial speculation is also linked to the theatre and specifically to a theatricality that aims to seduce the spectator into becoming a speculator. One of the very first descriptions of the French Bourse in the novel already connects it to theatre: "C'est un peu, ce derrière du monument, comme l'envers d'un théâtre, l'entrée des

artistes, avec la rue louche et relativement tranquille, cette rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires.”

[“This rear of the building was something like the rear of a theatre—the entrance for the actors with its seedy and relatively quiet street of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires”] (27). And Saccard extends the familiar term of “bull” from the stock exchange jargon to a theatrical metaphor, comparing himself to a “bleeding bull” that is “galled back into the arena” [*le taureau saignant ramené dans l’arène*] (21). The comparison of the stock exchange to the theatre is not, of course Zola’s invention, and is as old as the stock exchange itself. For one, most of the action in the novel takes place not at the Bourse, but at the Coullisse (which in French means “backstage” or “the wings of the theatre”).

At the time of novel’s publication and at the time of the novel’s events (1864-1869), only a minority of all corporate securities and stocks and bonds issued in France were sold on the Bourse. Instead, these securities were traded either on what was known as the Coullisse in Paris or on the provincial exchanges. The official Paris Bourse remained a market chiefly for *rentes* (government securities) and railway securities until the 1890s. Buying and selling futures took place on the Coullisse, where the banks could participate without government regulation.

Zola does not limit himself solely to representations of financial speculation. Characters who seemingly have nothing to do with the financial world also engage in speculation, like Sigismond, the brother of the powerful stockbroker Busch. Educated in Germany, Sigismond is an aspiring revolutionary who once made the acquaintance of Karl Marx in Cologne in 1849 and begins reading *Capital* hot off the press in 1867. The bedridden Sigismond is a fascinating character not only because he professes Socialism with an ardent faith, giving his entire being to the idea of an approaching social renovation, but also because he speculates in the philosophical sense of the word, imagining the perfect utopian society without money. In fact, his daydreaming

sounds a lot like Saccard's financial speculation in the sense that there is no sight of implementation: "Aussi, à la suite de Karl Marx, avec lequel il était en continuelle correspondance, épuisait-il ses jours à étudier cette organisation, modifiant, améliorant sans cesse sur le papier la société de demain, couvrant de chiffres d'immenses pages, basant sur la science l'échafaudage compliqué de l'universel bonheur." ["And thus, following the example of Karl Marx, with whom he was in constant correspondence, he spent his days studying this organization, incessantly modifying and improving upon paper the society of tomorrow, covering immense pages with figures, building up on the basis of science the complicated scaffolding of universal happiness"] (44). Through the filter of Sigismond's wild imagination, Zola casts the theories of Marx in a satirical light. Like Ibsen, however, Zola had great sympathy for socialism, albeit his own was influenced more by the utopianism of Charles Fourier. (Zola did not see the workers as revolutionary agents, but hoped that reforms could be carried out from the top down).⁹¹

Zola uses the meeting between Saccard, the financial speculator, and Sigismond, the philosophical speculator, as an occasion for his razor-sharp wit and biting irony. The speculations of these two may be poles apart in terms of political allegiances, yet both are more preoccupied with imagining the future than with working to ameliorate the present conditions in real time. Another ironic twist is that Sigismond, the ailing daydreamer, ends up consuming the larger portion of his brother's capital who duly takes care of him: "Et malgré son dur amour de l'argent, sa cupidité assassine qui mettait dans conquête de l'argent unique raison de vivre, il souriait indulgemment des théories du révolutionnaire, il lui abandonnait le capital comme un joujou à un gamin, quitte à le lui voir briser." ["And in spite of his strong love of money, his

⁹¹ Ian Birchall, "Zola for the 21st Century," *International Socialism* 2:96 (Autumn 2002), <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/birchall/2002/xx/zola.htm>. Web. 2 March 2014.

murderous greed, which converted the conquest of money into the single reason for living, he smiled indulgently at the theories of the revolutionary, relinquishing capital to him like a toy to a child, at the risk of seeing him break it] (43).

All these various representations of speculation beg the question: what is *not* speculation in the novel? Zola's answer is: the novel itself. There is only one person who does not lose his fortune to the collapse of Saccard's Universal Bank, which Zola modeled after the collapse of l'Union Générale in 1882 that triggered the worst crisis in the French economy in the nineteenth century. That person is the novelist Jordan who categorically refuses to do anything with the stock market, preferring to take odd journalistic jobs to make ends meet, and who is known for his contempt for money. In fact, the first time he makes an appearance in the novel is when Saccard bumps into him on his way to the Bourse and gently mocks the prudent writer: "Comment, Jordan, vous à la Bourse?" ["What, Jordan, you at the Stock Exchange?"] At the end of *Money*, after we find out just how terribly the crash of the Universal Bank has affected each and every character in the novel (except the powerful and largely invisible capitalists who had lent their capital to Saccard in the first place and who end up with the big slices of the financial pie), we learn about Jordan's unexpected success:

Il venait d'avoir une chance. Après tant d'années de travail ingrate, son premier roman, publié d'abord dans un journal, lancé ensuite par un éditeur, avait pris brusquement l'allure d'un gros succès; et il se trouvait riche de quelques milliers de francs, toutes les portes ouvertes devant lui désormais, brulant de se remettre au travail, certain de la fortune et de la gloire.

[He had just had a piece of luck. After so many years of thankless toil, his first novel, published first in a serial form, and then brought out by a publisher as a book, had suddenly proved a big success; and he now found himself possessed of several thousand francs, with all doors from now on open to him, with a burning desire to set to work again, certain of achieving fortune and glory."] (411)

Amidst the folly and financial ruin of the Second Empire, the art of the novel figures as hard,

honest, and humble labor that depends on implementation, not speculation, and that may one day finally pay off. In this manner, Jordan is portrayed as a foil to no one else but the literary giant Balzac who famously had a penchant for “a good speculation” [*une bonne spéculation*].

Critics have long connected Balzac’s immense literary output to his standing debts and the need to earn money by writing fiction to pay them off. But Balzac also took book publishing as an opportunity to speculate: one of his first business ventures was a publishing enterprise that would churn out cheap editions of French classics. It failed miserably. By contrast, Jordan, a stand-in for Zola himself, is a levelheaded artist who remains above the muck and mire of speculative activity, devoting his time to writing a novel that exposes society’s follies. Jordan stands apart not only from the likes of Saccard, stockbrokers who irresponsibly gamble with shareholders’ money, but also from the likes of Sigismond (and perhaps even Karl Marx), socialist theorists who are preoccupied more with imagining the future than with changing the present.⁹² By contrast, Jordan who from the very beginning says he has “an idea for a novel” (perhaps involving the speculative frenzy that he witnesses around him) is predominantly concerned with reality, i.e. the realistic depictions of society. Thus Zola’s novel still wants to hold onto the fantasy that in the new world of financialization and fluctuating values, where the difference between speculation and investment has become blurry, there still exist solid values like hard work and hard cash. Jordan has his royalty from his book in hand (in francs) and Saccard’s enterprise collapses because a sum of actual money fails to materialize to compensate the strategic bears and panicked shareholders who sell their stocks. Jordan’s novel, in its solid book form, is a product both of imagination and implementation, and, being a trace of sober and strenuous work, it is meant to stand in opposition to the theatricalized world of Saccard’s stock

⁹² Cf. Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”

exchange with its sham performances of credibility and solvency and with its calculating efforts to intoxicate the audience with unrealizable dreams of wealth. In Zola's view, the novel is not a commodity of the speculative market.

And yet Jordan still owes his success to chance. Paradoxically, while Zola's *Money* tries to carve out an ideological space for the novel to stand apart from the economic forces of the market and for the novelist to act as an independent artist who can resist the impulse to speculate, the reader may wonder if the novelist too gambles in a way—by the very choice of his precarious profession (“Il venait d’avoir une chance”). Zola's own novelistic career was not immune to chance. As Bourdieu notes, there had to emerge “objective chances” that guaranteed the conditions of achievement of the naturalist dispositions that Zola and his friends introduced into the field of production. Included in these “objective chances” was the transformation of the market for literary and intellectual work. Bourdieu writes:

...on the one hand, a lowering of the barrier to entry into the literary professions linked to the relatively favorable situation of the market for intellectual work (in the larger sense), offering the jobs necessary to guarantee a minimum of resources to writers deprived of private income (like Zola himself, employed by the Librairie Hachette from 1860 to 1865 and contributor to several newspapers) and on the other hand a literary market in expansion, hence more numerous and more socially varied readers, therefore a market that is potentially inclined to welcome new products. (127-28)

Moreover, the preface to the second English translation of Zola's novel challenges the idea of the novel as a work of art that lies beyond the grip of the market and financial speculation. This 1894 preface written by the translator Ernest Alfred Vizetelly begins by arguing that Zola's *Money* is a novel that exposes the evils of speculation, but is not a mere story of swindling and corruption. According to Vizetelly, whilst proving that money is the root of much evil, Zola's novel also shows that money can be the source of much good. The very last paragraph curiously takes on the language of advertisement, as it turns into an appeal to the reader to send in—some money:

And now, by way of conclusion, I have a request to make. After perusing the story of Saccard's work of ruin, the reader will, perhaps, have a keener perception of all the misery wrought by that Liberator crash to which I have previously alluded. I would point out, however that whereas Saccard's bank was essentially a speculative enterprise, the Liberator and its allied companies claimed that they never embarked in any speculative dealings whatever. Their shareholders had no desire to gamble; they only expected to obtain a fair return from the investment of their hard-earned savings. Their position is therefore deserving of all commiseration. Unfortunately, the fund raised for their benefit still falls far short of the amount required; and so I would ask all who read *Money*, and who have money to spare, to send some little of their store to the Rev. J. Stockwell Watts, at the office of the Fund, 16 Farringdon Street, E.O. In complying with this suggestion they will be doing a good action. And I may say that nothing would afford greater pleasure either to M. Zola or myself than to learn that this book had in some degree contributed to alleviate so much undeserved misery and hardship.⁹³

Vizetelly calls on the reader to become a financial contributor to a supposedly honorable cause, implicitly suggesting that he [Vizetelly] is able to tell a sound investment from a reckless speculation or from a downright swindle. Yet the Liberator affair that he refers to would prove to be one of the most notorious financial scandals of the Victorian era. On 27 November 1895, a London jury would convict the main culprit—businessman Jabez Spencer Balfour. *The Times* called the accused “one of the most impudent and heartless swindlers on record.”⁹⁴ Balfour rose to financial and political eminence in the 1880s, managing a variety of enterprises, the most successful of which was The Liberator Building Society. In a curious instance of life imitating art, like Saccard, Balfour employed quasi-spiritual rhetoric and promoted the bank as the great regenerator of the masses. The terrible crash came in 1892. The final irony is that, after serving time, Balfour lived out his remaining years comfortably, aided by royalties made from his bestselling book: *My Prison Life*. So perhaps there is something to Zola's belief that writing a book was a safer and more honorable financial enterprise than speculation after all.

⁹³ Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, Introduction to Émile Zola, *Money*, 1894, trans. Ernest Alfred Vizetelly (New York: Mondial, 2007), viii.

⁹⁴ David McKie, *Jabez: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Rogue* (London: Atlantic, 2004).

Overall, however, this historical anecdote illustrates that try as it may to raise the art of the novel above the market and above financial speculation Zola's *Money* only implicates itself further in the ideological trenches of capitalist modernity. By stubbornly maintaining that there is an easily found alternative to the destructive lure of capital, such as the tangible and allegedly clean money earned from novel writing, Zola's novel does not present a radical enough portrayal of capitalist culture. In other words, the blind spot of the novel lies in its failure to see how it too is implicated in the all-pervasive march of capital. This naïve belief is what leads Vizetelly to conclude that Zola's *Money* maintains a boundary between "speculative dealings" and "fair investments." Alas, the example that Vizetelly cites only proves that in real life such boundaries were becoming far messier and harder to recognize. It would be Ibsen's great intuition about capitalist culture that the lure of capital is not so easily resisted.

The Comedy of Capital

Just as Zola's *Money* theorizes the position of the novel in capitalist culture so Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* discusses the role of the theatre in the new capitalist modernity. One of the few living souls that Borkman talks to during his eight years of self-imposed confinement is his friend, poet Foldal. Like Borkman, Foldal knows the bitterness of failure: he had written a tragedy when he was young that never made a great enough impression to get staged. It soon becomes evident from their dialogue that the two old friends go through the same ritual, perform the same script, whenever Foldal comes to visit. They validate each other by agreeing with each other's delusional self-assessments. Borkman perfunctorily compliments Foldal's tragedy and Foldal in return listens to Borkman's pipe dream about how the directors of his former bank will one day beg him to come back as president. Borkman has never read Foldal's play and Foldal

does not seem to believe a word of Borkman's fantasies. More interesting still, their exchange offers a metatheatrical commentary on the state of theatre as an art form, as Foldal keeps trying to read his tragedy to Borkman in order to get it placed. In this comic scene we witness the artist trying to persuade his would-be producer to sponsor his project when Foldal says: "Herregud, når jeg nu endelig engang kunde få det anbragt—(begynder ivrigt at åbne og blade i mappen.) Se her! Nu skal jeg vise dig noget, som jeg har forandret—" ["Good god, if I could only get it staged--! (He eagerly opens and browses the portfolio.) Look here! Let me show you something that I've revised—" (92). But Borkman remains uninterested, as he tells Foldal that his tragedy can wait till another time. But another time will never come because the world no longer seems to need tragedies. The times have changed. Unlike Zola's notion of the novel as existing apart from the market, Ibsen's idea of the theatre shows the theatre to be vulnerable to the ebb and flow of economic forces. Audiences no longer want to be lifted up by the high ideals of tragedy through catharsis. They long to be entertained. Yet this does not mean that a play cannot at once be entertaining, make money, and offer a powerful social commentary. Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* proves that a theatre play can critically represent capitalist modernity by showing the world to be a *theatrum mundi* where capital is the new *deus ex machina* that moves the action along and seemingly resolves any unsolvable problem.

As a play *John Gabriel Borkman* flirts with the tragic mode but ends up swerving into the comic register though the relentless expansion of capital. In his conversation with Foldal, Borkman comments on his own life story in metatheatrical terms. When Borkman's rival, Mr. Hinkel, rose to great heights in his career, Borkman plunged to the depths. On hearing this, Foldal immediately labels the events of Borkman's life "a terrible tragedy" [*frygteligt sørgespil*]. Borkman first agrees with Foldal but then laughs and decides that "it is really a kind of comedy"

[*er det virkelig en slags komedie*] (103). Borkman realizes that one human's tragic fall is always another's triumphant rise. Human destinies oscillate like stock market quotes. Or, as Bjørnson's protagonist in *A Bankrupt* remarks: "Down today, up tomorrow." In particular, Borkman discerns a comedy in the way that his own son, Erhart, and Foldal's daughter, Frida, attend parties hosted by the man who ruined him: "Min søn er dernede i de dansendes rækker iaften. Er det så ikke en kommedi, som jeg siger?" ["My son is down there in the dance whirl tonight. Isn't that, just as I say, a comedy?"] (105) And Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* plays out not as a banker's tragedy but as a comedy of capital. Borkman does not commit suicide by his own hand, but is taken away by the grip of an "icy metal hand"—his relentless desire for more capital. Moreover, by the end, the unremitting expansion of capital will subsume all of the characters. The beginning of the play sets up the struggle between the twin sisters, Mrs. Borkman and Ella Rentheim, over Erhart's direction in life. Such an exposition may initially suggest the structure of a Greek tragedy, as defined by Hegel, which depends on the collision and the ultimate reconciliation between two opposing and valid forces, each making too exclusive a claim.⁹⁵ But the fight between the two women is ultimately carried out in vain. Neither wins, and their final reconciliation—the final stage picture is of the two women joining their hands over Borkman's dead body—is futile. They lose both Borkman and his son, becoming, in Ella's words, themselves only "two shadows" [*to skygger*], just like the shadows projected onto the walls of Borkman's bank vault. Borkman's own son falls victim to a kind of icy metal hand personified by Mrs. Wilton, a wealthy, older woman who seduces him. Instead of choosing either his mother or his aunt, Erhart leaves them for Mrs. Wilton, who takes both him and Frida away in her sledge of silver bells. The silver bells of Mrs. Wilton's sledge become a kind of fetishistic object for the

⁹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988-1998).

play's characters. Mrs. Borkman can tell the nearing of Mrs. Wilton's sledge just by the ring of the bells alone. (Ibsen's stage directions indicate the hypnotic sound of the bells offstage). And Borkman's obsession with metal carries to these silver bells as he comments on their genuineness. In a way, Ibsen here is subtly rewriting Hans Christian Andersen's well-known Danish fairytale *Snedronningen* (1844; *The Snow Queen*). In the original tale, the Snow Queen casts a spell over a boy named Kai and keeps him away in her palace until, after many trials and tribulations, Kai's childhood friend Greda finds him and melts his frozen heart with her tears. Mrs. Wilton even compares her seduction of Erhart to a kind of spell that makes him to do her bidding. In Ibsen's version, however, Mrs. Wilton is no fairy sorceress, but rather figures as a personification of capital, as she carries away the progeny of the play, Erhart and Frida, promising to support them. Unlike brave Greda in the fairytale, Frida cannot resist Mrs. Wilton's spell, as the latter takes Frida abroad to help launch her music career. Thus, John Gabriel Borkman is knocked down by "an icy metal hand," while his son falls prey to a modern-day Snow Queen. Moreover, when Mrs. Borkman maliciously hints to Mrs. Wilton that Erhart may one day grow tired of her, or turn his attention to the younger Frida, Mrs. Wilton remains unfazed, as she remarks: "Mændene er så ubestandige, fru Borkman. Og kvinderne ligervis." ["Men are so variable, Mrs. Borkman. And women likewise]" (203). Mrs. Wilton maintains that she knows how to arrange for herself and that she will be fine. Again, there is no tragic end in sight, only the inconstancy of human sentiments. The comic register of *John Gabriel Borkman* reinscribes the status quo in the sense that the *deus ex machina* of capital ties up the loose ends and drives the play to its finale. But it is a dark comedy, perhaps even a modern tragicomedy. The expansion of capital, epitomized in the deification of economic expediency, proves to be a

congealing and destructive force that leaves living beings frozen and dead, or turns them into shadows.

Throughout its history, the stock exchange has often been compared to the theatre.⁹⁶ It is not surprising then that theatre would be interested in staging the economy and in understanding the economic forces of the market. Even the finance novel reverts to theatricality, particularly to the melodramatic mode, to represent the elusive forces of the market and people's economic impulses. While financial melodrama, both on stage and in the novel, represents the market as a stage managed by unscrupulous financiers-puppeteers, Ibsen's comedy of capital shows the difficulty of assigning moral blame in an economy where moral responsibility has become dispersed among many shareholders and customers. In his great finance novel, *Money*, Zola came close to Ibsen in showing the sheer magnitude of speculation's grip on the entire population of the Second Empire, but Zola let the novelist off the hook. Zola's intellectual embraces money but wants to stand apart from the vulgarities of the market. Such artistic independence, as we have seen, is a hypocritical performance of sorts. Paradoxically, it is in exposing theatre's complicity with and vulnerability to the ebb and flow of the market, that Ibsen could critically represent the contradictions of capitalist culture. In Ibsen's drama, the capitalist economy becomes a *theatrum mundi* where the ghosts of old ideals mingle with the new gods of capital

⁹⁶ Edward Chancellor, *Devil Take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation* (London: Macmillan, 1999), x.

The Invisible Stage Hand, or the Drama of Capitalist Realism

Что делать?
—Nikolai Chernyshevsky, 1863.

— Was könnt die Lösung sein?
—Bertolt Brecht, 1942.

Che fare?
—Mario Metz, 1968.

Ibsen's Legacy

It has become a commonplace to note the “Ibsen craze” that swept Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.¹ This craze still continues today as evident in the successes of such contemporary renditions as Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller’s *Ibsen-Saga* and Thomas Ostermeier’s productions of Ibsen’s plays in a directing style that he calls “capitalist realism.”² Moreover, there has been a strong resurgence of scholarly interest in Ibsen’s oeuvre. Toril Moi has reevaluated Ibsen’s legacy in the context of Modernism; Tore Rem has studied the British exoticizing reception of an essentially “provincial” Ibsen; and Narve Fulsås has shown the importance of the market economy and money to Ibsen’s modern breakthrough.³ The well-rehearsed story of Ibsen’s legacy tells how Ibsen’s drama inspired such British and Irish playwrights as John Galsworthy, Harley Granville-Barker, G. Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde to

¹ For excellent surveys of this literary and theatrical phenomenon see Tore Rem, *Henry Gibson/Henrik Ibsen: Den provinsielle verdensdikter*, ed. (Oslo: Cappelen, 2006) and “Blood-poisoned Norway: Henrik Ibsen in Britain, 1872-1914,” Helge Ø. Pharo and Patrick Salmon, eds., *Britain and Norway: Special Relationships* (Akademika Forlag, 2012), 51-72; Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² Marvin Carlson, *Theatre is More Beautiful than War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 166.

³ Narve Fulsås, “Market Economy, Work Discipline and Prose in the Making of Ibsen’s Modern Drama,” *Arts & Econ Conference*, 8 May 2014, Wolfson College, Oxford University. I would like to thank William Mills Todd III for bringing my attention to this conference (which I did not attend) and for telling me about the scholarship of Narve Fulsås.

write “the drama of social reform.”⁴ The following chapter will argue that the amelioration of socio-economic conditions, as important as it was for these playwrights with their socialist inclinations, was not the only aspect at work in their drama that sought to reevaluate the very nature and stakes of critique. Beginning with the modern drama of Henrik Ibsen the tone and the stakes of representing the stock market and speculation on stage change. To be sure, even before the rise of Ibsen, nineteenth-century theatre and Victorian melodrama in particular brimmed with financial plots of deceitful speculators, blackmailing villains, fraudulent joint-stock companies, and seedy banks gone bankrupt, revealing public anxieties over the new culture of financialization.⁵ Yet Ibsen and the British and Irish playwrights writing in his wake represented capitalist culture in a different light. While they certainly looked at the changing world around them with a critical eye, they no longer portrayed financial maneuvers through the lens of moral polarization, neatly dividing the exploiters from the exploited. Instead, they often chose the problem play to express both their ambivalence about capitalist culture and the growing sense that to a certain degree every member of society, including the playwright and the spectator, was complicit in the socio-political realities of the day.

Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society*, the play that got William Archer initially excited about Ibsen and the first of Ibsen’s plays to be performed in English in 1880 in London, was a particular favorite among British and Irish playwrights who would constantly allude to it in their own works. As discussed earlier, *Pillars of Society* is neither an apology for capitalism, nor is it a reductive portrayal of the greedy and self-serving capitalist. Rather, the play shows how men like

⁴ See, for example, Harry Morrison, *The Socialism of Bernard Shaw* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1989); Travis Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and The Socialist Theatre* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994); Judith Evans, *The Politics and Plays of Bernard Shaw* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003); Charles Carpenter, *Bernard Shaw as Artist-Fabian* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel, *Shaw, Synge, Connolly, and Socialist Provocation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).

⁵ Jane Moody, “The Drama of Capital: Risk, Belief, and Liability on the Victorian stage,” *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. Francis O’Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Bernick convince themselves that their private interests *are* public interests, while at the same time dramatizing their doubts and qualms. Bernick justifies his railroad speculations (he invests in the rail line and its surroundings in the hope of gain but with the considerable risk of loss) by insisting that in the long run these financial maneuvers represent the interests of the entire community. A railroad will stimulate business and raise the status of the whole community. Any time a character throws his self-assessment into doubt, however, Bernick becomes defensive and we see him wade through what Shaw identifies in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* as the characters' "continual perplexity" regarding the rightness and wrongness of their actions. When Bernick explains to Lona his reasons for leaving her, he stress his tremendous role and responsibilities in the town:

Do you think I acted as I did from selfish motives? If I had stood alone then, I would have begun all over again with courage. But you do not understand how the life of a businessman, with his tremendous responsibilities, is bound up with that of the business that he has inherited. Do you not realize that the prosperity or the ruin of hundreds—or thousands—depends on him? Can you not consider the fact that the whole community in which both you and I were born would have been shaken if the house of Bernick had gone to smash?

Bernick's speech foreshadows the lament of mill owner Dreißiger from Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die Weber* (1892; *The Weavers*) who complains that his laborers do not appreciate "the tremendous risk" that he runs as the head of the textile corporation and the jobs that his business creates. We are also not far away from Shaw's armaments manufacturer Andrew Undershaft of *Major Barbara* (1905) whose profits help build a seemingly healthy, poverty-free, "smokeless town of white walls" for his workers. Bernick's "great and good works" are also seen everywhere in the town from the Recreation Ground, which is marked as "the gift of Karsten Bernick," to the dinners for the poor that he regularly funds. While Bernick admits that these deeds of good will are meant in part to encourage positive publicity ("I should stand well in

every respect with the town and with the Press”), he also clearly sees himself as a great benefactor of his native town for which he does care (47).

What is both unsettling and fascinating in the case of Shaw is that, although Shaw called himself “a revolutionary writer,” so many of his plays paradoxically deal with the waning of revolutionary energy and the irresistible seduction of capital.⁶ And, although Shaw continued to believe in socialism throughout his life, his works are far removed from socialist realism that would be defined in 1934 in the Soviet Union as the truthful and historically concrete artistic representation of reality in “in its revolutionary development.”⁷ If anything, Shaw’s truthful and concrete artistic representation shows social reality at a political impasse and at an intellectual standstill. His early plays such as *Widowers’ Houses* (1892), *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893), and *Major Barbara* (1905) tell the story of how a young idealist fails to rebel against the prevailing capitalist order and becomes another clog in the machine.⁸ In fact, the troubling reaffirmation of the status quo and the seeming lack of alternatives— instead of reality in “in its revolutionary development”— becomes a frequent motif in what we may call the drama of capitalist realism.⁹

Incidentally, Mark Fisher has recently defined capitalist realism as “a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and

⁶ Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Major Barbara, Pygmalion and Major Barbara* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 44.

⁷ Abram Tertz, *The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism*, trans. Max Hayward and George Dennis, intro Czeslaw Milosz (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1960.

⁸ An exception is Shaw’s 1934 *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, which is a utopian play, but this chapter will deal with the early works of Shaw that he wrote under the influence of Ibsen.

⁹ The term “capitalist realism” was first used in the title—*Demonstration for Capitalist Realism*—a 1963 art exhibition in Düsseldorf, featuring the works of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Wolf Vostell. The artists depicted Germany’s growing consumer culture and media-saturated society, influenced by American Pop Art, but with a more critical angle. Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art*, 7th ed. (Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 847.

education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constricting thought and action.”¹⁰ Fisher uses the term to describe the ideology that “not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (2). According to Fisher, capitalist realism is characterized by the fantasy of the infinite expansion of capital and by “reflexive impotence.” That is, people “know things are bad, but more than that, they can’t do anything about it” (21).

In this chapter, “capitalist realism” will be used as an aesthetic category describing the formal features of the plays as well as production styles (such as Thomas Ostermeier’s), although some aspects of this aesthetic category will no doubt echo those of Fisher’s discussion of ideology. However, the key difference between the aesthetic category of capitalist realism and the ideological one, as defined by Fisher, is that the first might offer an antidote to the latter by provoking the kind discussion that Fisher argues has been depleted. The reason that capitalist realism seems a fitting label to designate the work of British and Irish playwrights writing in the wake of Ibsen is that they are often described as *realist* playwrights who revolted against melodrama and the *pièce bien faite*. The argument of this chapter is that their realism also captures their ambivalent attitude toward capitalist culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The most common motifs in the drama of capitalist realism include the negotiation of a deal with echoes of the Faustian bargain, toxic inheritances, and what Shaw dubbed “tainted money.”¹¹ These features spotlight the perpetuation of the status quo and leave the problem of how to bring about social change largely unresolved within the scope of the play. If Greek tragedy, as defined by Hegel, shows the collision and the ultimate reconciliation between two

¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009), 16.

¹¹ Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Major Barbara, Pygmalion and Major Barbara* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 22.

opposing and valid forces, each making an exclusive claim, then the problem play of capitalist realism dramatizes the negotiation and the signing of a business deal between political idealists and realists, resulting in a significant loss for the idealists.¹² Indeed, the motifs of the “compromise,” the “deal,” and “moderation” that Aslaksen, the chairman of the homeowners association, keeps bringing up in Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (“moderation is the most valuable virtue a citizen can possess”), appear time and again in capitalist realist drama. The conflict in these plays is shown to take place on the surface, while the foundations remain unshaken. And the winners are the characters that are able to reach a compromise that perpetuates the status quo and guarantees the expansion of capital. In John Galsworthy’s *Strife* (1909), for example, the strife between the employers and laborers and the resulting deaths turn out to be in vain, given the fact that the terms that are drawn up in the end are exactly the same ones that the Secretary of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works and the Trades Union official suggest to both sides before the fight even begins. In fact, the Chairman of the Tin Plate Works and the directors are at the complete mercy of the invisible shareholders, as they keep worrying about their satisfaction throughout the play: “We ought to think of the shareholders” (16). The true winners are neither the managers nor the workers, but the absent shareholders who continue to receive their dividends as though nothing has happened. The problem of how to bring about social change remains unresolved in the end. The *deus ex machina* that perfunctorily takes care of the plot and the unsolvable moral problem at the end of capitalist realist plays is often nothing less than the invisible hand of the market, which makes its material grasp felt on stage through the presence of financial shares either through the mention of shareholders or through a document showing the prices of stocks.

¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988-1998).

It should come as no surprise then that formally the drama of capitalist realism is often a comedy, albeit a dark one, since the genre of comedy usually reaffirms the status quo that is threatened in the beginning. Time and again, we witness characters abandon their idealism, join the general covering-up of corruption, and become part of the system that they once hoped to challenge and change. In other words, these dramatic works not only represent reality as it is, but also probe political realism and the acceptance of reality as it is. As Adolphus Cusins sums it up in *Major Barbara*: “What I am now selling [my soul] for is neither money nor position nor comfort, but for *reality* and power” (171, my ital.). Yet the approach of these playwrights is not simply that of critique, as they stress their own complicity in the state of affairs and question the ability to resist the lure of capital.

Toxic Inheritances

One manner in which the lure of capital is expressed in the drama of capitalist realism is through the theme of toxic inheritances passed from one generation to another—a vicious cycle that proves impossible to break. In Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society*, Bernick’s inheritance of his family’s firm comes with a certain understanding of authority and responsibility. Similarly, in the plays of Shaw and Granville-Barker, whose most famous play signals this theme in its very title—*The Voysey Inheritance* (1905), the heirs must deal with their parents’ debts from unscrupulous or simply unlucky financial maneuvers. When Lona asks Bernick the identity of the real thief who was making free with the cash-box of *Bernick & Co*, he answers: “There was no thief. There was no money stolen—not a penny” (101). Bernick simply inherited the company after his mother was “involved in a mesh of injudicious undertakings” and the family “had all manner of bad luck” (101). In other words, *Bernick & Co* made a few poor investment choices

that did not pay off. Nobody is to blame. It was simply a matter of “bad luck,” or “Providence,” or what sometimes happens in financial speculation. It is around this unstable time that Bernick initiates his liaison with the married actress to “deaden [his] thoughts,” which will come to haunt him later in the play when he most needs his public image to be impeccable.

The businessman who takes risks with his financial portfolio as well as his personal life is a common trope in Ibsen (*The Wild Duck* and *The Master Builder* are two other salient examples) and in plays inspired by Ibsen (Willy Lotman’s extramarital fling in Arthur Miller’s *Death of A Salesman*), revealing the public anxieties over the risk-taking that capitalist culture promotes. How should responsibility for risk-taking in business ventures and speculation be construed? Where is the line between intelligent investment and reckless speculation? What makes one individual competent and reliable to take on the risks of others? These are questions that animated public discussions during Ibsen’s time and that are still with us today.

In Nicholas Jarecki’s Ibsenesque film *Arbitrage* (2012), for example, that joins the ranks of films exploring the 2008 world economic crisis, a venture capitalist Robert Miller (Richard Gere) tries to sell his profitable and prestigious hedge fund. Mr. Miller is also a “pillar of society,” donating money to cancer research and appearing on the cover of *Forbes* after he predicted the house market crash and made a substantial profit from his prognosis. But Mr. Miller’s good deeds and smart financial decisions are only smoke and mirrors, as he has cooked his company’s books in order to hide an investment loss. At the same time, he tries to cover up the fact that he was in the car with his mistress when it crashed, leaving him unscathed and her—dead. The investment loss was not entirely his fault—the copper mines in Russia simply did not turn out as lucrative as he had hoped—just as the car accident is not entirely his fault either. Yet both are indirect results of Miller’s risk-taking. And, like Bernick, Miller considers the risks that

he takes as ultimately beneficial for society as a whole: it is the gain from his capital ventures that helps finance the charities that he and his wife fund. Furthermore, Miller's daughter and business partner Brooke learns in the course of the film that she is a trustee of her father's toxic inheritance. At first, she tries to defy her father's decision to hide the corruption. By the end of the film, however, she tacitly agrees to join in the cover-up of her father's misdemeanors to save her family from ruin and prison.

This is the same dilemma that is faced by Edward, the protagonist of Granville-Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance* (1905), adapted and revived by David Mamet in 2006. When Edward finds out that his family's trust and estate law firm has been speculating with their clients' money in the course of several generations, he tries to set the record straight by cutting paychecks to his family members and by refusing to pay blackmail. His relatives, creditors, and his father's old business partners, however, all resist Edward's decision and impede his good intentions. When one of his clients threatens to disclose the illegal machinations of The Voysey Trust, Edward must face imprisonment. The future of Edward and his family estate remains uncertain at the end of the play. Indeed, the drama of capitalist realism does not resolve the moral problems that it presents to its audience, often requiring a *deus ex machina* to perfunctorily tie up the loose ends, while leaving the answers to the issues raised open-ended.

In a way, the British and Irish playwrights of capitalist realism were responding to questions left by Henrik Ibsen who by 1889 became the darling of the London avant-garde theatre scene. As Toril Moi has persuasively argued "the true aesthetic antithesis of modernism is not realism, but idealism," and Ibsen, whose plays critique idealism should be rethought as influencing not only modern drama, but also modernism.¹³ While Moi describes Ibsen as a

¹³ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

modernist, she also stresses his political idealism (which was not uncommon in modernism), noting that “in its most radical political form, [the] utopian and perfectionist vision stayed with Ibsen throughout his life” (71). Still, as we will soon see, in *An Enemy of the People* (1882; *En folkefiende*), Ibsen already begins to probe and challenge these utopian and perfectionist visions, which Galsworthy, Granville-Barker, and Wilde would further chip away at and that Bernard Shaw would smash. In order to see the remnants of idealism in Ibsen that these later playwrights were set on overturning, it is productive to turn to *An Enemy of the People*, with its latent lure of capital, that contemporary directors like Ostermeier would detect and magnify.

Troubled Waters

Instead of focusing on one capitalist in particular, *An Enemy of the People* presents a panorama of a community of a small coastal town in Norway, where things have been looking up since the public development of the Baths—a nineteenth-century version of a health and spa resort. The town has invested a large amount of public and private money into the project. In other words, instead of looking at the corporation from the point of view of the CEO, this time Ibsen gives us a bird’s-eye view of it, thereby revealing how all members of the community that harbors a corporation are implicated in its proceedings. According to the mayor Peter Stockmann, there is “business doing in the town,” “houses and landed property are rising in value every day,” and “unemployment is diminishing” (8). All that is needed to seal the deal is “a good summer” and “lots of visitors—plenty of invalids” to spread the word and establish the town as a tourist getaway (9). There have been “many inquiries about apartments,” so it seems that the town’s investment will pay off (9). The mayor’s brother Doctor Thomas Stockmann has agreed to write a scientific article about the sanitary and salubrious conditions of the waters for

the *People's Messenger*, crowning the marketing of the Baths with the-doctor-recommended review. And then Thomas Stockmann makes the inconvenient discovery that the waters are poisonous. Moreover, the worst pollution comes from the tannery of Morten Kiil, the adoptive father of Stockmann's wife. This is an important detail that is easily overlooked in the beginning of the play, but that will come back in the end to haunt Thomas Stockmann.

To idealist Thomas, the situation is “a plain, straightforward thing” (45). The Baths project should be stopped immediately and the town must build a sewer to draw off the impurities from the Molledal tannery and relay the water conduits. Initially, both the liberal press, headed by Hovstad, and the Householders Association, chaired by Aslaksen, offer their support, until they find out the price they will have to pay. As the mayor mentions, “the proprietors of the Baths are not in a position to incur any further expense,” so the financial burden will fall hardest on the small taxpayers—the town's majority represented by Aslaksen (90). The liberal-minded press, which is struggling to stay afloat during financially unstable times, switches sides when they learn that Thomas Stockmann has no capital. As Aslaksen succinctly puts it: “You can pay too dearly for a thing sometimes; that is my opinion” (108). Yet it is neither simple greed, nor the reluctance to pay higher taxes that causes the entire community to turn against Thomas and brand him “an enemy of the people.” Eschewing hackneyed plots and the simple charge of social hypocrisy, Ibsen gives us a nuanced scenario of how it is possible for a community to believe in truth and freedom in principle and to act otherwise in reality. Peter Stockmann makes a persuasive and pragmatic claim that even if the town were to make the sacrifice, raise the money, and relay the water pipes, their future would be doomed. And it is not only the present investment loss that the mayor has in mind, but the future reputation of the town as well. How could any visitor trust their community after finding out the reason behind the

delay? During the time that it would take for the town to turn the whole project around, “other towns in the neighborhood with qualifications to attract visitors for bathing purposes,” would promote their own health resorts by besmirching their small community. The good intentions of the town would have been in vain. The mayor then proposes that Thomas and he reach a compromise. If Thomas gives his stamp of approval now, then later down the line “the Committee will not be disinclined to consider the question of how far it might be possible to introduce certain improvements consistently with a reasonable expenditure” (56). In other words, Peter Stockmann offers his brother a Faustian bargain that the latter ultimately refuses.

Shun by the entire community, Thomas Stockmann shows up to the town hall meeting and delivers a rant of a speech the thesis of which is that “the most dangerous enemy of truth and freedom amongst us is the compact majority.” The play ends with Dr. Stockmann professing that he will continue his fight by himself and claiming that “the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone” (164). Like Bernick’s speech, Thomas’s ramblings have not impressed critics, some even criticizing Ibsen for aristocratic leanings. Ibsen chooses to deal with the stalemate that his protagonist finds himself in by giving him the chance to proclaim that he will not be moved to corruption even if its means standing alone. The success of Thomas’s revolt, however, is uncertain given the tempting proposition that he receives at the end of the play and the very manner in which Ibsen’s drama is framed.

The exposition and the denouement of *An Enemy of the People* are punctuated with the appearance of Morten Kiil, Thomas’s father-in-law and the owner of the Molledal tannery. During Kiil’s first visit, the tanner insinuates that Thomas’s discovery of the poisonous waters is an entertaining and useful fiction meant to ruin the board of the Baths from which Kiil was once expelled. And Kiil advises Thomas to “keep up this game for all it is worth.” Thomas initially

dismisses this remark, assuming that the “old chap doesn’t believe a word of all this about the water supply” (39). Kiil’s supposed signs of dotage are later revealed to be a speculator’s careful assessment of the financial climate. Kiil does not care whether or not the waters are actually polluted, but only what the official pronouncement about the water supply can do for his business. He knows, in other words, that speculation is largely a feat of the imagination. At the end of the drama, it is revealed that Kiil has used all of the inheritance money meant for Thomas’s wife to buy the shares of the Baths, which he then presents to Thomas. At the end of the drama, they are worth nothing, but if Dr. Stockmann should change his stance on the quality of the waters and announce that the Baths are safe after all, the shares will skyrocket. After Kiil’s departure, Hovstad and Aslaksen show up apologizing profusely for their conduct toward Thomas at the town hall meeting. Now that word has spread that Thomas’s father-in-law has been acquiring all the shares of the Baths, Hovstad and Aslaksen suspect that Dr. Stockmann’s claim about the water supply was part of a ploy to drive down the prices of stocks. They are thus more willing to accept Thomas as a savvy speculator seeking profit than as an idealist who wants to change society, and so they offer to represent him and his family in the best light to the public. Essentially, the two blackmail Thomas and ask for a percentage of his profits. As Hovstad reminds Thomas, “this affair of the shares can be represented in two ways!” (157) Ibsen chooses to end his drama with Thomas utterly disgusted at the society in which he finds himself, as he chases Hovstad and Aslaksen out of his house with an umbrella and tells his wife that he is prepared to “drive all the wolves out of the country” (164).

Thomas Ostermeier’s 2012 production of a radically transformed adaptation *An Enemy of the People* by Florian Borchmeyer for the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz cast a shadow of doubt

over Thomas Stockmann's ability to resist Morten Kiil's Faustian bargain.¹⁴ Instead of emphasizing Thomas's stubbornness and strength of will, this contemporary version chose to highlight the lure of capital latent in Ibsen. In the last stage picture, Thomas and his wife are at the end of their rope. Shun by their community, fired from their jobs, and given notice of eviction, they sit on their living room couch drinking beer. A baby is heard wailing in the background. They pick up the document for the shares left by Morten Kiil, read the numbers, and look at one another. The lights go out, and the audience is left in pitch dark to contemplate whether the decision to go ahead with Kiil's plan is an unforgivable sign of weakness, or whether the decision not to is an act of insanity. With a family to support what is Thomas Stockmann to do? In fact, the production focused on the family as the most potent unit of socialization and the strongest pull that society exerts on individuals to concede and comply with the status quo. The almost incessant wailing of the Stockmann's baby drove this point home. Moreover, Borchmeyer and Ostermeier did away with last vestige of idealism in Ibsen—the belief in the integrity of scientific research. In Ibsen's original version, when Morten Kiil mentions that if Thomas sticks with his “mad idea” he stands to lose everything, Dr. Stockmann briefly entertains the idea that “it might be possible for science to discover some prophylactic [...] or some antidote of some kind” for the poisonous waters (151). Yet he quickly abandons this hypothesis as “nonsense” based on his grasp of science, and Ibsen does not venture into the dark place of imagining what would happen if scientific research were to go corporate and bend its results to fit the demands of the market. Marx hints at this possibility when he writes that “invention becomes a business, and the application of science to direct production itself becomes

¹⁴ My discussion of Thomas Ostermeier's production is based on its 2013 performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, part of the Next Wave Festival.

a prospect which determines and solicits it.”¹⁵ For Ostermeier’s production, Borchmeyer adds a few disturbing lines to Morten Kiil’s selling pitch to Dr. Stockmann in order to show just how seductive capital can be. In Borchmeyer’s version, instead of trying to win Stockmann over with promises of financial security and wealth, Kiil reminds Thomas that no scientific discovery is a hundred percent accurate—what if he made a computation mistake somewhere along the line? What if the waters are not as detrimental as the first tests have shown? Maybe, Kiil hypothesizes, Thomas took his samples on a day that the level of pollution was way off the charts because of some freakish aberration. In other words, Kiil tries to seduce Thomas with the language of science by offering him a scientific justification for accepting the shares. He invites the scientist to “speculate” in the broad sense of the word, that is, to imagine a variety of possible scenarios, so that the meaning of truth itself becomes porous, relative, and ultimately up for grabs. Indeed, Ostermeier defines his productions style—capitalist realism—as one “where every reading and interpretation is allowed... where the self-determination of an essential kernel within a subjective individual no longer exists, when all can be deconstructed.”¹⁶ In this context, realism is “not the simple depiction of the world as it appears,” but “a view of the world with an attitude that involves an alienation born out of suffering and injury” and includes “the tragedy of everyday life.”¹⁷

What is more, Kiil suggests that if Thomas were to gain control of the Baths, he will have the power to use science for good and maybe even discover an antidote for the waters, if the subsequent tests still show that they are dangerous. Here again we see the capitalist ideology of optimism that takes hold of Ibsen’s protagonists hoping the market will eventually swing in their

¹⁵ Marx, *The Grundrisse, The Marx-Engels Reader*, 283.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Carlson, 166.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 166-67.

favor. Kiil encourages Thomas to view the process of scientific discovery itself as a financial speculation, inviting him to bet on the future possibility of an invention that will eventually make the Baths a safer place and make up for the present cover-up. What is the use of Thomas remaining forever a *persona non grata*? All that Thomas would be agreeing to is letting the Baths function in their present condition for the time necessary for the investments to pay off. This argument—that one can only fight the corrupted system when one is within that system—is precisely the rhetoric that Andrew Undershaft will use to persuade the gentle professor of Greek Adolphus Cusins to come work for his ammunitions empire in Shaw’s *Major Barbara*. Undershaft suggests that in order to “make war on war” Cusins will need the weapons of war and the latter bites the bait. Undershaft ultimately does not care what hopes and ideals lead Cusins into his corporation. Like the young man’s last attempt at independence—his announcement that he will only work during the “healthy, rational hours eleven to five,” Undershaft knows that such hopes and ideals will soon be forgotten in the daily reality of business: “Come when you please: before a week you will come at six and stay until I turn you out for the sake of your health” (169).

In the original text of *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen’s way out of the stalemate of a corrupted system was to end the play on a cry of despair. We hear one lone man’s voice of reason challenging the whole system that he faces. Written in the wake of the public outcry over his scandalous *Gengangere* (1882; *Ghosts*), it is tempting to read the conclusion of *An Enemy of the People*, as Ibsen’s own challenge to his audience. When *Ghosts* was published in 1881, theatres across Europe refused to touch the script. Even Frederick Hegel, Ibsen’s publisher, thought his client had gone too far, since he made him lose a considerable amount of money.¹⁸ Through the voice of his protagonist, the playwright declares that he will continue to speak the

¹⁸ Ferguson, 249.

truth and to disclose the rotten foundations of society no matter how vehemently his audience protests. The capitalist realist playwrights, writing in the wake of Ibsen, however, would turn the critical blade onto themselves. Instead of singling out paragons of resistance, their plays would highlight the complicity of each and every member in perpetuating the social order through the motifs of “tainted money” and toxic inheritances. In the Preface to *Major Barbara*, Shaw writes that railway shareholders “kill and maim shunters by hundreds to save the cost of automatic couplings, and make atonement by annual subscriptions to deserving charities;” yet right after “shareholders” he is sure to add in a parenthetical statement—“I am one” (47). Rather than imagining a way out of the stalemate, these playwrights made the intellectual stalemate and the political gridlock the very source of dramatic tension in their work. Despite the myriad conflicts and fights that take place on stage, very little gets done, and the status quo is reaffirmed. Yet this troubling reaffirmation is a perversely happy ending that is meant to leave the audience with a bad aftertaste. Indeed, Ostermeier’s version of *An Enemy of the People* highlighted precisely this sense of complicity and the feeling of “we are all in this together” by breaking the fourth wall of the town assembly of Act IV and turning the space of Harvey Theatre into a public forum on capitalism. For about twenty minutes, audience members were invited to voice their thoughts on Doctor Thomas Stockmann’s denunciation of capitalism. The actors stepped off stage and moved in the aisles with microphones, soliciting the opinions of spectators. The special twist of the production was that Stockmann’s original speech about the tyranny of the majority was replaced with excerpts from the incendiary 2008 political manifesto *The Coming Insurrection*, a French political tract that hypothesizes “the imminent collapse of capitalist culture,” allegedly written by the Invisible Committee.

Oscar Wilde's New Ending for *Pillars of Society*

On the surface, Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895), might appear to be a merry comedy of manners revolving around blackmail and political corruption in the vein of Victorian financial melodramas. Although Wilde certainly borrows conventions such as the incriminating letter, the figures of the dandy and the adventuress as well as the causally related plot from melodrama and the *pièce bien faite*, he recombines them in a subversive and darkly satirical manner to probe the very definition of "speculation," as we will later see.

Although Oscar Wilde has often been dubbed "the English Sardou," he bristled at this sobriquet and often lamented that his plays were misunderstood. As Kerry Powell has shown, Wilde was interested in the dramatic oeuvre of Ibsen and considered his own work for the theatre to be on equal footing.¹⁹ In a 1893 letter to Bernard Shaw, Wilde writes: "... your little book on Ibsenism and Ibsen is such a delight to me that I constantly take it up, and I always find it stimulating and refreshing: England is the land of intellectual fogs but you have done much to clear the air."²⁰ Among the books that Wilde asked his friend Robert Ross to bring him when Wilde was about to be released from prison were Ibsen's recently published *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. In fact, Powell reads Wilde's dramatic feat in *An Ideal Husband* as writing "a new ending" for Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*. Indeed, both dramas deal with the tainted pasts of their heroes who at the beginning of the dramatic action are esteemed as the paragons of moral excellence in their respected communities. According to Powell, in *Pillars of Society*, Bernick supposedly expiates his secret shame by a public confession, whereas, in *An Ideal Husband*,

¹⁹ Kerry Powell, "Wilde and Ibsen." *English Language in Transition, 1880-1920* 28.3 (1985), 224.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

Lord Goring advises Chiltern to confess only to his wife and not to the public.²¹ Eventually, Lady Chiltern too agrees to join the cover-up. Powell notes that with this ending, Wilde takes Ibsen's drama to its cynical conclusion and tries to "out-Ibsen" Ibsen.²² As mentioned earlier, however, the cynicism and perversity are already latent in Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*. The parallels between the two plays lie not only in the similarities between the main characters and the plot twists, but also in their interest in the language that individuals use to justify their actions and in the ways that socio-corporate ethics saturates this language. Before delving into the play's use of language, a quick glance at the plot and the terms of the financial blackmail is helpful.

The intrigue sets into motion with the arrival of Mrs. Cheveley who knows incriminating details about the ignoble origin of Sir Robert Chiltern's political success and wealth. Chiltern laid the foundation of his fortune by selling a Cabinet secret to a stock exchange speculator. When Chiltern was Lord Radley's secretary, he wrote a letter to Baron Arnheim in Vienna, advising the latter to buy Suez Canal shares—a letter written three days before the Government announced its own purchase. As late Arnheim's mistress, Mrs. Cheveley is privy to this classified information and even has the said letter in her possession. She arrives in England with the intent of selling this letter to Chiltern in exchange for his public support of the Argentine Canal scheme where she has invested (with the Baron's advice) a substantial amount of capital. What is most interesting in this imbroglio is not necessarily the blackmail or the salacious details of Mrs. Cheveley's private life (like in Ibsen, financial risk-taking of characters is echoed in their sexual peccadilloes), but the battle of wits between Chiltern and Cheveley, as they negotiate not only the terms of their financial exchange, but also the very definition of "speculation." Without giving away her cards—the fact that she has the incriminating letter— Mrs. Cheveley first asks

²¹ Ibid., 234.

²² Ibid.

Chiltern to explain to her what differentiates the Suez Canal scheme from the Argentine one.

Believing that he holds all the power in the situation, Chiltern assumes high moral ground.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Yes. But the Suez Canal was a very great and splendid undertaking. It gave us our direct route to India. It had imperial value. It was necessary that we should have control. This Argentine scheme is a commonplace Stock Exchange swindle.

MRS. CHEVELEY. A speculation, Sir Robert! A brilliant, daring speculation.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Believe me, Mrs. Cheveley, it is a swindle. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes matters simpler. We have all the information about it at the Foreign Office. In fact, I sent out a special Commission to inquire into the matter privately, and they report that the works are hardly begun, and as for the money already subscribed, no one seems to know what has become of it. The whole thing is a second Panama, and with not a quarter of the chance of success that miserable affair ever had. I hope you have not invested in it. I am sure you are far too clever to have done that. (33)

What is at stake in this first exchange is the difference between a speculation and a swindle.

When is a speculation “a brilliant, daring” undertaking meant for the development of a future project and when is it a mere fraud, a get-rich-quick scheme, that should be called a swindle? As historian Edward Chancellor notes, what quickly became apparent during the Railway Mania of 1840s, for example, was the fact that “not all speculators were interested in the long-term future of the railways.” Many speculators simply hoped to sell their stocks when the prices were still high—they had no faith in the railway project (which often was completely fictitious to begin with) and, in some cases, they even expected the bubble to burst.²³ It did. The Railway Mania set in motion events that would cause the great financial crisis of 1847. A letter in the *Times* from 12 July 1845 emphasized the self-serving attitude of railway speculators: “There is not a single dabbler in scrip who does not steadfastly believe—first, that a crash sooner or later, is inevitable; and, secondly, that he himself will escape it. When the luck turns, and the crack play is *sauve qui peut*, or devil take the hindmost, no one fancies that the last mail turn from Panic station will

²³ Chancellor, 136.

leave him behind.”²⁴ Moreover, according to economic historian Charles Kindleberger, “speculation often develops in two stages.”²⁵ During the first stage, firms and experienced investors go in, anticipating real benefits from the construction of real railroads, whereas, during the second phase, “professional company promoters—many of them rogues interested only in quick profits—tempted a different class of investors, including ladies and clergymen.”²⁶ This is why Chiltern admits to Mrs. Cheveley that the British Foreign Office made inquiries into the validity of the Argentine Canal to see whether this was indeed a project whose subscribers came together in order to see something built, or whether capital enterprise was fictitiously and hastily raised in attempt to get rich through speculation and then abandon the project. Because “the works are hardly begun” and nobody knows where the invested money went, the British government decides not to lend its support. Yet, Chiltern also inevitably slips here and reveals that governmental support is often needed to legitimize speculation and to make the fictitious real, especially when there are interests in colonial expansion at hand. The news that the British Government acquired shares in the Suez Canal increased the value of the stocks, made the project trustworthy, and helped raise capital necessary for its execution. One point worth stressing about how the canal and railway corporations functioned in the nineteenth century is that once a company was registered, “the subscription certificates for its shares (scrip), on which only a tenth of the capital had been paid (the rest would be ‘called’ later when construction was underway), could be traded in the market.”²⁷ In other words, it was no longer necessary to obtain all the capital that a given project needed or might need before speculating with its subscriptions.

²⁴ Qtd. in Chancellor, 136.

²⁵ Charles P. Kindleberger and Robert Z. Aliber, *Manias, Panics and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises*, 6th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁷ Chancellor, 129.

It was then tempting to try to earn profit from fluctuations in security prices and to leave the game of speculation before the project was completed or before it collapsed.

The reference to the Panama Canal scheme (“The whole thing is a second Panama”) is not accidental, as Wilde was writing *An Ideal Husband* in the midst of the public scandal surrounding the abysmal failure of the Panama Canal project. Although undertaken in the wake of the successful completion of the Suez Canal, the construction of the Panama Canal was from the start fraught with financial, engineering, and labor problems, as it became abundantly clear that a sea-level canal was unfeasible. In 1889, the company *La Société internationale du Canal interocéanique*, headed by Ferdinand de Lesseps (also in charge of the triumphant Suez Canal), went bankrupt, and its collapse was a major scandal in France. The Americans under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt would take over the French property in 1904, so not all the initial efforts were in vain. Still, in 1893, when Wilde began to write *An Ideal Husband*, the project was deemed an embarrassing and colossal fiasco on the part of the French government.

That Wilde, like his hero, was “interested in International Canal schemes,” is evidenced by the fact that he dedicated *An Ideal Husband* to editor and publisher Frank Harris. According to Harris, the story for the play was inspired by an anecdote that he once told Wilde. Harris’s first edition of *An Ideal Husband* (Hyde Collection) contains the following note written in Harris’s hand:

This book came from a story I heard in Egypt about Lord Rothschild and Disraeli. Rothschild wanted to get back money he had loaned to Ismail Pasha, Khedive of Egypt. He persuaded Disraeli to buy Suez Canal shares from the Egyptian Government through his house. Rothschild of course added his previous debt to commission and so netted two birds with one throw. I thought of a drama on the subject and told it to Oscar Wilde who used the story in this play.²⁸

²⁸ Quoted in Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 1131.

Whether or not this episode served as an inspiration for *An Ideal Husband* is, of course, impossible to know for certain. What was widely known in Wilde's time, however, was that the political career of Benjamin Disraeli, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom until 21 April 1880, was steeped in financial speculation. The young Disraeli bought shares of the Bolivar Mining Association in the 1820s in hopes of attaining wealth and power. The crash of the mining market undermined these hopes and put Disraeli into severe debt, which was not forgiven for a quarter of a century. These events in part form the background of Disraeli's first novel published in 1826, *Vivian Grey*. Despite his initial financial failure, Disraeli managed to carry out one of the most brilliant investments on behalf of the British government. In 1875, the Prime Minister purchased for the British Government a half-share in the Suez Canal. Bought for four million pounds; half a century later the Suez shares were worth forty million.²⁹ The anecdote that Frank Harris told to Wilde hints at the involvement of business insiders such as Lord Rothschild.

Thus, the exchange between Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Chiltern is not simply a melodramatic episode of the fallen woman blackmailing the would-be corrupted state official, but also an inquiry into circumstances that make a financial scheme a legitimate speculation and ones that make it a fraud. When Chiltern, realizing that he is cornered, asks: "My God! What brought you into my life?" Mrs. Cheveley responds: "Circumstances" (40). And when his wife is appalled at the news that Chiltern will go ahead and support the Argentine speculation, he tries to reason with her that "circumstances alter things" (49). Because the government's financial interests are often intimately tied to those of business (Disraeli and Rothschild) the very definition of political corruption as it pertains to financial speculation becomes murky, as it is constantly redefined by various interested parties and the introduction of new legal injunctions. When Mrs. Cheveley

²⁹ Chancellor, 115.

alludes to Chiltern's selling a Cabinet secret, he tries to dismiss his action by calling it a speculation and not an act of corruption:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. The affair to which you allude was no more than a speculation. The House of Commons had not yet passed the bill; it might have been rejected.

MRS. CHEVELEY: It was a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simple. And now I am going to sell you that letter, and the price I ask for it is your public support of the Argentine scheme. You made your own fortune out of one canal. You must help me and my friends to make our fortunes out of another! (37)

In this second instance of repartee, Wilde uses repetition (Mrs. Cheveley throws Chiltern's words about "a swindle" right back at him) to draw attention to the ambiguous concept of "speculation." The "brilliant, daring speculation" of Mrs. Cheveley here becomes "no more than a speculation" from Chiltern's point of view. His argument comes down to the fact that since the House of Commons had not yet voted on the matter there was no way to know for certain whether the British Government would acquire the Suez Canal shares or not, though his insider status no doubt helped him gauge the risk and potentials of the political climate. He too was speculating on nothing less than his political career, but with the advantage of having information not yet available to the public. "What's in a name?" one might ask. Does it really matter whether we call the financial machinations of Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Chiltern "speculation" or "swindle"? It does matter in the sense that the ambiguity in the language points to the contradictory relations between government and business in capitalist culture where the government engages in buying and selling shares, while at the same time attempting to regulate business practices.

In this light, the etymology of the word "swindle" is relevant, as it entered the English language at the end of the eighteenth century through the culture of financial speculation. The

English “swindler” comes from the German *Schwindler* meaning “giddy person, extravagant speculator, cheat,” from the verb *schwindeln* “to be giddy, act extravagantly, lie,” and makes its first appearance in the English language in 1774, in other words, on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution.³⁰ Essentially, the difference between a speculation and a swindle, both of which are financial fictions that project onto the future, can be seen as a matter of degree. Speculation is a realist fiction that has a feasible project in mind, whereas a swindle is an “extravagant speculation” and a tall tale with little basis in reality. Notice too that Wilde chose to have a fictitious project at the center of his drama—the Argentine Canal (a name invented by Wilde)—to highlight the fictional element in financial speculation. There is a reason why “swindle” appears at the end of the eighteenth century to account for the difference between “speculation” and “swindle.” Early corporations such as the South Sea Company and the East India Company were still tied to Mercantilism and its emphasis on the balance of trade. Most speculations thus focused on international trade and colonial expansion. While inventions attracted speculators, before the late eighteenth century the innovations that speculators proposed were either of limited use or frauds.³¹ As Charles Mackay notes in his *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841), on the eve of the burst of the South Sea Bubble in 1720, myriad of roguish speculators appealed for charters and patents for all sorts of “inventions” in the making such as “a wheel for perpetual motion,” a technique “for improving malt liquors,” a method “for making iron with pit coal,” etc. The most famous petition that might have been a legend all along was “for carrying on an undertaking of great advantage; but nobody

³⁰ “Swindle.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. 2010. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 20 August 2013. <<http://www.oed.com.ezp>.

³¹ Chancellor, 123.

to know what it is.”³² From the late eighteenth century, however, a number of genuine innovations, such as canals, railways, cars, and radio revolutionized the domain of communication and transportation, galvanizing the public imagination.³³ The Schumpeterian emphasis on “innovation” became the new game in town.³⁴ With this new development, however, it became more difficult still to judge whether a given project was undertaken with innovation in mind, or merely with the intent to quickly get rich. At any rate, the two motives were not mutually exclusive.

As many critics have pointed out, *An Ideal Husband* can be read as an indictment of Victorian hypocrisy and a veiled portrayal of Wilde’s own experience with blackmail relating to his private life. Yet, like Ibsen, Wilde also seriously explores the new forms of financial relations spurred by corporate capitalism, especially the ambiguous and fluctuating links between corporate and governmental agencies. In other words, *An Ideal Husband* is not merely a play about a straightforward and identifiable political corruption as it is often thought to be. Rather, in his careful attention to language, Wilde captures the uncertain nature of financial speculation oscillating between gambling and investment and the role that political support plays in legitimatizing financial maneuvers. After all, even insider trading was not always considered illegal and still to this day what qualifies as insider trading varies greatly from one country onto another. What is more, the very definition of insider can be quite broad and may include not only the insiders themselves, but also any person related to or working for them.

In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde offers a compromise between idealism and realism. One can

³² Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, 1841 (New York: Start Publishing, 2012), 53.

³³ Chancellor, 123.

³⁴ Joseph Schumpeter, *Business Cycles: A Theoretical, Historical and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1939), 86.

still hold onto to some ideals in private, while subscribing to political realism. Unlike Ibsen's Bernick, Chiltern only comes clean to his wife who eventually agrees to help the cover-up of his initial corruption and learns to love this new *unideal* husband. While society is revealed to be utterly rotten and dependent on everyone's complicity, one may at least find solace in mature, realist, and forgiving love. Wilde would shatter the idealistic possibility of such love in the deeply cynical *The Importance of Being Ernest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (1895). The notion of compromise would take a more sinister turn in Shaw.

Shavian Heteroglossia

Another playwright, for whom the drama of Ibsen would play a pivotal role, is Bernard Shaw. Much has been written about the relationship between Shaw's Fabian socialism and his dramatic output, but it is not often that Shaw's capitalist ventures and his involvement in the business side of the theatre receive attention. Like Ibsen, Shaw's first job was in the world of commerce—for the Dublin firm of Uniacke Townshend and Company—where Shaw was responsible for “handling large sums of money and keeping accounts of receipts and expenditures”—business skills that would prove crucial in his dual career as playwright and theatre director.³⁵ Like Ibsen, Shaw liked to be involved in every aspect of the production of his plays from scenery choices to business management. So pronounced was Shaw's directorial presence that Bernard Dukore suggests that we consider Shaw as the forerunner of “the twentieth-century tradition of the director as a guiding artist in the production of a play.”³⁶ After all, when Shaw began to direct his plays in 1894, this tradition of the director theatre had not yet been established: the actor-manager still dominated the London theatre scene; The Moscow Art

³⁵ Bernard Dukore, *Shaw's Theater* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 130.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Theatre would not open its doors until 1898; and The Meiningen Company (1874-90) of George II, duke of Saxe-Meiningen, as influential as it proved to be, was outside the mainstream of nineteenth-century theatre.

Moreover, Shaw not only embraced the business side of theatre but saw it as an integral part of his artistic practice, including the writing of his plays. In the preface to William Archer's *The Theatrical "World" of 1894*, Shaw mentions that "the art of the theatre is as dependent on its business as a poet's genius is on his bread and butter."³⁷ And, similarly to Ibsen, Shaw achieved economic independence by keeping track of his copyright. More interesting still was the careful attention Shaw paid to the box office and not only for the sake of his own profits. "An author should always have these [box office] returns," Shaw notes, "not only to check the accounts, but to be able to follow the history of his play—whether it is getting more or less popular, whether it is gaining with the gallery and losing with the stalls (so as to shew the class of people it appeals to), and also to be able to shew them to managers in making fresh contacts as proof of the previous success of the author."³⁸

Once deemed one of the greatest living playwrights, Bernard Shaw has suffered a significant fall in the eyes of critics throughout the years. How Shaw fell into disfavor because of his glowing remarks about the Soviet Union after his 1931 visit is a well-known story. Shaw's infamous statement that Jesus Christ would have been happy with the developments in the USSR caused an uproar that is still shocking to this day. Moreover, in an open letter to the *Manchester Guardian* in 1933, Shaw dismissed the stories of Soviet famines as untrue, noting that he saw no such evidence during his trip. Defenders of Shaw usually point out that he was a seventy-five-year-old celebrity when he was taken on a Potemkin village tour and had no chance to see the

³⁷ Ibid., 130.

³⁸ Qtd. in Dukore, *Shaw's Theater*, 131.

horrors of the totalitarian state. Shavian biographer Michael Holroyd explains that Shaw's enthusiasm for Russia came from the ambition to have political influence later in life and dubs the twilight of Shaw's life "the lure of fantasy."³⁹

Shaw's public voice had always stirred controversy among literary critics and political activists alike. A self-declared socialist, Shaw was unpopular with the Right; and his uninformed and naive endorsement of the Soviet Union caused the Left to distance itself from the writer as well. In any case, for Marxists, Shaw had always remained, to borrow Lenin's turn of phrase, "a good man fallen among Fabians." Bertolt Brecht, who respected the work of Shaw, once said that the funniest thing that he had ever heard was that Shaw was a socialist. As Irish poet Rosemarie Rowley puts it, "Shaw was the first celebrity to suffer from the sound-bite effect, and also be damned by his own quotes and others misunderstanding of them."⁴⁰ Yet the very features that made Shaw's public pronouncements contradictory and disturbing in the limelight made his plays powerful works of art that still provoke debate and discussion.

Shaw's staunchest defenders come from the theatre world, as they assert that Shavian drama is as relevant today as ever. At academic conferences devoted to Shaw, *Major Barbara* still ignites heated disagreements and discussions. This fact would have immensely pleased Shaw, who in the Preface to *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, writes that "only in the problem play is there any real drama, because drama is no mere setting up of the camera to nature: it is the presentation in parable of the conflict between Man's will and his environment: in a word, of problem" (197). While some champions of Shaw choose simply to not address Shavian politics, others acknowledge the playwright's merits as an artist while not dispensing with the fact that there are elements of a disturbing ideology lurking in Shaw's oeuvre such as the promotion of

³⁹ Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990-).

⁴⁰ Rosemarie Rowley, "Superman in the Phone Booth—George Bernard Shaw under Fire From the Right and Left."

eugenics and violence. Matthew Yde, for example, has recently argued that Bernard Shaw used “his immense talent to trumpet a most insidious ideology.”⁴¹

Still others, like Bernard Dukore, sublimate Shaw’s political thought into his overall moral philosophy. In *Bernard Shaw: Slaves of Duty and Tricks of the Governing Class* (2012), Dukore explores how Shaw dramatizes the idea of moral duty as hypocritical justification for greed and power across the playwright’s oeuvre. The subtitle’s second part—“tricks of the governing class”—comes from Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, in which Andrew Undershaft, a powerful capitalist, refers to tricks designed to make the populace act in ways that profit the likes of him. According to Undershaft, the powerful promote dogged adherence to moral duty and ensure that even charitable organizations, seemingly designed for the good of the poor, in actuality benefit the dominant class’s economic interests. While the governing class in Shaw most often refers to capitalists who essentially control the government and employ a variety of tricks from advantageous tax codes to insider trading on the stock exchange, Dukore is careful to note that Shaw does not rigorously define the label. Depending on the play, members of the aristocracy, of parliament, and even kings and emperors refer to themselves as the governing class. One of the central merits of Dukore’s study is his refusal to take Shaw at his word when the later proclaimed: “My plays are all propaganda plays.”⁴² Instead of searching for the would-be moralizing impulse in Shaw, Dukore sheds light on the artistic richness, nuance, and the sheer playfulness with which the playwright approaches his subjects. Even Shaw’s capitalists are, as Dukore underlines, “far different from each other” and some are quite seductive.⁴³

⁴¹ Matthew Yde, “Bernard Shaw’s Stalinist Allegory: The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles.” *Modern Drama* 56.1: 35.

⁴² Bernard F. Dukore, *Bernard Shaw: Slaves of Duty and Tricks of the Governing Class* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 2012), 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 118.

One of the reasons why Shaw's political thought has caused much unease and why attempts to read his plays as direct illustrations of his politics are rarely fruitful or satisfying is because, as James Alexander has shown in his excellent *Shaw's Controversial Socialism* (2009), Shavian social ideas remain at their core controversial. They never fit any identifiable socio-economic theory. Shaw's political thoughts were "partial, argumentative or dialectical" and "almost deliberately offensive."⁴⁴ As Alexander sees it, Shaw attempted to differentiate his ideas from both liberalism and Marxism, picking and choosing from various strands of economic thought. Thus, Shaw could uphold the Fabian Society's belief in the advancement of socialism through gradualist and reformist means, while simultaneously defending the inquisitorial violence of the State. Put in the simplest way possible, Shaw was a human being who had conflicting ideas about the world. When Shaw tried to express his political thoughts in public, they naturally came across as controversial, contradictory, incoherent, and at times downright disturbing. Shaw attempted to bring together clashing ideas into one voice publicly known as author "G. Bernard Shaw." No wonder Shaw ultimately chose playwriting over a career in politics. It was in the theatre and, in the problem play specifically, that Shaw could finally and most successfully give his ideas form and structure. He redistributed his ideas to a panoply of characters from different social and political backgrounds and of different ages, without having to be dogmatic or choose sides. Thus, Shavian drama could be considered a prime example of what Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin calls "dialogical" and "polyglot" art.⁴⁵ Although Bakhtin emphasizes that it was the novel that was "dialogical" or "heterglot"—that is, expressive of a multiplicity of points of view that includes but is not limited to the author's—Bakhtin's

⁴⁴ James Alexander, *Shaw's Controversial Socialism*, Foreword by R. F. Dietrich (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2009), 6 and 7.

⁴⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981).

statements about the novel can also be applied to drama. As Martin Puchner points out, Bakhtin borrows his vocabulary for the rise of the novel from drama.⁴⁶ For Bakhtin, it is through the diversity of voices and speech types that “heteroglossia,” i.e. “the internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects,” each of which expresses the ideological perspective of a particular class, enters the novel.⁴⁷ With his interest in and careful attention to dialects and speech patterns, Shaw was aware of this “heteroglossia.” He wrote an entire play, shedding light on what Bakhtin calls the “social and historical voices populating language”⁴⁸—*Pygmalion* (1912). Shavian characters are born into and develop in the social matrix of language. In the last scene of *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, Kitty Warren is so distressed that her daughter Vivie has disowned her that she drops the social mask of her proper English. Shaw’s directions signal that Vivie is “jarred and antagonized by the echo of the slums in her mother’s voice” (284). And it is not only the dramatic characters that make Shavian drama heteroglot; Shaw’s own many divergent opinions expressed in the apologies, prefaces, epilogues, and even alternative endings to his plays ensure a multiplicity of voices in his drama, both as text and performance.

Tainted Money

The multiplicity of voices in Shavian drama has an important political thrust, however: every member of society is complicit in the social order in which he or she lives (including the playwright), albeit to a varied degree. Like the residents of the costal town of Ibsen’s *An Enemy*

⁴⁶ Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 124.

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, 262.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

of the People, most citizens collaborate in one way or another with the capitalist system. There are still the exploiters and the exploited; yet what Shaw's plays highlight time and again is that whatever position one occupies, be one a brothel owner or a professor of Greek, one is complicit. The motif of "tainted money" permeates Shavian drama and reveals that all money in exchange comes from rotten sources, i.e. from the exploitation of others. As Croft tells Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*: "If you're going to pick and choose your acquaintances on moral principles, you'd better clear out of this country, unless you want to cut yourself out of all decent society" (265). The dramatic arch of many a Shavian play involves an idealist, usually a young person, hoping to make a difference in the world only to find out how trapped he or she is by the tentacles of society and unable to bring about social change. The idealistic character first learns that his or her money comes from an iniquitous origin. As Shaw puts it in the Preface to *Major Barbara*:

The notion that you can earmark certain coins as tainted is an unpractical individualist superstition. None the less the fact that all of our money is tainted gives a very severe shock to earnest young souls when some dramatic instance of the taint first makes them conscious of it. (22)

This scenario is already present in Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses* (1892), where an aristocratic young doctor Harry Trench falls in love with the young daughter of the slumlord Sartorius. He refuses at first to allow Blanche to accept money from her father, until her father reveals to Trench that his income comes from mortgage on his property:

SARTORIUS: And now, Dr. Trench, may I ask you what your income is derived from?

TRENCH. [*defiantly*] From interest not from houses. My hands are clean as far as that goes. Interest on a mortgage.

SARTORIUS. [*forcibly*] Yes: a mortgage on my property. When I, to use your own words, screw, and bully, and drive these people to pay what they have freely undertaken to pay me, I cannot touch one penny of the money they give me until I first paid you your £700 out of it. (72)

In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Vivie learns to her horror that her entire education was funded by profits made through a prostitution ring. As Crofts, her mother's business partner, puts it to her in the most blatant of terms: "Do you remember your Crofts scholarship at Newnham? Well, that was founded by my brother the M.P. He gets his 22 per cent out a factory with 600 girls in it, and not one of them getting wages enough to live on" (265). In *Major Barbara*, Barbara is driven to despair when she realizes that in order to survive the Salvation Army has to accept money from a whiskey distillery owner as well as her own father, a leading armaments manufacturer: "Do you know that the worst thing I have had to fight here is not the devil, but Bodger, Bodger, Bodger, with his whisky, his distilleries, and his tied house?" (119) The character of Andrew Undershaft as well as the Undershaft lineage was in part inspired by The Krupp family, an ammunitions dynasty that became at the end of the nineteenth century the world's largest industrial company and the largest private company in Germany. In a curious metatheatrical manner, the Krupp Foundation has also funded this dissertation project, i.e. the very words on this page. Thus, Shaw's point about the circulation of money holds water. The realization that all money is tainted, however, is not the dramatic climax of the play, but just the beginning of the protagonist's journey.

The Shavian hero must then make a choice: rebel against the corrupted system or concede and become another cog in the machine. Like in Ibsen, we witness the motif of foul foundations. Yet, unlike Ibsen, Shaw does not have his characters divulge in public the rottenness of the foundations that they see around them. The real drama stems not from public disclosure, but from the perpetual cover-up of inconvenient truths to which the spectator too becomes complicit. Vivie Warren, a self-proclaimed modern, pragmatic, and unsentimental woman, cannot even

whisper the profession of her mother to her close friends. She has to write it down on a piece of paper and then immediately tear it up: “There! Oh no: don’t read it: don’t!” (276)

Goodbye, Lenin

What are Shavian idealists to do? In *Widowers’ Houses*, Trench makes a feeble attempt at rebellion by forsaking Blanche and her corrupted source of money, but is forced to join the shady business deal of Sartorius and his former employee Lickscheese involving a half-hearted renovation of the slums in order to receive a compensation when the slums get torn down to make room for fashionable development projects. Lickscheese was once under the power of Sartorius, but now has the upper hand because he knows in what dismal conditions the latter keeps his property. More important, he also owns shares of the North Thames Iced Mutton Depot Company to which he asks Sartorius to “put half of the houses” in exchange for the information that he provided, i.e. the need to clean up the slums before the city’s inspection. As Sartorius agrees to the terms of the blackmail, he pronounces: “We live in a progressive age; and humanitarian ideas are advancing and must be taken into account” (89). At first, Trench asks to be left out: “But why can’t you act without me? What have I got to do with it? I’m only mortgage” (90). Sartorius explains to Trench that the whole affair is ultimately a financial speculation, as “the City Council may alter the line of the new street” and “if that happens, the money spent in improving the houses will be thrown away” (90). In other words, Sartorius and Lickscheese need Trench’s capital. Trench makes one last feeble attempt at resistance only to find out that Sartorius could have cut his payment from the mortgage a long time ago (“250 a year for it instead of 700”). In other words, Trench has always been completely dependent on the mercy of Sartorius. Trench is cornered: there is nowhere to run. Yet the two businessmen offer

Trench compensation—Blanche’s hand in marriage: “Why not have a bit of romance in business when it costs nothing? We all have our feelings: We ain’t mere calculating machines” (92). Dukore calls *Widowers’ Houses* a tragicomedy where dark forces triumph in the end.⁴⁹ The shares that Trench is presented with echo the document of shares that Morten Kiil presents to Thomas Stockmann at the end of *Pillars of Society*. Of course, the audience may be left wondering whether Trench’s initial rebellion against Blanche and her father was ever a genuine revolt against the corrupted system, since he is essentially an aristocratic freeloader who wishes to take the moral high ground because his love interest’s money is tainted: but so is his. And, while it is true that Blanche is not a conventional heroine of a romantic comedy, but just as ruthless as her father, Trench is no beacon of hope either. Early in the play when Trench asks for Blanche’s hand, Sartorius makes sure that his future son-in-law is no political troublemaker:

SARTORIUS: I assume, to begin with, Dr. Trench, that you are not a Socialist, or anything of that sort.

TRENCH: Certainly not. I’m a Conservative—at least, if I ever took the trouble to vote, I should vote for the Conservative and against the other fellow. (70)

In *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, Shaw composes a more complicated moral labyrinth for his hero and his audience to navigate. This time, the idealist is a young woman who, at the beginning of the drama, is completely ignorant of the tainted origin of her upbringing just as she is ignorant of her father’s identity. In this manner, rather than presenting his audience with a character who does not bother to educate himself about the conditions of the world around him (Trench), Shaw gives us a young woman who has not yet had the chance to become disillusioned and who, it seems at first, wants to live an examined life. On the surface, it might appear that Vivie Warren is one of the few young idealists who escape the corrupted system into which she was born by choosing to make an independent life for herself. What makes Vivie turn her back on her mother

⁴⁹ Bernard Dukore, “Widowers’ Houses: A Question of Genre,” *Modern Drama* 17 (1974): 27-47.

is not the mere fact that Kitty Warren chose to work as a prostitute and later manage a whole ring of European brothels instead of “wearing out [her] health and [her] appearance for other people’s profit” as a respectable waitress or scullery maid (248). In fact, the mother-daughter scene in Act Two where Mrs. Warren tells Kitty her life story and justifies her reasons for the line of work that she has chosen is a rare instance of compassion and tenderness between the two. Vivie, who is unsentimental and frosty, even calls her mother “a wonderful woman: [...] stronger than all England” (251). What Vivie refuses to accept is the fact that her mother continues to run the brothel business long after she has made enough money to get herself out of the slums: “Tell me why you continue your business now that you are independent of it. Your sister, you told me, has left all that behind her. Why don’t you do the same?” (283) In fact, as Vivie explains to Crofts, she believed at first that “the business [was] wound up, and the money invested.” To which Crofts gives her a response that opens her eyes: “Wound up! Wind up a business that’s paying 35 per cent in the worst years! Not likely. Who told you that?” (262) The brothel ring *is* the investment. Crofts, who had initially invested “no less than forty thousand pounds into it,” is now the “chief shareholder” (263, 276). While Crofts justifies continuing the business by emphasizing its sheer profitability, Mrs. Warren’s explanation to Vivie is a more nuanced and sophisticated defense of the unending quest for capital:

I must have work and excitement, or I should go melancholy mad. And what else is there for me to do? The life suits me: I’m fit for it and not for anything else. If didn’t do it somebody else would; so I don’t do any real harm by it. And then it brings in money; and I like making money. No: it’s no use: I can’t give it up—not for anybody. (283)

Here, Mrs. Warren reveals the irresistible lure of capital to which she has succumbed. It is this supposed moral weakness that Vivie cannot forgive her mother. Yet the lure of capital promises not only profit, but also an exciting life style, a sense of purpose and direction, and even emotional comfort (“I should go melancholy mad”). While Shaw no doubt means to critique

capitalist culture in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, as an artist he also lends a compassionate ear to Kitty Warren's explanations and justifications. He allows us to hear her voice and perspective with all the nuances of her situation. One of problems that remain unsolvable in the play is the simple, yet agonizing question: what else is Kitty Warren to do?

Vivie appears to offer an answer by example. She forsakes her mother, refuses to take any more monthly allowances, and gets a job supporting herself at Honoria's chambers in Chancery Lane. Utterly disillusioned, she also gives up her half-hearted suitor Frank (who is more than relieved to give her up when he finds out the source of her upbringing) and the idea of marriage. In other words, she takes the high moral ground and attempts to distance herself from the ruthless exchange economy, both financial and sexual. Yet Shaw could not have chosen a more ironic choice of occupation for his heroine. Vivie decides to work away at "actuarial calculations and conveyancing" and to "do some law, with one eye on the Stock Exchange all the time" (217). At the end of the play, Shaw's directions indicate that Vivie "goes at her work with a plunge, and soon becomes absorbed in its figures" (286). Again, we witness the return of the material presence of stocks. Vivie has not only failed to distance herself from her mother's tainted money, but has moved even closer to the pulsating heart of the whole system: the Stock Exchange. Her sacrifices are rendered not only worthless, but also delusional and hypocritical. Like Trench, the desire for capital had been latent in Vivie all along. Early in the play, Vivie recounts to Praed how she only managed to "face the grind" of studying for her math exams after striking a bargain with her mother. She tried for "fourth wrangler or thereabouts for fifty pounds" (216). After completing her degree and tying with the third wrangler, she confides to Praed: "But I wouldn't do it again for that. Two hundred pounds would have been nearer the mark" (217). Like mother, like daughter. Vivie believes, like her mother, that not all work is worth the labor,

time, and energy, be it toiling away as a scullery maid or studying for a degree, especially when there is an easier way out.

There is one key difference, however, between Kitty Warren and her daughter that, while not being exactly a mitigating circumstance, might tip the audience's sympathy toward Mrs. Warren. In contrast to Vivie's self-righteous idealism and uptightness, Kitty Warren radiates worldly wisdom, seductive charisma, and warmth. Kitty knows the "tricks of the governing class"—the way that exploiters promote the concept of moral duty to keep the exploited passive and compliant—and she shares her wisdom with her daughter:

You think that people are what they pretend to be: that the way you were taught at school and college to think right and proper is the way things really are. But it's not: it's all only a pretense, to keep the cowardly slavish common run of people quiet. Do you want to find out, like other women, at forty, when you've thrown yourself away and lost your chances; or won't you take it in good time now from your own mother, that loves you and swears to you that it's truth: gospel truth? [*Urgently*] Vivie: the big people, the clever people, the managing people, all know it. They do as I do, and think what I think. (282)

Mrs. Warren has suffered and survived and does not want her daughter to go through the same ordeal. If Vivie is the exasperating idealist, then Mrs. Warren appears to be the realist with a touch of panache. Her point of view here is seductive not only because it is meant to touch the heart, but also because it is well argued, as she stresses the bleak alternatives available to Vivie if she forsakes her mother and her support. Yet Shaw's drama, as mentioned earlier, is characterized by a rich multiplicity of clashing voices, and one should not dismiss Vivie's reservation when she asks: "So that's how it is done, is it? You must have said all that to many a woman, to have it so pat" (281). Indeed, Mrs. Warren even refers to the working girls whom she employs as her "daughters." While Vivie understands that, in this instance, her mother gives her the spiel of her life philosophy with the best intentions in mind, it has not and will not prevent Mrs. Warren to use more or less the same words in a sales pitch to seduce young women to join

her profession. Capital beckons one not only through the obvious mirage of wealth and power, but also through the more devious paths of least resistance. As Shaw notes in the *Author's Apology* to the play, he got under fire for allegedly offering his audience “a standing advertisement of the attractive side of Mrs. Warren’s business” (187). Indeed, we hear no reports of Mrs. Warren’s own exploitative practices, or the voices of her employees. Still this does not mean that we should take everything Kitty Warren says at face value. There is a dramatic reason behind Shaw’s fleshed-out portrayal of Mrs. Warren and his decision to endow her with the most irresistible charm: “Nothing would please our sanctimonious British public more than to throw the whole guilt of Mrs. Warren’s profession on Mrs. Warren herself. Now the whole aim of my play is to throw that guilt on the British public itself” (201). There is a risk, however, that the playwright takes, when he bestows upon his character the gift of seductive oratory. Such a voice might drown all the others. And Shaw would take the greatest risk in his portrayal of Andrew Undershaft in *Major Barbara*, the play where the stakes of the scenario of young-idealist-meets-capitalist-world are at their highest.

Major Barbara is the most sophisticated problem play in the series of Shavian works that explore how capitalist society breaks “earnest young souls.” Unlike the carefree Trench or the supposedly self-sufficient Vivie, Barbara Undershaft, daughter of the most powerful ammunitions manufacturer, joins the Salvation Army in hopes of changing the world. At least, on the surface, Barbara matches her words with her deeds. (The scenario of the capitalist’s offspring rebelling against his or her father to champion the cause of the working class would become a recurring motif in the plays of German and American expressionists: Kaiser, Toller, and O’Neill to name but a few). What is more, Andrew Undershaft is one of the most seductive capitalists to grace the stage. He takes the other characters and the audience on a tour of his

foundry in Perivale St. Andrews to show both the dangers and the benefits of his empire. In the course of the play we witness the characters offer their souls one by one to this Mephistophelean protagonist. It is then up to the audience to decide whether they too want to buy into his worldview.

Put simply, Undershaft's capitalist worldview is based on two premises. First, poverty should not be glorified. According to the armaments manufacturer, poverty is "the worst of crimes" and the way to save the poor souls who come to the Salvation Army is "not by words and dreams; but by thirty-eight shillings a week, a sound house in a handsome street, and permanent job:" hence, Undershaft's fundamental disagreement with the Salvation Army (162). Second, the two most important things in the world are "money and gunpowder." When Barbara's suitor Adolphus Cusins asks Undershaft if there is "any place in [his] religion for honor, justice, truth, love, mercy and so forth," Undershaft replies: "Yes: they are the graces and luxuries of a rich, strong, and safe life." And when Cusins asks if one were to choose between them and money or gunpowder (a choice Cusins himself will have to make soon), Undershaft calmly responds: "Choose money and gunpowder; for without enough of both you cannot afford the others" (102).

In the Shavian scenario of the young idealist becoming disillusioned by society, Barbara at first resists her father's power by trying to reject his "tainted money" for the Salvation Army fund, but her older and wiser superior, Mrs. Baines, takes a more pragmatic approach: "If heaven has found the way to make a good use of his money, are we to set ourselves up against the answer to our prayers?" (119) Shaw supports the decision of Mrs. Baines in the Preface where he agrees that the Salvation Army "must take the money because it cannot exist without money, and there is no other money to be had" (22). Furthermore, Undershaft's "almost smokeless town of

white walls [...] beautifully situated and beautiful in itself,” where he has built libraries, schools, nursing homes, and churches and has provided his residents with “the insurance fund, the pension fund, the building society, [and] the various applications of co-operation” (privatized social services) make Barbara come to terms that her Salvation Army cannot match the power of Undershaft’s empire. At the end of the play, Barbara’s disillusionment changes to hope, as she realizes that it is in Undershaft’s empire that “salvation is really wanted” and that her greatest works of conversion are still ahead of her:

My father shall never throw it in my teeth again that my converts were bribed with bread. [She is transfigured]. I have got rid of the bribe of bread. I have got rid of the bribe of heaven. Let God’s work be done for its own sake: the work he had to create us to do because it cannot be done by living men and women. When I die, let him be in my debt, not I in his; and let me forgive him as becomes a woman of my rank. (174)

In this speech, Shaw reveals that, however noble her ideals might be, his heroine’s desire for power drives her spiritual aspirations. The potential for being seduced by Undershaft’s capital was there from the very beginning. In a letter, Shaw mentioned that “the clue to much of Barbara is that she is her mother’s daughter.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Barbara admits to Cusins that she felt just like her mother when she saw Undershaft’s domain with “all the human souls to be saved.” Barbara immediately felt that she must have it and “never, never, never could [she] let it go” (174). Barbara’s discourse brims with pride and hubris. At the nadir of her disillusionment, she even compares herself to Christ: “My God: why hast thou forsaken me?” (124) In short, Barbara’s is an easy soul to buy and her resistance to her father echoes the unconvincing rebellions of Trench and Vivie. If Shaw’s aim was to highlight the complicity of each and every person in capitalist society, then his audience could always dismiss Trench, Vivie, and Barbara as hypocrites and then distance themselves from them. Shaw needed a protagonist that could not be so easily

⁵⁰ Qtd. in T. J. Matheson, “The Lure of Power and the Triumph of Capital: An Ironic Reading of Major Barbara,” *English Studies in Canada* 12.3 (1986): 288.

dismissed as a hypocrite. Thus, the soul that is the most difficult to win over in the play is that of Adolphus Cusins, professor of Greek and Barbara's suitor. Shaw endowed this Faustian intellectual with qualities that he himself possessed as a playwright: perspicacity, razor-sharp wit, and a penchant for irony. What is more, Shaw's close friend, producer, and a talented playwright in his own right—Harley Granville-Barker played the part of Cusins in the original production of 1905. Cusins is not a young idealist and, like Undershaft, he sees through Barbara's true motives, the hypocrisy of both the workers of the Salvation Army and of the wretched poor that it tries to save, as well as the whole corrupted political system. He is well aware that the likes of Undershaft are the ones who run his country. When Undershaft explains to Barbara that "the ballot paper that really governs is the paper that has a bullet wrapped up in it," Cusins admits: "That is perhaps why, like most intelligent people, I never vote" (164). Like Undershaft, Cusins is a realist albeit one with a strong sense of irony about the world around him. Cusins is infatuated with Barbara and so is willing to join the Salvation Army, pick up the drum, and play any tune to woo her because, like the jester, he can see the humor and irony in any given situation, addressing Undershaft as "my good Machiavelli" and "Dionysus." That Cusins' jesting has a subversive edge is not lost on Undershaft who nicknames him "Euripides." Cusins enjoys Undershaft's company because the latter is not devoid of a sense of humor himself and allows Cusins to think that they are both onto the same joke. What initially differentiates Cusins from the rest of the characters is that he believes that he is immune to the lure of power that comes from the ownership of capital:

CUSINS: If power were my aim I should not come here for it. YOU have no power.

UNDERSHAFT: None of my own, certainly.

CUSINS: I have more power than you, more will. You do not drive this place: it drives you. And what drives the place?

UNDERSHAFT: [enigmatically] A will of which I am part.

The question then is how does a man, who believes that Undershaft's place "is driven by the most rascally part of society, the money hunters, the pleasure hunters, the military promotion hunters," ends up accepting not only to work for Andrew Undershaft, but to be the next heir to the Undershaft dynasty. The invisible hand of the market of which Undershaft is a part snatches Cusins. Undershaft offers Cusins a challenge: "Dare you make war on war?" (169). If Cusins loves the common people as much as he professes and if he abhors war as much as he claims to, then he needs power and weapons to wage "war on war." Undershaft essentially argues that Cusins can only fight Undershaft's corporation by joining and becoming an insider, and so he encourages him to at least temporarily give up his political ideals and to accept the socio-economic reality as it is. Cusins recognizes the stakes of the bargain when he confesses to

Barbara:

It is not the sale of my soul that troubles me: I have sold it too often to care about that. I have sold it too often to care about that. I have sold it for a professorship. I have sold it for an income. I have sold it to escape being imprisoned for refusing to pay taxes for hangmen's ropes and unjust wars and things that I abhor. What is all human conduct but the daily and hourly sale of our souls for trifles? What I am now selling it for neither money nor position nor comfort, but for reality and power (171).

The disturbing question that *Major Barbara* leaves open is whether Cusins will be able, as he hopes, to get "the whole establishment blown up with its own dynamite," or whether he will be broken down by it. There is another possible scenario that is hinted by the match that almost gets misplaced in the ammunitions factory: that, with out without Cusins' intervention, the Undershaft establishment and capitalism as a whole might ultimately self-destruct and fail.

Andrew Undershaft's gospel of wealth is so persuasive, in fact, that it has led some critics, the most attentive scholars of Shaw no less, to admit to being at least partially persuaded

by his argument.⁵¹ So what does one get when one buys into the Undershaft Corporation? The fictional Perivale St. Andrews is, in effect, a neoliberal capitalist utopia, or at least it is advertised as such. Notice how all the social services from education to pension funds are privatized and controlled by the Undershaft Corporation and how the invisible hand of the market is deemed the ultimate authority to which even Andrew Undershaft bows down. After all, Undershaft gives “arms to all men who offer an honest price for them, without respect of persons or principles” (157). “Capital accumulation is amoral,” as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello remind us in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.⁵² Bernard Dukore considers the key question in *Major Barbara* to be “whether money will make morality its servant or whether moral forces will put money to their use” and argues that the play “culminates with the union of the forces of money and morality.”⁵³ According to Dukore, “the power of Undershaft’s money is pervasive” and Shaw seems to suggest that “if even such a capitalist can do the job, then let the job be done” (117). Thus, Dukore predicts that “in a Fabian fashion, Cusins hopes to build upon Undershaft’s social advance” and “to turn the capitalism of Perivale St. Andrews—into a socialist democracy” (119). And Dukore sees a beacon of hope in Cusins’ protest that he will only work during the “healthy, rational hours eleven to five” as a telling sign that “Cusins will have his way in this matter as in others” (120). While the audience can only speculate what ultimately happens to Barbara and Cusins after the curtain falls, a darker version of events than the one painted by Dukore is possible: Barbara transforms into her mother, “a very typical managing matron of the upper class” and Cusins, as Undershaft predicts, “before a week” will begin to come to work at

⁵¹ As T. J. Matheson points out many readers and spectators have taken Shaw’s contention in the Preface that Undershaft is the “hero” of *Major Barbara* at face value. See T. J. Matheson, “The Lure of Power and the Triumph of Capital: An Ironic Reading of *Major Barbara*,” *English Studies in Canada* 12.3 (1986): 285-300.

⁵² Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme [The New Spirit of Capitalism]* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 35.

⁵³ Bernard Dukore, *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1980), 110.

six, get caught up in the everyday reality of the business world, realize that he has a family to support, and become another Undershaft working for the prosperity of the corporation. To be sure, the new couple will be different from the generation that came before them. Barbara will not be content to simply reign in the domestic sphere and will make a public career for herself promoting spiritual values, and Cusins, as the new CEO, will be more aware than Andrew Undershaft of his failure and complicity, but will look at his failure and complicity from an ironic distance. Cusins will “know things are bad, but more than that, [won’t] do anything about it.”⁵⁴ If Andrew Undershaft’s motto was “Unashamed,” then Cusins’ could be “Ironic.” The manner in which one reads the play’s ending depends in part on one’s political leanings and historical position. Dukore’s *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht* was published in 1980. The 1970s saw the rise of neoliberalism through the work of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman and the strengthening of conservatism, culminating in the early 1980s with the revolutions of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Perhaps, today the last line of the play and Undershaft’s last words to Cusins—“Come when you please: before a week you will come at six and stay until I turn you out for the sake of your health”—has acquired a more sinister ring—that Cusins ultimately will not be able to change a thing.

It is important to note, however, that in the dialogical world of Shavian drama there are other voices besides Undershaft’s, including Shaw’s remarks in the Preface, that offer a different perspective on Undershaft’s would-be neoliberal capitalist utopia. In fact, some voices are not heard directly at all. How do Undershaft’s employees feel? For one, we find out indirectly that Peter Shirley who got a job in Perivale St. Andrews “as a gatekeeper and timekeeper” is “frightfully miserable” (146). Moreover, Undershaft’s own son, Stephen, who mostly says a lot

⁵⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009), 21.

of foolish things in the play, at one point manages to relay the following piece of wisdom that Undershaft quickly dismisses:

You are very properly proud of having been industrious enough to make money; and it is greatly to your credit that you have made so much of it. But it has kept you in circles, where you are valued for your money and deferred to for it, instead of in the doubtless very old-fashioned and behind-the-times public school and university where I formed my habits of mind.” (140)

Shaw waves another red flag to his audience so that they listen to the gospel of Undershaft with due suspicion when the businessman dismisses the theatre. After going through a list of possible career choices for Stephen, Undershaft quips: “Rather a difficult case, Stephen. Hardly anything left but the stage, is there?” (138) In their attitudes toward the theatre Shaw and Undershaft are polar opposites. As Shaw notes in the Author’s Apology to *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, dramatic art was for him “the most seductive, the most effective instrument of moral propaganda in the world” capable of “persuad[ing] even London to take its conscience and its brains with it when it goes to the theatre” (185).

Finally, there is Shaw’s own voice to consider. What is Shaw’s stance on the Undershaft inheritance? The Preface to *Major Barbara* is subtitled “First Aid to Critics,” and Shaw claims that he intends “to help [his] critics out with *Major Barbara* by telling them what to say about it” (10). However, as anyone who has carefully read the ambivalent preface can attest, it is not as straightforward as Shaw would have his critics believe. For one, Shaw agrees with Undershaft that “poverty is a crime” and “the greatest of evils” (10). This partial agreement seems to have encouraged readings that Shaw is offering an apology for capitalism. Yet Shaw also adds the more radical point that the “indispensable revolt against poverty [...] must also be a revolt against riches” (27). Most important, Shaw warns his readers of the camouflage of benevolence and good will that the capitalist dons once he or she achieves social success and recognition:

But the successful scoundrel is dealt with very differently, and very Christianly. He is not only forgiven: he is idolized, respected, made much of, all but worshipped. Society returns him good for evil in the most extravagant overmeasure. And with what result? He begins to idolize himself, to respect himself, to live up to the treatment he receives. He preaches sermons; he writes books of the most edifying advice to young men, and actually persuades himself that he got on by taking his own advice; he endows educational institutions; he supports charities; he dies finally in the odor of sanctity, leaving a will which is a monument of public spirit and bounty. And all this without any change in his character. The spots of the leopard and the stripes of the tiger are as brilliant as ever; but the conduct of the world towards him has changed; and his conduct has changed accordingly. You have only to reverse your attitude towards him—to lay hands on his property, revile him, assault him, and he will be a brigand again in a moment, as ready to crush you as you are to crush him, and quite as full of pretentious moral reasons for doing it. (32)

If Shaw is pointing the finger at Undershaft here, why does he not condemn him more explicitly and name him? Perhaps, such a didactic gesture would undermine the very multiplicity of voices and perspectives that Shaw cultivates in *Major Barbara*. In other words, Shaw allows Undershaft's voice to be as persuasive and seductive as it can be precisely because such a characterization is a *realist* one. For better or worse, there are many who accept and will continue to accept Undershaft's worldview. Another reason behind Shaw's evasive rhetoric is that to outright condemn Undershaft would mean to take the high moral ground. Instead, Shavian dialogical drama reveals the complicity of every member of the social order, including the playwright himself. After all, it is in the same preface that Shaw admits to being a railway shareholder even as he criticizes the corporation's cold-blooded treatment of human lives. Perhaps, it is through his experience of shareholding that Shaw came to the realization of how interconnected every member of a society that embraces socio-corporate ethics becomes and how the guilt of exploitation is dispersed through every member. Shaw cannot denounce Undershaft's worldview without taking stock of the intellectual's position, i.e. his own role in bolstering Undershaft's financial empire.

The deep malaise that permeates *Major Barbara* adds yet another dimension to Shaw's problem play: the issue of irony. Critics who do not accept Andrew Undershaft's gospel of wealth tend to read the play ironically. T. J. Matheson, for example, insists on an "ironic reading" of *Major Barbara* and argues that "the point is simply that Undershaft can be the most intellectually impressive character in *Major Barbara* without our having to accept everything he says in its entirety."⁵⁵ Matheson sees Cusins in an unfavorable light: "Cusins has also fallen pray to one of the oldest temptations known to man, the lure of power, and has rationalized his capitulation on the grounds that the power he desires he will use for the good of humanity."⁵⁶ While this is a persuasive way of dealing with *Major Barbara* and, perhaps, the only way to read the work for a left-wing reader, the vexed and unsolvable problem that still stays with us is that through the figure of Cusins *Major Barbara* also puts the leftist intellectual and the very technique of ironic distancing on trial. The critical blade points toward the playwright as well so that truly everyone is rendered complicit. Shaw does not even spare his closest socialist friends in *Major Barbara*. Dukore argues that while Shaw's plays might not explicitly point their audience toward the "way out of painful contradiction," "Shaw the playwright perceives an ideal," and that ideal is presumably socialism.⁵⁷ The problem with this assessment is that one of the darkest moments of irony in *Major Barbara* happens when the workers of the Undershaft foundry present Lady Britomart with flowers in the "William Morris Labor Church." Discerning the dark humor and perversity of the situation, Cusins springs up and exclaims: "Oh! It needed only that. A Labor Church!" (151) The socialist ideas of William Morris, who was friends with

⁵⁵ T. J. Matheson, 287.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵⁷ Bernard Dukore, "Widowers' Houses: A Question of Genre." *Modern Drama* 17 (1974): 32.

Shaw for twelve-years and gave regular lectures at the Fabian Society, are mangled and recycled in Undershaft's domain to make workers, in Undershaft's own words: "most economical," "unselfish," "indifferent to their own interests," "conservative," "with their thoughts on heavenly things [...] and not on Trade Unionism or Socialism," so that Undershaft's "profits are larger" (108). It is quiet remarkable how open Undershaft is about his agenda and methods and how many of the play's characters willingly go along with him. Then again, it is also quiet realist.

Shaw would jeer at socialism once again in his later play *The Millionairess* (1936), which has two endings: one written for a capitalist society and another— for a socialist society— that are not all that different. In the capitalist version, Epifania marries an Egyptian doctor who in the beginning thought he could resist her tainted money. In the socialist version, Epifania announces her travel plans to Russia, asserting that before the end of the year she will end up "high up in the Politbureau" and "in a thousand years from now holy Russia shall again have a patron saint, and her name shall be Saint Epifania" (320). The lure of capital in Shaw is revealed to be the oldest temptation of power, to which neither capitalists nor socialists are immune.

The intellectual stalemate and the problem of social change left unresolved in the drama of capitalist realism need not be as cynical and as pessimistic as Mark Fisher's definition of the ideology of capitalist realism that only offers us a "reflexive impotence." Although the question of what is to be done remains unanswered in the capitalist realist play, the dramatic tension of the intellectual and political standstill might just be powerful enough to galvanize the audience when they leave the theatre. In this manner, the capitalist realist playwrights foreshadowed the epilogue of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1942). In the last scene, one of the actors steps out before the curtain and addresses the spectators, imploring them to think of solutions to

the social plights that the play has failed to find: “Es muß ein guter da sein, muß, muß, muß!”

[There must be happy endings, must, must, must!] (115)

Machine Art: From German to American Expressionist Theatre

What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning rod and Hermes against the Credit Mobilier?

—Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*.

“You can no more take machines out of the modern mind, than you can take the shield of Achilles out of the *Iliad*.”

—Ezra Pound, *Machine Art*.

The Representability of Labor

In Greek mythology, the gods condemn Sisyphus to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone falls back on its own weight. “They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor,” writes Albert Camus in his philosophical essay, *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*).¹ Futile and hopeless is Sisyphus’s labor not only because it is hard, dull, and repetitive, but also because it receives no reward, no payment, and no recognition.

In our story about the relationship between modern drama and capitalism, the working class and its labor have largely gone unrecognized so far. In Ibsen’s dramatic oeuvre, as Franco Moretti points out, there are hardly any workers (only servants) even though the playwright composes his “bourgeoisie cycle” during a time (1877-99) when trade unions, socialist parties, and anarchism are changing European politics.² In Shaw, the hypocrisies of the British class system and the plight of the working class are endlessly discussed, but the audience does not get a chance to watch a representation of collective labor or the rapport between labor and capital. Shaw might have written *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893) “to draw attention to the truth that

¹ Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955), 119–23.

² Franco Moretti, “The Grey Area: Ibsen and the Spirit of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* January-February. 61 (2010), 117-18. *Pillars of Society* (1877) stages a confrontation between a union leader and a manager about safety and profits; but then the conflict between capital and labor virtually disappears from Ibsen’s world, because the conflict Ibsen focuses on, according to Moretti, is not between the bourgeoisie and another class, but that internal to the bourgeoisie itself.

prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution,”³ but his play surprisingly portrays no working girls. Likewise, in *Major Barbara* (1905), British aristocrats and businessmen visit a Salvation Army shelter and a munitions factory, but again factory workers are missing from the stage. And rarely do we meet manual workers in Chekhov. We find one – Firs — the emancipated serf and manservant of *Вишнёвый сад* (1904; *The Cherry Orchard*) who, at the end of Chekhov’s last play, is forgotten and is left to die in the abandoned, boarded-up estate.

Herbert Blau once noted that Beckett’s *Endgame* begins where Chekhov leaves off in *The Cherry Orchard*.⁴ We could take this idea further and argue that where Chekhov leaves off a new era of modern drama begins. If Chekhov draws the audience’s attention to the labor force repressed and ignored by other classes only to end *The Cherry Orchard* on a menacing note of foreboding, the plays discussed in this chapter spotlight workers and take issues of labor center stage. Drawing rooms, as we have seen, can be productive theatrical spaces to explore issues of credit, debt, and speculation, but when playwrights take on questions of labor, they often envision sets representing spaces of work such as the gas factory of Georg Kaiser’s *Gas* trilogy (1917-1920), the robot factory of Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R.* (1920), the buzzing offices of Elmer Rice’s *Adding Machine* (1923) and Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1928), the hydro-electric plant of Eugene O’Neill’s failed production of *Dynamo* (1929) and the ship’s engine room of his

³ Kerry Powell, *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 229.

⁴ “...the slumped figure of old First crawling toward the couch to die. Look again: it might be the opening of *Endgame*. Adjust your eyes to the darkness. Now you see the closed shutters, the covered furniture, the spaces on the walls where the pictures had been. The decrepit motion of the servant is the last residue of pure behavior. It is the gravitational field where Beckett works.” Herbert Blau, *Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 27.

successful *The Hairy Ape* (1922).

In the wake of the naturalist novel, naturalist drama extended the social range of characters away from aristocrats toward members of the bourgeoisie and eventually toward the peasants and workers. To name but a few, Aleksey Pisemsky's *Горькая судьбина* (1859; *A Bitter Fate*) and Leo Tolstoy's *Власть тьмы* (1886; *The Power of Darkness*) were some of the first plays to bring peasant protagonists to the fore. Pisemsky's play is particularly remarkable in that it tackles the question of serfdom in Russia on the eve of its abolition. August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* (1888; *Miss Julie*), subtitled a "naturalistic tragedy," stages a class war and the battle of sexes between a count's daughter and her father's footman. Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836-1837), first published in 1879 and performed in 1913, dramatizes the mental breakdown of a lowly soldier and thus is often called "a working-class tragedy."⁵ Yet it was Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die Weber* (1892; *The Weavers*) that took modern drama a step further in its representation of labor. Hauptmann not only shows weavers engaged in a revolutionary struggle for their rights and recognition, but also attempts to dramatize and lay bare modern labor conditions such as labor exploitation and the fundamental conflict between labor and capital. To appreciate what made *Die Weber*'s display of labor innovative and to understand why signs of labor had largely been repressed both in nineteenth-century theatre and in modernist literature in particular it is helpful to recall the ambivalent attitude toward work in nineteenth-century capitalist culture.

On the one hand, the ideology of the work ethic was promoted and celebrated. As Max Weber famously argues in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), the Protestant work ethic was a significant force in promoting "one's duty in a calling," which in

⁵ Michael Patterson, *Introduction to Georg Büchner, The Complete Plays*, trans. Michael Patterson (London: Methuen Drama, 2000).

turn became “what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalist culture.”⁶ Neither unscrupulousness, nor the pursuit of selfish interests, but rather work “performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling” had motivated and buttressed the capitalistic enterprise.⁷ On the other hand, another cultural imperative of the nineteenth century was a certain cover-up of signs of labor, especially of hard manual labor. Such concealment of signs of labor was carried out, paradoxically, for the very purpose of promoting the work ethic. Citing the study of labor historian Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920*, Cindy Weinstein, explains that the aesthetic phenomenon of “the erasure of labor” resulted from changes in production during rapid industrialization, which created new work conditions — “specialized, repetitious, machine-paced, and, often, deadeningly simple.”⁸ In short, inhumane work conditions “destabilized” and threatened the ideology of the work ethic. The new tasks, requiring no skill, that became the norm, as the craft guilds dissolved and the division of labor characteristic of an industrialized economy came to the fore, were difficult to promote as anyone’s calling and so had to be hidden, if the work ethic were still to be encouraged.

Expressionist Strategy of Modernism

Repression of signs of labor not only facilitates the ideology of the work ethic, but also encourages guilt-free consumption, including that of art. According to Jameson’s seminal

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1930, trans. Talcott Parsons, intro Anthony Giddens (New York: Routledge, 1992), 19.

⁷ Ibid. Max Weber explains the relationship between monetary unscrupulousness and development of capitalism in the following manner: “The universal reign of absolute unscrupulousness in the pursuit of selfish interests by the making of money has been a specific characteristic of precisely those countries whose bourgeois-capitalistic development, measured according to Occidental standards, has remained backward” (25).

⁸ Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974). Qtd. in Cindy Weinstein, *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.

argument in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), modernism is “an ideological expression of capitalism, and in particular the latter’s reification of daily life,” that largely operates through the repression of signs of labor beneath its formalized surface.⁹ Thus, the impressionistic strategy of classical modernism is to “derealize the content and make it available for consumption on some purely aesthetic level.”¹⁰ The famous example that Jameson gives of this impressionistic strategy is Joseph Conrad’s description of the ship and sea in *Lord Jim* (1900):

Above the mass of sleepers, a faint and patient sigh at times floated, the exhalation of a troubled dream; and short metallic clangs bursting out suddenly in the depths of the ship, the harsh scrape of a shovel, the violent slam of a furnace-door, exploded brutally, as if the men handling the mysterious things below had their breasts full of fierce anger: while the slim high hull of the steamer went on evenly ahead, without a sway of her bare masts, cleaving continuously the great calm of the waters under the inaccessible serenity of the sky.

The waters might be calm, the sky serene, and the passengers asleep, but “the brief clang from the boiler room... mark[s] the presence beneath ideology and appearance of that labor which produces and reproduces the world itself.”¹¹ Jameson identifies this impressionistic strategy as the “dominant one” but not the only one “structurally available to modernists.” The other one that he names but does not go into is the “much rarer expressionism.”¹²

While expressionism might not have played a dominant role in the modernist novel, it significantly permeated early twentieth-century German and American modern drama. It is in this expressionist theatre that the boiler room of the ship would be entered and exhibited. In Georg Kaiser’s *Die Koralle* (1917; *The Coral*), the first play of the *Gas* trilogy, the Millionaire’s Son tells his father about his descent into their yacht’s engine room. Witnessing the exploitation

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 225.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 213.

of stokers inspires the Son to champion the cause of the proletariat. Eugene O’Neill stages a parody of this moment in *The Hairy Ape* (1922), which opens inside the boiler room of a Transatlantic Ocean Liner.¹³ Mildred, the spoiled daughter of the owner of Nazareth Steel, descends into the belly of the ship only to faint at the sight of Yank, a brutish-looking laborer. Instead of focusing on the capitalist’s child, Mildred, who never again reappears on stage, the play explores how the encounter changes Yank.

It is not until German naturalism and expressionism that we encounter what I propose to call *labor dramas* — dramatic works that explore the crises and conditions of modern labor such as the conflict between labor and capital, division of labor, Taylorization, the relationship between humans and machines, the relationship between humans and animals as well as the problems and potentials of all these for theatrical productions.

To be sure, an interest in money and work is not exclusive to modern drama. Already, in Aristophanes’ Πλοῦτος (388 BCE; *Wealth*), we encounter a farmer named Chremylos who breaks the fourth wall to point at the audience and pronounce: “But, then, look at all those crooks out there! Look how they’ve all made it! Temple thieves, politicians, sycophantic bum lickers, sleazebags – they’re all filthy bloody rich! Look at them all! They’ve all made it big time!”¹⁴ If Aristophanes means to excoriate greed, he is also aware that his play entertains the greedy. This political satire, which portrays the god of Wealth, Plutus, as a blind beggar, ends with Chremylos’s household becoming so rich that even Hermes begs to be admitted as a servant. When humans become wealthy they no longer need to offer sacrifices to the gods. Consequently,

¹³ For the relationship and possible influence that German expressionism might have had on O’Neill see Mardi Valgema, “O’Neill and German Expressionism,” *Modern Drama* 10 (1967): 111-23. Valgema points out that O’Neill would have read German drama at his year at Harvard in George Pierce Barker’s playwright course and had seen such German expressionist films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1921 upon its American release.

¹⁴ Aristophanes, *Wealth*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 2001).

in Aristophanes' topsy-turvy world, the gods find themselves bankrupt. Hermes proposes various possible jobs for himself like "Door Hinge Protector God," "Middleman God," "Protector of Crooks"—all of which get rejected because in the new utopian economy of wealth there are no crooks and robbers. Hermes finally manages to secure employment for himself as the "Protector of Sport God," because contests of music and athletics still please the wealthy. A couple of millennia later, Bertolt Brecht would pin his hope on the sporting public as well, recognizing that modern theatre could learn how to be more fun from sport.¹⁵

Questions of work were also prominent in early modern English drama. Michelle M. Dowd and Natasha Koda's edited collection *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama* (2011), for instance, highlights how drama played a significant role in responding to England's changing labor economy, exploring the cultural meanings of work and defining its own place within that economy.¹⁶

Work versus Labor

The difference does not merely lie in the *type* of labor that modern drama portrays, i.e. labor of the capitalist mode of production, characterized by wages, specialization, division of task, and machinery. Labor dramas highlight the very difference between "work" and "labor" that the capitalist mode of production creates. Although in English the two words are often used

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, "Mehr guten Sport," *Berliner Börsten-Courier*, 6 February 1926.

¹⁶ Michelle M. Dowd, "Introduction: Working Subjects," *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Michelle M. Dowd and Natasha Koda (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 3-5.

interchangeably,¹⁷ in “Work, Labor, and Play,” poet W. H. Auden pays close attention to their semantic differences and proposes the following distinction:

Between labor and play stands work. A man is a worker if he is personally interested in the job which society pays him to do; what from the point of view of society is necessary labor is from his point of view voluntary play. Whether a job is to be classified as labor or work depends, not on the job itself, but on the tastes of the individual who undertakes it. The difference does not, for example, coincide with the difference between a manual and a mental job; a gardener or a cobbler may be a worker, a bank clerk a laborer.¹⁸

In German, however, the English “labor” and “work” are both translated as *Arbeit*, so adjectives are usually added to describe the type of labor/work in question. In the writings of Marx, for example, “alienated labor” becomes *entfremdete Arbeit* and “external labor” – *entäußerte Arbeit*. In Czech, as we will later see with Karel Čapek, there also exist words that pick up on the possible differences between “work” and “labor.”

Labor not only informs the content of labor dramas but also their very form. The plot often hinges on some crisis of modern labor and production, whether it is the conflict between workers and owners of the means of production, or mechanized tasks that make a character psychologically snap. To give but a few preliminary examples of such plots, the central conflict of Georg Kaiser’s *Gas* (1918) happens between the Millionaire’s Son, who tries to persuade the workers to leave the factory after a gas explosion and start an agrarian utopia, and the Engineer who attempts to persuade them to keep working. The action of Elmer Rice’s *Adding Machine* sets into motion when Mr. Zero loses his job of twenty-five years to a machine and, as a result, snaps and kills his boss. Issues of labor are so foregrounded that romantic plots, if they appear at all, appear only in the background. Thus, although Yank, a stoker on a Transatlantic Ocean

¹⁷ Dowd and Korda’s *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama* and Weinstein’s *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature* employ those two words as synonyms, while Jameson’s *Political Unconscious* is careful to use only “labor” to designate “the alienated labor” of the working class.

¹⁸ W. H. Auden, “Work, Labor, and Play,” *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (New York: Viking, 1970), 5.

Liner, “falls in hate” with Mildred Douglas, the plot continues to unfold not because of a would-be romance, but because Yank becomes aware of the alienation of his labor and tries to understand where he ultimately belongs. The Mildred storyline never resurfaces. In *The Adding Machine*, Mr. Zero leaves the Elysian Fields and the woman he has pined away for all his life, so that he can work overtime — in the afterlife. Compare these labor plots to Thomas Dekker’s *Shoemaker’s Holiday, or the Gentle Craft* (1599), where aristocrat Rowland Lacy falls in love with middle class girl Rose Oatley and disguises himself as a Dutch shoemaker Hans to secretly marry her. To be sure, the play explores the rapport between one’s occupation and identity, but the plot is largely driven by romantic intrigue and highlights the hypocrisies of the class system. In modern labor dramas, by contrast, the crises and conditions of labor are what galvanize the main conflict. To give a more recent example of a labor drama, David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) proves that the working conditions and conflicts of a real estate agency can be a riveting dramatic source.

In a self-conscious manner, labor dramas often explore the role that labor plays in theatre productions. Modern dramatists thus become aware of and interested in what Fredric Jameson calls in *Brecht and Method* (1998) the “representability of capitalism.”¹⁹ What is so problematic about representing the operations of capitalism? Jameson argues that the movement of money and labor in the capitalist system often elude artistic representation and scientific explanation. Brecht, for example, stumbled upon this problem when researching the Chicago’s wheat exchange for the dramatic setting of his plays. He interviewed specialists (writers on economics) and practitioners (business people) only to realize that no one could adequately explain to him the processes of the wheat exchange: “Die Art, wie das Getreide der Welt verteilt wurde, war

¹⁹ See Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 1998), 149 and “High Tech Collective in Late Godard,” *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 158-86.

schlechthin unbegreiflich.” [“The way that the grain of the world was distributed was absolutely ungraspable.”]²⁰ Taking Brecht as an example, Jameson argues that money as exchange in the capitalist system proves difficult to represent whether on the page or on stage. We witness either the lack of money, such as Dickensian poverty, or its “incorporeal value” and “effects” when it becomes capital (150). The miser’s money or the greenbacks of Theodor Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) become valuable substances in themselves and cease to be tokens of exchange. What Jameson underlines is that when there is too little of money (poverty) or too much of it (hoarding or capital), the moment of capitalist exchange when money changes into capital or capital changes into money (what Marx describes as M-C-M) becomes difficult to artistically capture.²¹

Labor in the capitalist system also proves a tricky subject to handle because, as Jameson points out, labor is not “accessible in any unmediated way.”²² This is why Brecht was not interested in representing industrial labor. Instead, Brecht relied on businessmen as dramatic characters to organize his representation of capitalism around speculation and the stock market and filled the category of the oppressed with peasants and the unemployed.

Novelists do not fare better in their attempts to represent labor, that is, make it visible and graspable to the reader. Thus Jameson explains that in his attempt to develop an artistic “method,” Brecht found himself between two kinds of representation, “both of which have

²⁰ Qtd. in Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America* (Miami, OH: Ohio State University, 1981), 139-40.

²¹ Marx explains that capitalists do not see money as a means of exchanging the commodities they produce for the commodities they need but as something to be sought after for its own sake. Thus, the capitalist starts with money, transforms it into commodities, and seeks to transform those commodities into more money. M-C-M where M stands for money and C stands for commodity. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 335.

²² Jameson argues that only “documentary seems to offer a solution” for the representation of labor, but Brecht did not believe in photographic realism of that kind. Moreover, Jameson draws an intriguing parallel between Bertolt Brecht’s dramatic works and Jean-Luc Godard’s films, in particular *Passion* (1982) that associates shots of labor with those of pornography — in other words, “neither labor nor sex is accessible in any unmediated way.” For more on this, see “High Tech Collective in Late Godard,” *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 158-86.

already been exploited by the naturalist novelists from Zola to Frank Norris and Upton Sinclair: on the one hand the ‘Schicksalschläge’ (‘blows of fate’) of the very poor; on the other, the ‘malefactors of great wealth,’ whose rise and fall, fortunes and downfall, also register the fists of destiny.”²³ (151). Indeed, if we look, for example, at *Hard Times* (1854) of Charles Dickens, we find depictions of miserable working conditions, reversals of fortune, and Victorian tidy associations of poverty with goodness, richness with corruption.²⁴ But we do not find an attempt to investigate the role of labor in capitalist modernity or the relationship between labor and capital. Absent is what Jameson identifies as the “desire to express the economic”—“the peculiar realities and dynamics of money as such—in and through literary narrative.”²⁵

Moreover, the activity of work itself poses a challenge to artistic representation. In *Resisting Representation* (1994), Elaine Scarry identifies the major problems involved in the representation of work in the nineteenth-century novel. The first difficulty that Scarry points out is that “work is action rather than a discrete action: it has no identifiable beginning or end”; thus work is “perpetual, repetitive, habitual.”²⁶ The second issue is that “work is social, hence not easily located within the boundaries of the ‘individual,’ hence not wholly compatible with the nature of ‘character’ as it is conceived and developed in the novel.”²⁷ For example, Zola’s *Germinal* (1885), a naturalist novel about a coal miners’ strike in the north of France to which

²³ Jameson, Brecht, 151.

²⁴ See Franco Moretti, “The Grey Area,” for a discussion of Victorianism: “That’s what Victorianism *is*: social relations cannot always be morally good—but they must be morally *legible*. No ambiguity” (124).

²⁵ Jameson finds this “desire to express the economic,” however, in Balzac and Brecht. “Politics have been with us since the dawn of time, along with power and its vicissitudes: money in the form of riches—gold, adornment, monumental piles. But economics in our modern sense—the perpetual transformation of money into capital, as well as the discovery of the ways in which this economic dynamism circulates through modern politics—is a phenomenon as new as Adam Smith, its fundamental theory rapidly evolving over the three-quarters of a century between the Scottish Enlightenment and the work of Marx himself.” Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 13.

²⁶ Elaine Scarry, *Resisting Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 65.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n24, 87.

The Weavers is often compared, solves the first problem – the fact that work is habitual – by subdividing the activity of work into smaller tasks throughout the novel (Scarry 65). As a dramatic work, written to be performed onstage, *The Weavers* attempts to solve both issues of representation. The repetitiveness and habitual nature of work is expressed through the nearly continual movements of the actors, who are engaged in manual work before the eyes of the audience. The social aspect of work is rendered through the sheer collective effort that is required to mount a production like *The Weavers*.

A Brief Economic History

There are certain economic, political, and social reasons as to why German theatre in particular from the late nineteenth century onto the 1920s of the Weimar Republic became fertile ground for the exploration and staging of labor. To begin with, Germany's belated industrial revolution had brought economic questions including those of labor to the fore. Before the First World War, trade unions, despite a membership of about three million, had enjoyed little official recognition. Yet the weariness and disillusionment after First World War created a hospitable culture for socialist groups to strengthen organized labor.²⁸

The Weimar Republic did not, however, resolve problems of labor such as unemployment. Article 165 of its constitution, which aimed at guaranteeing workers' representation to supervise production, distribution, and the economic life of the nation, was never put into practice.²⁹ According to the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, the German economic policy of 1919-1920 "fell between two stools, being neither capitalist nor socialist"

²⁸ Theo Balderston, *Economics and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-8.

²⁹ Stephen Lamb, "Ernst Toller and the Weimar Republic," *Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 78.

and created a kind of “limping capitalism,” or “labourism.”³⁰ There also emerged a radical right-wing critique of unfettered profit seeking by businesses in disregard of national interests. As Theo Balderston reminds us in his economic history of Germany, from our post-Cold-War standpoint of triumphant capitalism, it is hard to recollect the degree to which capitalism was a contested idea before 1914, not just for socialists but for right-wingers as well (3). Even Schumpeter thought capitalism would ultimately fail. Given this climate of economic debate, it should come as no surprise that German theatre joined the discussion while negotiating its own place in the economic system.

Satire Sells

In the meantime, Germany’s stage equipment became the most advanced in the world, thanks to steel production along with the corresponding boom in heavy engineering and the development of successful electrical firms such as Siemens and AEG.³¹ The world’s first electrically lit stage was built for the Munich Electrotechnical Exhibition of 1881, a year before the premiere of Wagner’s *Parsifal* at Bayreuth.³² It was this new class of managers created by the industrial revolution who became interested in the arts, providing financial support.³³ Thus in Wilhelmine and later in Weimar Germany, theatre became the locus of debate about the capitalist system and theatre’s own uneasy role in it.

German theatre directors and artists were well aware of their complicity with capitalism

³⁰ Joseph Schumpeter, *Business Cycles. A Theoretical, Historical and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1939), 714f. Cited by Theo Balderston, *Economics and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

³¹ John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

and the double-edged role of theatre, being both a medium of critique and entertainment. They sought a way of dealing with this complicity through a variety of artistic methods such as expression of angst, self-critique, parody, and dark humor. The double bind that they found themselves in was that their social satire sold theatre tickets but not necessarily to the working class. In 1930, Brecht would write about the paradox of critiquing a society that needed culinary operas through the very medium of a culinary opera like his own *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930; *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*).³⁴ Yet, already by the end of the nineteenth century, Maximilian Harden, one of the founders of Freie Bühne (1889; Free Stage), noted the following hypocrisy behind Otto Brahm's leadership of the Deutsches Theatre:

This trustee and business manager for a capitalistic group brought out plays whose chief merit was the scourging of the capitalistic social order and the demoralizing abuses it carries daily in its wake. Because this policy filled their purses, his backers did not object.³⁵

The German writer-director Otto Brahm would eventually supervise, however, the founding of the progressive Freie Bühne in 1889 by ten writers and critics who went on to stage new, naturalistic plays and to resist the commercialization of theatre. Like André Antoine's Théâtre-Libre in Paris, Brahm's company gave private performances to its theatre subscribers. Freie Bühne had no official home and staged its productions in rented auditoriums. Its main contribution was to provide a private showcase for plays banned in public theatres, such as the works of Ibsen, Strindberg, Tolstoy, and Zola.³⁶ Gerhart Hauptmann, who would go on to win

³⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny: Oper in drei Akten/Kurt Weill; Text von Bertolt Brecht* (Wien: Universal Edition, 1956).

³⁵ Maximilian Harden, "The Genius of Max Reinhardt," in Oliver Sayler, ed., *Max Reinhardt and His Theatre* (New York: Brentano's, 1924), 230.

³⁶ The Freie Bühne's first production was of Henrik Ibsen's *Gengangere* (1881; *Ghosts*) in September 1889. A month later, Brahm staged Gerhart Hauptmann's first play, *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (1889; *Before Dawn*, or *Before Sunrise*), a tragedy of working-class people. For more on the history of Freie Bühne, see John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*.

the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1912, was the most important playwright promoted by the Freie Bühne. Although statistics from this period are scant, a census of members from the 1893-1894 season shows that the association was predominately working-class and particularly popular with skilled workers.³⁷ This independent theatre lasted only a few seasons, however, largely because Berlin's commercial theatre scene had by then embraced the fashion of naturalism.³⁸

A split in the Freie Bühne in 1892 led to the new leadership of Franz Mehring and closer ties to SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, The Social Democratic Party of Germany), while Bruno Wille and his supporters who opposed the rigid dogmas of SPD left to establish the Neue Freie Bühne. While Mehring's Freie Bühne promoted the political goals of the SPD, Wille's Neue Freie Bühne attempted first to educate the proletariat about the art of theatre, such as the difference between role and actor. In Wille's opinion, the working class could not educate itself and had a conservative taste in theatre.³⁹ It is difficult to gauge how effective either Mehring or Wille's programs were at galvanizing the working class (data available to us about reception is scanty). Yet what we can claim for certain is that these were two of the earliest attempts at subsidizing tickets and bringing theatre art to the masses.

Aware of the commercial aspect of theatre, Brecht insisted throughout his career that political theatre be both critical and entertaining.⁴⁰ The technique of mixing critique with entertainment of course is as old as the tricks of court jesters and Horace's advice to poets

³⁷ Cecil W. Davies, *Theatre for the People: The Story of the Volksbühne* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1977), 47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁰ See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre (1918-1932): The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), and "Mehr guten Sport," *Berliner Börsten-Courier*, 6 February 1926.

wishing to instruct — be brief and mingle usefulness with sweetness.⁴¹ Yet naturalist plays critiquing capitalism were particularly popular among those members of society that they sought to scourge and who could, after all, afford theatre tickets. Satire sells. A more recent example of such a phenomenon is Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987), a satirical play about speculation and the British stock market that was especially popular with stockbrokers when it first premiered.

Imagined Economies and Alternative Activities

Another intriguing feature of labor dramas is their engagement with contemporary social, political, economic, and religious discourses that defined the cultural meanings of work.

Hauptmann read Darwin, Saint-Simon, and Marx.⁴² Ernst Toller studied Marx's *Das Kapital*, Engels' *Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*, and Max Beer's *Geschichte des Sozialismus in England*.⁴³ Before becoming a writer, Karel Čapek studied philosophy and wrote his dissertation on Gustav Fechner and William James.⁴⁴ And O'Neill educated himself about the conditions of the American working class.⁴⁵

As such, labor dramas pose certain interpretive challenges. While significant scholarship has been done on how modern drama promoted socialist reforms, not all playwrights who read

⁴¹ Horace. *Ars Poetica*, In *Horace for Students of Literature: The 'Ars Poetica' and Its Traditions*, trans. O. B. Hardison Jr. and Leon Golden (Tampa: University of Florida, 1995): lines 333-46, 17.

⁴² Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Dramatic Works of Gerhart Hauptmann*, ed. and intro Ludwig Lewisohn (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912).

⁴³ Cecil Davies, *The Plays of Ernst Toller: A Revaluation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 162.

⁴⁴ For more on Čapek's biography, see William E. Harkins, *Karel Čapek* (New York: Columbia University, 1962).

⁴⁵ Patrick Chura, "'Vital Contact': O'Neill and the Working Class," *Eugene O'Neill and his Contemporaries: Bohemians, Radicals, Progressives, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Eileen J. Hermann and Robert M. Dowling (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2011), 175-199.

Marx, for example, were eager to see his theories put into practice.⁴⁶ While it is possible to do Marxist analyses of these plays, such a move might prove reductive, as many of these labor dramas imagined a variety of economic models and ways of organizing human activity, not limited to those discussed by their contemporary economists. And because these works of modern drama problematize a few established views of modernism they call for a different set of interpretive tools.

According to Jameson, modernism is an ideological expression of capitalism, “in particular, of the latter’s reification of daily life” and at the same time a semi-autonomic, “Utopian compensation for everything that reification brings with it.”⁴⁷ In other words, although the modernist text reproduces some ideological elements of capitalism (for example, the repression of signs of labor), it also compensates for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism—“the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling amid the desacralization of the market system.” An example that Jameson gives is the abstract color and the pure sound of modern art that makes the perceptual “a historically new experience, which has no equivalent in older kinds of social life” (225). To anticipate a later discussion, the Taylorization of the stage in the expressionist productions of Rice and Treadwell, for example, do not just replicate the Taylorization and mechanization of the modern workspace, but also create a new symphony of sounds inspired by office machines. Instead of being a mere critique of capitalism, these plays can be said to “compensate” for the loss of quality in a quantified world by creating music and beauty out of the unlikeliest elements.

⁴⁶ For examples on the relationship between drama and socialism, see Tracy Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and The Socialist Theatre* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994); Judith Evans, *The Politics and Plays of Bernard Shaw* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003); Ira A. Levine, *Left-wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Research Press, 1985); Nelson O’Ceallaigh, *Shaw, Synge, Connolly, and Socialist Provocation* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2011); Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

⁴⁷ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 225.

Jameson concludes the *Political Unconscious* with a call to arms aimed at Marxist critics: “It is only at this price—that of the simultaneous recognition of the ideological and Utopian functions of the artistic text—that a Marxist cultural study can hope to play its part in political praxis”(290). And, in the very beginning of his book, Jameson states that Marxism “subsumes other interpretive modes or systems” (31). Yet such a claim puts more emphasis on the *work* and profession of the Marxist critic tackling the text than on the work done by the artist. The labor dramas that will be discussed in this chapter do more than “express the economic” or compensate through their aesthetic achievements.⁴⁸ They also think through the economic issues of their time in a way that is different from but no less valuable than the disciplines of economics and sociology.

Before delving into the texts and productions in question, it is important to note that it is the material that Jameson chooses to analyze that seems to influence his elaboration on the Utopian compensations of modernist texts. That is, Jameson’s primary focus is what he calls the impressionistic strategy of modernism. In passing he notes but does not discuss “the much rarer expressionism” (214). As mentioned earlier, the impressionistic strategy of modernism is to “derealize the content and make it available for consumption on some purely aesthetic level” (202). According to Jameson, the “fierce anger” of the stifled sounds of labor—such as “the clang of the boiler room” heard on the seemingly serene deck of *Lord Jim*—is systematically displaced in two different ways. One way is the ideological myth of *ressentiment*, where the villain turns into a labor organizer.⁴⁹ The other is the myth of existentialism that shows “the

⁴⁸ For the “desire to express the economic” see Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 13.

⁴⁹ Jameson’s example is Conrad’s novella *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’: A Tale of the Sea* (1897).

absurdity of human existence in the face of a malevolent Nature.”⁵⁰ While, some labor dramas, in particular the early works of Toller and Kaiser, as well as Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* (1927), do end with capitalists’ prodigies becoming labor organizers and while the early plays of Brecht can be read as anticipating the theatre of the absurd, most labor dramas do not fit in the two categories of displacement proposed by Jameson. They are much more interesting and ambivalent in their representations of capitalism. Nor are they mere works of realism that would appeal to Lukács. On the contrary, they display an array of stylistic innovations in part inspired by the playwrights’ own ambivalence and angst vis-à-vis capitalist modernity.

Theatre enabled these modern playwrights to think through economics and ask difficult questions where political solutions were not available at hand. There seems, however, to be a general trend in the critical commentary of modern drama to distinguish between a play’s social themes—urbanization, capitalism, and labor—and its philosophical and spiritual concerns. Julia Walker, for example, reminds us that most critics tend to view O’Neill’s treatment of the theme of alienation in *The Hairy Ape* as “not truly concerned with the economic exploitation of labor,” but rather “abstracted and de-politicized into philosophical—or more properly, spiritual—terms.”⁵¹ Yet often what we are dealing with is not so much abstraction or de-politicization, as the way in which theatre engages with questions for which there are no readymade political or social solutions. Instead of offering easily digestible socialist propaganda, labor dramas reveal aporias, propose alternative economic systems, and imagine human activities different from alienated labor.

Theatre, in other words, can be not only a platform for the discussion of social problems,

⁵⁰ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 203-204.

⁵¹ Julia Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre; bodies, voices, words* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144.

as we have witnessed with Galsworthy and Shaw, but also a kind of laboratory where various labor scenarios and economic systems, not limited to socialism or capitalism, are tested on stage.⁵² Thus Hauptmann and Toller revisited famous historical revolts of workers and imagined if those uprisings could have lead to anything more than unorganized violence. Their plays are interesting not in the ways that they supposedly illustrate Marxist theories but in the ways that they *differ* from Marx's accounts of history. Still, other playwrights dreamed up socio-economic systems that were utterly unrealizable in real life, like Karel Čapek's entirely robot-run production or Kaiser's world of total war in *Gas II*. These plays seem to have eerily foreshadowed such scientific developments of the twentieth century as DNA-cloning and the atomic bomb. Whether looking back at unrealized historical potentials or fantasizing about the future, the imagined economic models of labor dramas explore issues of labor of their own time and the philosophical meaning of human labor in general. For instance, although Gerhart Hauptmann studied Darwin, Saint-Simon, and Marx, *The Weavers* is by no means an unproblematic reflection of their theories.⁵³ Inspired by the Silesian weavers uprising of 1844, Hauptmann's play differs significantly from Marx's account of the historical event.

Another way that labor dramas think through economics is by imagining alternative activities to that of alienated labor. If, according to Marx, alienated labor strips the human of his or her dignity and brings the human condition closer to the animal one, what activity is worthy of the human being? Or another way to pose the question is what activity allows a human to reach his or her highest potential?⁵⁴ Is it a career, a political act, or play? Marx himself proposes "free

⁵² See Chapter III for the discussion of drama of social reform.

⁵³ See f43.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 66-125.

production” in his vision of the ideal communist society, Theodor Adorno describes a life of luxury and peace opposed to ceaseless production, and Hannah Arendt argues that political action is the worthiest of human activities, one that distinguishes humans from beasts and gods alike.⁵⁵ Modern drama is a particularly powerful arena for thinking about such an alternative activity to alienated labor precisely because a theatre production often involves elements of hard labor, fulfilling work, play, and even political action.

That the topic of human activity would be more prevalent in modern drama than say in early modern drama can be explained by the historical fact that with the division of labor comes the problem of professionalization. As Jameson notes, the combined effect of the French Revolution and the spread of the market system led to the secularization of life under capitalism and the breaking up of older-tradition-oriented systems of castes and inherited professions.⁵⁶ For the first time the realm of values becomes a problem and people must choose their professions, or as Stendhal formulated the dilemma: “Quel métier prendre?” [“What career to take?”]⁵⁷

Finally, discussions of human labor often center on the danger of dehumanization brought about by modern working conditions. Dehumanization can entail two kinds of mutations (not mutually exclusive): the human becoming a machine and the human becoming an animal. It is not surprising then that labor dramas explore both the machine and the animal on stage, looking at activities that might distinguish the human from these categories. Thus, the first part of our discussion of labor dramas will focus on machine art created by modern drama, while the second part will explore how modern drama probes the human-animal boundary through its

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, *The Germany Ideology, The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 124; Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, 1951 (New York: Verso, 2006); Hannah Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, trans. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000) 167-82.

⁵⁶ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 238.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

representations of the urban jungle.

Machine Art: From German to American Expressionist Theatre

While labor dramas might criticize the dehumanizing aspects of machines and management, they also, paradoxically, find stylistic inspiration in capitalist modernity's new sights and sounds. For example, as we will see, Rice's *Adding Machine* and Treadwell's *Machinal* display such fascination with machines, mathematical language, and even a Taylorization of the stage. One of the first plays to tackle the introduction of machines into the lives of humans and the problems that come with it was Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*. Inspired by the Silesian weavers' uprising of 1844, Hauptmann's play tells the story of a community of weavers who are losing their traditional occupation to power looms and are becoming wage earners.

Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die Weber*

While *The Weavers* was initially banned and labeled "socialist," Hauptmann insisted that his play was "wohl sozial, aber nicht sozialistisch" ["social, but not socialist"].⁵⁸ In court, his advocate Richard Grelling insisted that the play was on the side of law and pointed out that three-quarters of the audience of the Deutsches Theatre public came from the upper classes and that censorship could not, in any case, prevent the play's performance before the working-class audiences of Volksbühnen.⁵⁹ Still, after the premiere of *The Weavers* at the Deutsches Theatre on 25 September 1894, the Kaiser cancelled his box and authorities tried to prevent future performances. The socialists, however, were fans: Hauptmann's play was performed three times

⁵⁸ Cited by John Osborne, *The Naturalist Drama in Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1971), 119.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

by Bruno Wille's Neue Freie Volksbühne and seven by Franz Mehring's Freie Volksbühne.⁶⁰

Yet *The Weavers*, as its author emphasized, is not mere socialist propaganda but rather a study of social labor.

In 1914, Barrett H. Clark already recognized that with *The Weavers*, Hauptmann had created a new form of drama that "may be designated as the tableau series form, with no hero but a community."⁶¹ As later critics have noted time and again, Hauptmann treats the class of Silesian weavers, in whose dialect he wrote the play, as the main protagonist:

If individuals emerge from the rank and file they are not thrust into the foreground to stay long. It is the weavers as a class that are ever before us, and the unity of the play is in them and in them alone; they are only parts of a larger picture which will take shape as the story advances, and are not intended to be taken as important individuals.⁶²

A few individual characters do stand out, however, such as the bold and rebellious Bäcker and reserve soldier Moritz Jäger, whose military service has rendered him worldlier than his poor folk. These two stir the young weavers to destroy the new power looms (machines to which traditional weavers are losing their jobs) and the mill owners' houses, "hack[ing] on at the beautiful furniture as if they was working for wages" (59).⁶³ Bäcker and Jäger are no leaders, however, as they do not know where or how to lead the revolt beyond mere wreckage.

Characters that refuse to join the riot and uphold the work ethic instead, such as Old Hilde, further complicate Clark's description of the weavers as a homogenous community. What Hauptmann accomplishes through the tableau series is not just a portrayal of a mob, but also a representation, the making visible, of the weavers' labor. The innovation of Hauptmann's drama,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁶¹ Barrett H. Clark, "The Weavers," *The Continental Drama of Today* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914), 89-93. *The Weavers* was staged on Broadway in 1915-1916.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hordig: "Die scheensten Meebelsticke, die wurden zerhackt, ganz wie fersch Lohn." (Act V)

in other words, is to show how human labor creates value and enables the expansion of capital. *The Weavers* does so by laying bare on stage the illusions inherent to the capitalist mode of production, including illusions behind commodities, wages, and work ethic, even though the weavers themselves might not truly gain insight of them.⁶⁴

The very first scene begins not with a dialogue, but with the weavers exhibiting the products of their labor — linen samples — to Pfeifer, their manager. The stage directions indicate a series of gestures and actions that Pfeifer repeats with each weaver. Once a laborer lays the fustian on the scale, an office apprentice weighs it and stores the accepted pieces. Pfeifer then calls out the payment due in each case to Neumann, the cashier. The first spoken words of the play are numbers signifying earned payments:

Kassierer Neumann, *Geld aufzählend*: Bleibt sechzehn Silbergroschen, zwei Pfennig.
[Cashier Neumann, money counting: Comes to sixteen silver groschen and ten pfennig (pennies).] (8)⁶⁵

What we witness on stage is nothing less than an exchange between the laborer and the capitalist. As the play progresses we see what the weavers can buy with their wage (very little) and what the capitalists do with the products of linen (expand and accumulate their capital by selling these products). We find out that the weavers need their wages to survive and that they do not receive enough to cover all their life expenses, as many of them ask Pfeifer for advanced payments. In short, we witness on stage a dramatization of labor that Marx elaborates in *Wage Labor and Capital* (1849): “He [the laborer] works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labor itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned

⁶⁴ See Karl Marx, *Wage Labor and Capital* in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1978). “Capital consists of raw materials, instruments of labor and means of subsistence of all kinds, which are utilized in order to produce new raw materials, new instruments of labor and new means of subsistence. All these component parts of capital are creations of labor, products of labor, accumulated labor. Accumulated labor which serves as a means of new production is capital” (207).

⁶⁵ Unless otherwise noted, my translation.

off to another. The product of his activity, therefore, is not the aim of his activity.”⁶⁶

In fact, every Act of *Die Weber*, except Act IV, opens with a display of signs of labor through props and actors’ pantomime. Act II, for instance, takes place in a small room in the house of Wilhelm Ansorge, weaver and cottager in the village of Kaschhach, and the stage directions indicate the following setting:

Das Getöse der Webstühle, das rhythmische Gewuchte der Lade, davon Erdboden und Wände erschüttert werden, das Schlurren und Schnappen der hin- und hergeschnehten Schiffchens erfüllen den Raum. Dahinein mischt sich das tiefe, gleichmäßig fortgesetzte Getön der Spulräder, das dem Summen großer Hummeln gleicht.

[The roar of the looms, the rhythmic thud of charge, which shakes the ground and walls, the click and rattle of the shuttles passing back and forth fill the room. Into all this blends the deep, steady whirr of the spooling wheels, resembling the hum of gigantic bumblebees.] (18)

Here, in the use of sound produced by work, Hauptmann anticipates expressionist playwrights who too would find inspiration in the noises of factories, machines, and clocks. Indeed, Hauptmann’s stage directions in *The Weavers* include the ticking of clocks. When we first see the weavers, the clock is on the stroke of twelve. If in Chekhov characters constantly check their pocket watches, which they carry and own, in Hauptmann, workers are reminded of the time (and that time is money) by management’s clocks that they do not own, but which own them, rationing their days.

Act III takes place in a Bar Parlor that too resembles a workspace rather than a space for recreation. With all the listed “barrels and brewing utensils,” the bar is a setting seen from the eyes of a working bartender rather than a customer at leisure (30). An old grandfather’s clock is ticking. Hauptmann makes sure to note the kinds of work that each member of the staff performs. The Innkeeper Welzel is drawing beer into a glass from a barrel behind the counter. Mrs. Welzel

⁶⁶ See f56. First published in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, April 5-8 and 11, 1849.

is ironing at the stove. Anna Welzel, their daughter, is embroidering. Similarly, the stage directions at the beginning of Act V describe the household of Old Hilse by enumerating the many work instruments lying around: “Ein Spulrad mit Garnwinde steht zwischen Tisch und Webstuhl. Auf den gebräunten Deckbalken ist allerhand altes Spinn-, Spul- und Webergerät untergebracht. Lange Garnsträhne hängen herunter. Vielerlei Prast liegt überall im Zimmer umher.” [“A winding-wheel with bobbins stands between table and loom. Old spinning, weaving, and winding implements are housed on the bronzed deck beams; long hanks of yarn are hanging down. There is much useless lumber everywhere around in the room”] (56). The old, discarded spinning instruments hint at the changes taking place in production with the invention of the power loom. Old Hilse’s weaving craft is becoming a thing of the past. Hauptmann portrays the weavers at a moment of transition. Not all weavers yet work in factories with power looms. But those who do not are on the verge of losing their jobs. *The Weavers* tells a version of the weavers’ story that Marx does in *The Grundrisse*:

The way in which money transforms itself into capital often shows itself quiet tangibly in history; e.g. when the merchant induces a number of weavers and spinners, who until then wove and spun as a rural, secondary occupation, to work for him, making their secondary into their chief occupation; but then has them in his power and has brought them under his command as wage laborers.⁶⁷

When weaving was a secondary occupation that villagers undertook to satisfy their needs and those of their immediate rural community, they created what Marx calls “use-values,” i.e. the usefulness of a commodity that is inextricably tied to “the physical properties of the commodity” and the human needs that it actually fulfills (126). When villagers make weaving their primary occupation and begin to work for wages, they create exchange values. The product of their

⁶⁷ *Grundrisse: der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* would be left aside by Marx in 1858 and not published till 1939. Hence, Hauptmann would not have read it before writing *Die Weber*. Still, examples drawn from the life and working conditions of “the weavers and spinners” permeate Marx’s *Wage Labor and Capital* (1849) and *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1867). See Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 273-274.

labor—linen—acquires exchange value, i.e. the exchange equivalent by which it can be compared to other objects on the market, including the weavers' own labor, which in turn becomes a commodity.

By contrast, Act IV takes place in a space of leisure — the luxurious home of capitalist Dreißiger. Stage directions describe characters “looking at pictures” and playing “a game of whist,” while the mob of angry weavers tries to break into the house. In contrast to the impressionistic strategy of modernism described by Jameson, where labor is repressed beneath the formalized surface, here Hauptmann's drama showcases the weavers' labor and stages their revolt.

But *The Weavers* is not a mere illustration of Marx's theories. The very notion of putting Marx's ideas into practice, even in the theatre, is problematic. Does the playwright imagine what would happen if Marxist theory was put into practice? If so, then the ending of *The Weavers* is ambiguous in that it refuses to show the historical crushing of the weavers' revolt and leaves its outcome suspended. Does the playwright attempt to shake up the audience and awaken its revolutionary spirit? The answer to the last question depends partly on who is in the audience. The spectators of Deutsches Theatre, as mentioned earlier, predominately came from the middle and upper classes. The Berlin Volksbühne (People's Stage), founded in 1890 under socialist influence, would only build its own theatre in 1914.⁶⁸ Bruno Wille of Neue Freie Volksbühne claimed that *The Weavers* “made a more powerful impact on the working class than any other social drama” that he had known.⁶⁹ Still, there is also evidence that *The Weavers* drew some

⁶⁸ Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, 20.

⁶⁹ “Erinnerungen an Gerhart Hauptmann,” *Mit Gerhart Hauptmann*, ed. Heyen, 108. Cited by Osborne, 120.

“inappropriate laughter” from the working class crowds.⁷⁰ Leaving complicated questions of reception aside, it is difficult to argue that *Die Weber* is a socialist work and not merely because its author resisted the label. One simply has to compare Hauptmann’s naturalist drama to Marx’s analysis of the weavers’ uprising to see the difference between the two. Marx argues that the weavers’ revolt was not in vain because “*not a single one* of the French and English insurrections has had the same *theoretical* and *conscious* character as the Silesian weavers’ rebellion.”⁷¹ Marx justifies the uprising by the sheer volume of discussion that it has generated among the bourgeoisie itself. In other words, the practice of Silesian weavers, paradoxically, finds in Marx a *theoretical* validation — the revolt engendered discussion among the educated and learned.

In *The Weavers*, Hauptmann refuses to give the weavers’ violence coherent meaning or value. Contrary to Barrett H. Clark’s assessment of Hauptmann’s achievement, the playwright does not portray the weavers fully conscious of themselves as a class with shared social and economic interests. Instead, *The Weavers* leaves us with questions relating precisely to practice. What else could the workers do beyond wreaking havoc? The audience, for one, has the advantage over the weavers in that it can observe their community’s entire social structure of labor throughout the different acts. The weavers themselves do not have such luxury and never gain any Marxist insight into their labor. Their outbreak is spontaneous, disorganized, and reckless. One could argue, of course, as Georg Lukács would in his 1923 *History and Class*

⁷⁰ Davies, *Theatre for the People*, 50.

⁷¹ “Lastly, it is *false, factually false*, that the German bourgeoisie wholly fails to appreciate the general significance of the Silesian revolt. In a number of towns, the masters are making attempts to associate themselves with the journeymen. All the *liberal* German papers, the organs of the liberal bourgeoisie, are overflowing with statements about the organization of labor, the reform of society, criticism of monopolies and competition, etc. All as a result of the workers’ movements. The newspapers of Trier, Aachen, Cologne, Wesel, Mannheim, Breslau, and even Berlin are publishing often quite sensible articles on social questions from which our “Prussian” could well profit. Indeed, letters from Germany constantly express surprise at the lack of bourgeois resistance to *social* ideas and tendencies.” Karl Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article: ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian,’” *Vorwärts!* 63, August 7, 1844.

Consciousness that “proletarian thought is practical thought and as such strongly pragmatic.”⁷² According to Lukács’ famous argument, proletariat is both the “object” of history, the living commodity created by capitalism and the “subject” of history, as it is its labor that shapes the world. Consequently, knowledge of itself is also knowledge of the reality and of “the totality of the historical process.”⁷³ *Die Weber* resists, however, portraying proletariat class-consciousness united by a common struggle. In this refusal, Hauptmann anticipates what would become the most recurrent criticism of *History and Class Consciousness* — the treatment of the proletariat as a unified class with shared economic interests. Because Hauptmann’s drama appears upon first glance to treat the weavers as an entity without an individual hero, the conflicts and disagreements within the community become the more pronounced.

The weavers’ differences and disorganization become especially evident toward the play’s ending. The tumultuous crowd arrives at the pious and hardworking Old Hilse’s house and orders all the weavers to come out. Upon seeing Old Hilse at the loom, they tell him to stop working. Old Hilse refuses and gives them a religious justification for his work:

Ich nicht! Und wenn ihr alle vollens drehnig werd! Hie hat mich mei himmlischer Vater hergesetzt. Hie bleiben mer sitzen und tun, was mer schuldig sein, und wenn d’r ganze Schnee verbrennt.

[Not I! Even if you all go completely crazy! My heavenly Father has placed me here. Here we’ll sit and do our duty, though the snow may burn.]

The pious old weaver chooses to remain at the loom in the middle of unrest and violence. The moment Old Hilse resumes weaving, he is mortally wounded in the crossfire. He falls dead forward over his loom, as we hear the weavers shout “Hurrah!” The play ends with Mother Hilse

⁷² Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

approaching the body of dead Hilse.

Hauptmann's ending is enigmatic for a few reasons. First, *The Weavers* does not show us the violent crushing of the revolt, well documented in historical sources, but instead gives the weavers the last word of "Hurrah!" Second, instead of imagining the future, the play paradoxically looks back: Old Hilse is dead just as his craft and work instruments have become obsolete with the new means of production. John Osborne argues that Old Hilse's "reactionary" attitude cannot be fully explained in Marxist terms by environment, but is rather an example of Silesian pietism and of "a strong psychological need for religion."⁷⁴ Yet Hilse's work ethic and religion are ultimately connected. In a way, *The Weavers* anticipates Max Weber's treatise *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) that would argue that the protestant work ethic was a significant force in promoting "one's duty in a calling," which became "characteristic of the social ethic of capitalistic culture."⁷⁵ Indeed, in the play, Pastor Kittelhaus promotes the work ethic as a religious value in itself. It is not by accident that the first time we meet Pastor Kittelhaus and his wife they are at Dreißiger's luxurious home and not among the weavers. Nor is it insignificant that rebellious weaver Jaeger tells Pastor Kittelhaus that he will no longer pay him money because he has become "a Quaker." Religion, the work ethic, and money create the social fabric in Hauptmann's labor drama. The last disturbing tableau of the play is not that of a mob (though their shouts are heard off-stage), but that of an old man lying dead on his antediluvian work instrument, dead because he believed in the work ethic.

Although Hauptmann's play is often dubbed naturalist, *The Weavers* also displays a self-awareness of being a dramatic work that depends on a hefty supply of stage labor. When one of the weavers, Hornig, describes to the Hilses the mob of weavers that he witnessed destroying the

⁷⁴ Osborne, 127-28.

⁷⁵ See f.5.

mills, he does so in metatheatrical terms: “Gelt, das is amal aso a Theatre? So was sieht man nich alle Tage.” [There’s a theatre play for you now! That’s what you don’t see every day] (64). Such metatheatricality highlights also the sheer labor that goes into producing the large crowd scenes in *The Weavers*, for which the play became infamous. Paradoxically, a play about death, starvation, and sweatshop labor involves costly logistics, as it requires a large cast: there are over forty speaking roles, not including “a large crowd of young and old weavers and weaver women” (6). Moreover, as Hauptmann’s stage directions indicate, he also envisioned an elaborate sound design that would involve the incessant sound of spinning looms and ticking clocks. In his review of a 2007 staging of *The Weavers* by the Boston University College of Fine Arts, Bill Marx notes that both the play’s dismal theme and expensive production scare off potential directions “in the land of the plenty,” even though Eugene O’Neill waxed lyrical about Hauptmann’s work, stating that it “stands with that of Ibsen and Strindberg as the source and inspiration of all modern drama.”⁷⁶

Hauptmann dedicated *The Weavers* to his father Robert Hauptmann, whose own father struggled as a Silesian weaver and sat at the loom before finding the means to become a waiter.⁷⁷ In his dedication, Hauptmann addresses his father and admits that as an author he cannot judge whether his drama “possesses the vigor of life or is rotten at the core,” revealing the angst that would be common to many German expressionist playwrights.⁷⁸ They too would question the artist and the intellectual’s ability to empathize with and relate to the working class from a position of privilege, expressing public anxieties over the utility of mental work and the very

⁷⁶ Bill Marx, “The Weavers and the Art of Starvation,” Fuse Stage Review. <http://artsfuse.org/390/stage-review-the-art-of-starvation/>. May 2nd, 2013.

⁷⁷ “hinterm Webstuhl gesessen...” Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Dramatic Works of Gerhart Hauptmann*, ed. and intro Ludwig Lewisohn (New York: B. W. Huebsch,) 1912.

⁷⁸ Ibid. “ob sie nun lebenskräftig oder morsch im Innern sein mag.”

term “bourgeois.” In fact, the ambiguous and tense relationship between an exemplary individual (the intellectual, the artist, or Nietzsche-inspired “New Man”) and the mass of laborers becomes the center of dramatic conflict in the early plays of Kaiser and Toller.

Mental versus Menial Labor in German Expressionism

Early expressionist plays often express some hope of awakening the revolutionary spirit of the masses, while later ones, especially after the horrors of First World War, the German Revolution of 1918-1919, and the Weimar hyperinflation of 1921-1924, convey their pessimism through gallows humor, cynical self-parody, and absurdist elements. Different attitudes toward labor can be detected in the evolving oeuvre of the same artist, as in the case of Georg Kaiser (1878-1945). Kaiser begins in the expressionist mode, his early plays exhibiting the movement’s emblematic features such as angst over modernization and industrialization and the Nietzsche-inspired fantasies of the “New Man.” Yet a change can already be discerned in the *Gas* trilogy. If the Millionaire’s Son champions the cause of the oppressed workers of his father’s factory in *Die Koralle* (1917), then the final play of the trilogy, the satirical and apocalyptic *Gas II* (1920), imagines the utter destruction of humanity that has allowed its economic production to completely rely on war.

If another strategy available to the modernists was, according to Jameson, the “much rarer expressionism,” what did it involve and how was it different from the impressionistic strategy? The most salient difference is that the expressionist artist represents not the outside world but the world from his or her subjective perspective, often distorted for an emotional effect.⁷⁹ And the most common term associated with expressionism is “angst.” Thus, instead of being a strategy of displacement or symbolic resolution as the impressionistic strategy is,

⁷⁹ John Willett, *Expressionism* (New York: World University Library, 1970), 25.

expressionism displays and even flaunts its neuroses, doubts, and the general feeling of malaise. Instead of concealing signs of labor, expressionist plays often stage labor conditions but not for any good-feeling resolutions. In a way, the flaunting of malaise and self-critique becomes a self-justifying strategy for the playwrights who came from higher social positions than the working class that they sought to represent. Given the movement's contradictions and uneasiness with its own productions, it should come as no surprise that critics have a hard time placing it either in the avant-garde or in modernism.⁸⁰ If we take Peter Bürger's definition of the avant-gardes as revolutionary movements that sought to directly attack and destroy the institution of art, it is not clear how seriously German expressionist playwrights were invested in the idea of destroying the institution of theatre.⁸¹ As Bürger himself notes, even the young Brecht who despised the bourgeois theatre did not conclude that theatre should be abolished (89).

Surveys of expressionism, while admitting the problem of grouping different artists under the single label *expressionist*, associate this "angst" with "a revolt against reification and economic determination."⁸² R.S. Furness defines expressionism as "the expression of a subjective vision regardless of mimesis, a concern for human life, a concern for man crushed by pitiless machinery and ruthless cities."⁸³ In a similar vein, Roger Cardinal identifies "the denial

⁸⁰ Andreas Huyssen, for example, proposes that Expressionism exists in "an area of overlap" between the avant-garde and modernism. See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁸¹ Peter Bürger notes that "with certain limitations that would have to be determined through concrete analyses," German expressionism and Italian Futurism can be placed under his rubric of the avant-garde, though he does not go into such a concrete analysis himself (f.85). Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 88.

⁸² John Walker, "City Jungles and Expressionist Reifications From Brecht To Hammett," *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly And Critical Journal* 44.1 (1998): 119-133. The origin of the term *expressionist* has also been a locus of debate. John Willett finds the use of *expressionist* as early as 1850 to characterize "modern" painting and specifically used in Manchester in 1880 to describe "those who undertake to express special emotions or passions. See John Willett, *Expressionism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 25.

⁸³ R.S. Furness, *Expressionism* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd), 1973.

of worker initiative by a market economy profitable only to the rich; the erosion of individual liberties by big business, fronted by an oppressive bureaucracy; the assertion of mechanical calculation over feeling, quantity stifling quality” as the broad themes of a general critique of everyday life in expressionist art.⁸⁴ Given the grim style and pessimistic attitude, it should come as no surprise that expressionist drama has often been characterized as presenting terrifying portraits of “dehumanization in an industrial society” and staging what J. L. Styan calls “an outright attack on industrial capitalism.”⁸⁵ But a closer look at expressionist plays reveals their contradictions, such as their stylistic fascination with machines, automata, and telegram language, as well as the socio-economic positions of the playwrights themselves.

Although German writers like Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller lambast so-called bourgeois values and call attention to the dire conditions of the working class, they could not be at peace with the idea that as intellectuals and artists they displayed values that potentially could be described as “bourgeois,” a term fraught with ambiguities. These ambiguities are not simply due to the many varieties of the bourgeois but reveal, as Roy Pascal has noted “a deeper social malaise” of which most writers were aware, so that “a self-criticism on the part of the bourgeoisie” was “perhaps the most signal feature of the culture of the post-1880 period.”⁸⁶ German drama of the time expresses this deep malaise, aware of its challenging role of being a mediator between intellectuals and the working class.

Moreover, the Provisional Guidelines of the BRPS (Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer

⁸⁴ Roger Cardinal, *Expressionism* (New York: Paladin Books), 1984, 52.

⁸⁵ J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*. Volume 3. *Expressionism and Epic Theatre* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), 53.

⁸⁶ Roy Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism: German Literature and Culture 1880- 1918* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 34-37. “The figure of the artist that appears in so many plays and novels of the period implicitly or explicitly refers to some image the bourgeois and bears as great a variety of meanings as the latter.”

Schriftsteller; League of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers) maintained that “the literary, just as much as the economic and political, emancipation of the proletariat can be achieved only by the working class itself” and its official journal *Linkskurve* (1929-1932) regularly featured a plethora of polemical critiques of “petty-bourgeois intellectuals” such as Kaiser, Toller, and Brecht.⁸⁷ Even Toller who served as the President of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic and was imprisoned for his left-wing politics was not immune to the smear of the “bourgeois.” Kaiser and Toller fought back and in turn dubbed their literary critics “bourgeois.” For example, in the Introduction to his *Masse Mensch* (*Man and the Masses*; 1921), a play dedicated “to the workers,” Toller calls his critics “bourgeois” and argues that proletariat art must ultimately rest on “universal human interests, must at its deepest, like life or death, embrace all human themes.”⁸⁸ In other words, such art must also embrace the educated classes to which Toller himself belonged. It is not surprising then that the early dramas of Kaiser and Toller imagine the educated “New Man” that could awaken and lead the laborers in their struggle to seize the means of production. Each new drama tests out a different labor scenario and a different relationship between the individual and the workers.

In Kaiser’s *Die Koralle* (1917; *The Coral*) and *Gas I* (1918) it is the socially conscious Son and Daughter of the Millionaire who attempt to help their father’s workers. The latter toil away at a factory that produces poisonous gas on which depends the entire economy of the country. After a horrific explosion, the Millionaire’s Son attempts to persuade the workers to leave the factory and found an agrarian utopia, while the Head Engineer tries to persuade them to stay. The narrative of an enlightened and compassionate industrialist taking the cause of the

⁸⁷ Rob Burns, “Theory and Organization of Revolutionary Working-Class Literature in the Weimar Republic,” *Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 135.

⁸⁸ Ernst Toller, Introduction to *Masses and Man, Seven Plays*, trans. together with Mary Baker Eddy (New York: Howard Fertig, 1991), 112.

proletariat would also inspire Fritz Lang's Expressionist film *Metropolis* (1927). Interestingly, the Millionaire Son's argument rehearses some of the main points that Kaiser makes in his Nietzschean manifesto of 1922, "Der kommende Mensch oder Dichtung und Energie" ("The Coming Man, or Poetry and Energy"). In short, this manifesto puts forward an idealistic program by which human beings could rise above their machine-age environment and return to the natural order of things.⁸⁹ Kaiser preaches pacifism, human regeneration, and redemption of the soul. But *Gas I*, written two years before this manifesto, ends with the government coming onto the scene like a veritable deus ex machina to take control of production. It is no longer up to the Son or the Engineer to decide the fate of the workers. Thus Kaiser's play ends on a dark note with the government perpetuating the capitalist war machinery and the laborers' enslavement. The last words of the play, however, still express hope for future generations, as the Millionaire's Daughter professes that she will give birth to the New Man: "Ich will ihn gebären!" [I want to give birth to him!"]

Toller's *Die Maschinenstürmer* (1922; *The Machine Wreckers*), which lends itself to comparisons with Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, too imagines an enlightened individual who could lead the mob of weavers in their overthrow of capitalist order. Inspired by the Luddite Rebellion (1811-1813), the play's title probably came from Max Beer's *Geschichte des Sozialismus in England* that Toller was reading at the time.⁹⁰ But instead of choosing an enlightened capitalist, like Kaiser's Millionaire's Son, Toller purposely makes his protagonist a one-time weaver who has gone into the world and come back educated about socialism. Jimmy describes himself first

⁸⁹ First published as Georg Kaiser, "Der kommende Mensch," *Hannoverscher Anzeiger*, April 9, 1922.

⁹⁰ Cecil Davies, *The Plays of Ernst Toller: A Reevaluation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 162. Toller toyed with the title *Die Ludditen* for a while. The Luddites were textile workers in Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Lancashire, skilled artisans whose trade was threatened by a combination of machines and other practices that had been imposed by the aggressive new class of manufacturers of the Industrial Revolution.

and foremost as a manual and not a mental worker: “Bin Tramper, Handwerksbursche, der Arbeit sucht [...] Bin Arbeitsmann, bin Weber.” [I am a tramper, a journeyman, looking for work. I am a worker, a weaver] (Act II, scene i). In contrast to his brother, who is proud of having become an overseer by the age of thirty and of having earned a commercial title (“kaufmännische Würde”) that their common-weaver father did not, Jimmy remains a laborer. As such, Jimmy hopes to act as an emissary between the laborers and capitalists, leading a peaceful revolution. Jimmy, if you will, is an upgraded version of Hauptmann’s Moritz Jäger. While Jäger, being a haughty reserve soldier, merely stirs the mob to destroy power looms, Jimmy tries to educate them. For example, Jimmy explains to the workers that they are helpless in stopping the changes in production and advises them to wait for the right time to revolt — when other towns have joined their cause. Jimmy believes that once workers gain the means of production they can make machines work for them, but to violently hack at the machines appears senseless to him: “Kampf führt ihr gegen die Maschine? Ich weiß, dass die Maschine unser unentrinnbar Schicksal ist.” [“You fight against the machine? I know that the machine is our inescapable fate”] (Act I, scene i).

If Jimmy fails to reason with the weavers it is because they are not yet ready, not yet patient enough to wait for the realization of his socialist program, which remains rather vague and incoherent in the play. In fact, Toller slyly shifts the audience’s attention from Jimmy’s political plan to the susceptibility and violence of the crowd. In the end, the blood-thirsty mob, spurred by the play’s villain and double-dealer John Wibley, senselessly wreck the machines, tear Jimmy to pieces, and pluck his eyes out. Toller’s melodrama thus paints the weavers as violent, irrational, and easily moved by rhetoric. Wibley sways the crowd by two crucial rhetorical moves. First, he destroys Jimmy’s self-image of manual worker by insisting that

Jimmy's education has separated him from the common weavers even though he may plead their cause: "Er ist... mag er auch zu uns stehen... kein Arbeitsmann mehr. Er kann lesen und schreiben wie die Herren!" [He is a workman no more though he wants to take our part. He can read and write like the masters!"] (Act IV, scene ii). In short, the ideological point here is that the workers' distrust of Jimmy's education leads them to murder the one man who could have led them to liberation.

Second, describing the machines to the weavers as their enemies, Wibley perversely employs nothing less than the language of Marx, in particular when he calls the factory's machinery "Moloch" and "die Ungeheuer" (Act II, scene ii). Indeed, in *Das Kapital*, Marx uses the term "ein mechanische Ungeheuer" ("a mechanical monster") to describe the organized network of machines enslaving the workers.⁹¹ Marx employs metaphors of demons and monsters to describe machines in part to discredit the notion that industrial machines would shorten labor-time. Instead, according to Marx, it is precisely because the machine is "the most powerful instrument of shortening labor-time," that it lengthens the work day — it becomes "the most unflinching means for placing every moment of the laborer's time and that of his family, at the disposal of the capitalist for the purpose of expanding the value of his capital."⁹² In Toller's drama, however, Wibley uses the same metaphors not to explain an economic fact but to stir the

⁹¹ "Als gegliedertes System von Arbeitsmaschinen, die ihre Bewegung nur vermittelt der Transmissionsmaschinerie von einem zentralen Automaten empfangen, besitzt der Maschinenbetrieb seine entwickeltste Gestalt. An die Stelle der einzelnen Maschine tritt hier ein mechanisches Ungeheuer, dessen Leib ganze Fabrikgebäude füllt und dessen dämonische Kraft, erst versteckt durch die fast feierlich gemeßene Bewegung seiner Riesenglieder, im fieberhaft tollenden Wirbeltanz seiner zahllosen eigentlichen Arbeitsorgane ausbricht." Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Band 1, MEW Bd. 23 (Berlin/Ost, 1962), 402. "An organised system of machines, to which motion is communicated by the transmitting mechanism from a central automaton, is the most developed form of production by machinery. Here we have, in the place of the isolated machine, a mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and whose demon power, at first veiled under the slow and measured motions of his giant limbs, at length breaks out into the fast and furious whirl of his countless working organs." See Karl Marx, "Machinery and Modern Industry," *Capital*, Volume I: *A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, intro Ernest Mandel (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 503.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 526.

crowd's emotions. In other words, Wibley anthropomorphizes the machine in order to pivot it as an enemy that the workers must fight. The expressionistic sets and sound effects present the factory's engine as an anthropomorphic being seen and heard by the workers: "Eine Symphonie tönender Geräusche erfüllt den Raum. Man hört deutlich das Surren der Transmissionen. Verschiedenartigste Summlaute schwingen." ["A sonorous symphony of noises fills the room. One clearly hears the hum of transmitters. A variety of swinging noises"] (Act IV, scene ii). One of the most salient features of Expressionism is the representation on stage of visions seen through a subconscious mind.⁹³ In *Die Maschinenstürmer*, the monster machine arises from a collective subconscious, as we see the workers fall under the spell of the gigantic engine and John Wibley's rhetoric. By portraying workers manipulated to senseless violence, Toller's drama expresses angst about the proletariat's ability to recognize its best interests.

The workers are represented as violent from the very beginning of *Die Maschinenstürmer*. One of the first crowd scenes involves the weavers hanging "strike-breakers," fellow weavers who went back to work at the machines for wages. We find a similar, anxious portrayal of the proletariat as irrationally violent in Toller's earlier drama *Masse Mensch* (1921; *Masses and the Man*). Sonia, the leader of a workers' strike, battles her government-employed husband. Here, we have the rare instance of seeing on stage a "New Woman," not "Man," as a protagonist of an expressionist drama. The masses, however, overrule Sonia's pleas for nonviolence. Their riot leads to Sonia's imprisonment and the suppression of the revolution. Likewise, by the end of *Die Maschinenstürmer*, Jimmy becomes a Christ-like figure, who could have led the weavers to their freedom had they listened to him. Instead, he becomes the scapegoat of a savage community that looks back in horror at his death and professes to be better and wiser next time its messiah comes. With its cautionary tale, *Die Maschinenstürmer* attempts

⁹³ J.L. Styan, 54-55.

to valorize intellectual work and to imagine a productive relationship between the mental and the manual worker, if only in the future. Still, as with many expressionist plays of the time, Jimmy's political program, as conceived by Toller, remains vague and the very concept of the "New Man/Woman" hopelessly idealistic.

In the twilight of the Weimar Republic, expressionist plays become gloomier still, as the playwrights turn the satirical blade toward themselves. Instead of the hope of an enlightened individual leading the workers, we find in these dramas biting self-critique and a dark self-parody of intellectual and artistic work. The angst this time is directed not so much toward the violence of the working class as it is toward the utility and value of mental work. Playwrights thus express anxiety about the very institution of theatre and their own artistic endeavors.

Paradoxically, this anxiety was perhaps more artistically productive than their earlier hopes of the "New Man," as it generated riveting plays of dark comedy. Ivan Goll's *Methusalem oder Der ewige Bürger* (1922; *Methusalem or The Eternal Bourgeois*), for example, tells the story of a filthy rich shoe businessman who is slain in an uprising by his workers. But, as the play's title promises, Methusalem returns, this time as a devil reborn out of the marriage of his daughter and her husband, a pathetic idealist. In *Hoppla, wir leben!* (1925; *Hoppla, We're Alive!*), Toller stages a parody of a meeting of minds: "Diskussionsabend der Gruppe der geisigen Kopfarbeiter" ["An evening of discussion of the Union of Intellectual Head Workers"] (Act III, scene ii). Amidst the vain discussion and intellectual bickering, Lyric Poet Y keeps interrupting to ask: "Wo steht das bei Marx?" ["Where is this in Marx?"] until Philosoph X finally asks him to stop showing off: "Protzen Sie nicht immer damit, dass Sie Marx gelesen haben" ["Do not always flaunt that you have read Marx."] Toller is no longer uncritically valorizing intellectual work, but questioning in a self-critical manner where the reading of Marx

has led poets like himself. His later play expresses angst and skepticism about the possibility of a productive rapport between mental and menial workers, theory and political practice. No doubt this skepticism was brought about by Toller's own political failures as President of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic during the German Revolution of 1918-1919. *Hoppla, wir leben!* suggests that it is not so much the supposed irrationality and violent nature of the working class that impedes social change, but perhaps the eternal bourgeois hiding behind the mask of the artist and intellectual. After all, most of the surviving revolutionaries in Toller's play end up as complacent bureaucrats perpetuating the very system they fought against when they were young. The one man who wants to stand up against the regime, Karl Thomas, ends up back where he comes from — the mad house. The last play of Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy disposes even of such a pathetic protagonist.

There are barely any human beings left in the apocalyptic *Gas II* (1920). In this drama, Kaiser takes *Telegramstil*, a telegram style of clipped and fragmented dialogue, to the extreme in order to stage at once disturbing and humorous conversations between humanoids at work.⁹⁴ The play opens with "Blaufiguren" ("Blue Figures") performing work on stage and discussing production numbers. Kaiser never explains to us why these characters are called "Figuren" ["Figures."] ⁹⁵ We do not even know whether they are automata or humans who have become like automata through the division of labor and mechanization of tasks. The opening of Kaiser's drama presents us with the following set of gestures and dialogue:

Zweite Blaufigur
(Vor rotheller Scheibe)

Meldung von drittem Kampfabschnitt: Ballung von Feind im Werden.

⁹⁴ *Telegramstil* in the theatre was influenced by the poetics of Expressionist poet August Stamm.

⁹⁵ The French translation of the play, for example, opts for the term "humanoid" instead of "figure."

Scheibe verlöscht.

Erste Blaue Figur

(Umsteckt roten Stöpsel.)

Fünfte Blaue Figur

Vor grünheller Scheibe.

Meldung von drittem Werk: Leistung ein Strich unter Auftrag.

[Second Blue Figure

(In front of a red-glowing disk)

Message of the third battle section: concentration of enemy in the making.

Disk faded.

First Blue Figure

(Puts in a red plug)

Fifth Blue Figure

(In front of a green-glowing disk)

Message of the third workshop: production line below one order.]

And so on. These Blue Figures keep on changing the glowing disks and surveying both developments in war and in production, which seem to be linked. The play ends with a change in the ruling order, but the only change registered on stage is that the Figures are now yellow. They still move the same disks and say the same sentences. Whether the figures are human or not seems not to matter because the play cynically suggests that even if we are dealing with humans, they have been powerless and useless in changing their political reality. The figures eventually decide that the only way out of the maddening system is complete auto-destruction. The last image of *Gas II* is thus a landscape devoid of all human life: “In der dunstgrauen Ferne sausen die Garben von Feuerbällen gegeneinander — deutlich in Selbstvernichtung.” [In the distant gray haze sheaves of fireballs rush against each other— distinctly in self-destruction.] While utterly pessimistic in outlook, as a theatrical piece, Kaiser’s drama is innovative and interesting to

watch. In its use of abstract figures, color-changing blocks, and its last tableau sans actors, *Gas II* resembles a moving Cubist painting, or even Fernand Léger's film *Ballet Mécanique* (1923-1924). Paradoxically, by showing a posthuman theatrical landscape, Kaiser's drama spotlights in its finale the contribution that human labor makes to the theatrical production itself, however camouflaged it might be through the absence of actors.

Rossum's Universal Robots

Aristotle once hypothesized that if “the weavers’ shuttles were to weave of themselves, then there would be no need either of apprentices for the master workers, or of slaves for the lords” and the Greek poet Antipatros hailed the invention of the water-wheel as machinery that would give freedom to female slaves.⁹⁶ In *Das Kapital*, Marx would challenge both of these fantasies, explaining the economic paradox of machines: “the most powerful instrument of shortening labor-time, becomes the most unfailing means for placing every moment of the laborer’s time and that of his family, at the disposal of the capitalist for the purpose of expanding the value of his capital.”⁹⁷ Marx’s argument hinges, however, on the premise that some human labor would still be necessary to operate and build machines, but what if machines could eliminate human involvement all together, what if, indeed, as Aristotle imagines, “the weavers’ shuttles were to weave of themselves”?⁹⁸ What if robots could do all the work? Karel Čapek’s 1920 science-fiction play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* stages precisely such an

⁹⁶ Cited by Marx in *The Marx Engels Reader*, 406.

⁹⁷ See f50.

⁹⁸ In *The Grundrisse*, Marx elaborates: “The transformation of the means of labor into machinery, and of living labor into a mere living accessory of this machinery, as the means of its action, also posits the absorption of the labor process in its material character as a mere moment of the realization process of capital.” Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse, The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 279-280.

imaginary labor scenario.

The action of *R.U.R.* takes place on an island, in a factory that manufactures robots as cheap labor force and where robots are used to assemble other robots, thus entirely eliminating the need for human manual labor.⁹⁹ In fact, Čapek's play is credited with inventing the term *robot*, which stems from the Czech word *robota* meaning "serf labor" and "drudgery."¹⁰⁰ Although today *robot* primarily refers to mechanical automatons, in *R.U.R.* robots are mass-produced workers assembled in factories ("like automobiles") from artificially synthesized organic material. In the current science fiction jargon, Čapek's robots would be called androids, as the manner of their assemblage foresees biogenetic engineering (DNA cloning would not be proved possible until 1952). At first glance, *R.U.R.* appears to be a Frankenstein story about humanity's inventions gone awry and about the dangers of technology. An apocalyptic war breaks out between humans and robots that have become more humanlike due to evolved pain nerves. Robots win and annihilate all but one human. Alquist, the Head of Construction, is spared because he works with his hands like a robot. Seen in this critical-of-technology manner, the play's ending where two robots fall in love, becoming the new Adam and Eve, seems naïve and unsatisfying, as many commentators have pointed out.¹⁰¹ *R.U.R.* has also been read as a modern retelling of the Jewish Golem legend, where *golem* is an animated anthropomorphic

⁹⁹ While such a labor scenario sounds impossible, it exists in some capacity already in the production of computers today. As Paul Krugman notes in his blog for *The New York Times*, quoting Catherine Rampell: "The most valuable part of each computer, a motherboard loaded with microprocessors and memory, is already largely made with robots, according to my colleague Quentin Hardy. People do things like fitting in batteries and snapping on screens. As more robots are built, largely by other robots, 'assembly can be done here as well as anywhere else.'" <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/rise-of-the-robots/>. December 8, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Karel Čapek later admitted that it was his brother Joseph Čapek, another respected Czech writer, who had actually suggested the term to him. Čapek first toyed with the idea of naming his machines "Labori."

¹⁰¹ Harold B. Segel notes: "Hence, the banality, if you will, of *R.U.R.*'s ending: love will conquer all; the robots will become human, discover the joys of home and hearth, fall in love, marry, and have children." See Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automatons, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 310. Kamila Kinyon discusses the mixed feelings that Čapek himself had toward his ending in "The Phenomenology of Robots: Confrontations with Death in Karel Čapek's 'R.U.R.,'" *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Nov. 1999) 379-400.

being created entirely from inanimate matter.¹⁰² Although different versions of the legend recount the golem performing different tasks for humans — everything from manual labor to protection against anti-Semitic attacks — most describe the golem serving humanity under controlled conditions and rebelling against it under others.

The first scene of *R.U.R.* hints, however, that the play will deviate both from the Golem legend and the Frankenstein model. Harry Domin, the Director General of Rossum's Universal Robots, recounts to Helena Glory, a representative from the League of Humanity, the history of the factory and the significant differences between Old Rossum and his nephew, Young Rossum, who eventually took over. Old Rossum, "the materialist," wanted to make a human being so he could prove "that no God was needed," while his nephew Young Rossum just wanted to make millions. In short, Old Rossum fits the Frankenstein paragon of human hubris, while Young Rossum is the quintessential capitalist who views scientific research as a means to increase profits. For such an industrialist, as Marx writes, "invention becomes a business, and the application of science to direct production itself becomes a prospect which determines and solicits it."¹⁰³ The young heir quickly realized that the human body was "much too complicated" and that "any good engineer would design it much more simply" if he were to manufacture efficient workers. Consequently, he redesigned the whole anatomy so that robots could become the cheapest workers with the "least needs possible." As Domin explains, however, there also existed a utopian idea behind the profit-making scheme — the elimination of human work: "Ale pak nebude už vůbec žádné práce. Všechno udělají živé stroje. Člověk bude dělat jen to, co miluje. Bude žít jen proto, aby se zdokonaloval." ["But then there will be no work. Everything

¹⁰² The word *golem* occurs once in the Bible in Psalm 139:16, which uses the word גלמי, meaning "my unshaped form." "golem, n." *Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series*. 1997. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 20 October 2012. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

¹⁰³ Marx, *The Grundrisse, The Marx-Engels Reader*, 283.

will be done by living machines. People will do what they love. They will live only to perfect themselves.”¹⁰⁴ Domin does not use the Czech word *robota* denoting “drudgery,” but rather the neutral *práce*, which simply means “work,” “task,” “employment,” or “product.” The supposed goal of the R.U.R. enterprise was not the abolition of wage labor, but the elimination of work *tout court*. But work as an activity of voluntary creation is necessary precisely, so that people can *do* what they love and perfect themselves. As Alquist, Head of Construction, warns the others, again using the word *práce*: “Ano, a všichni dělníci světa budou bez práce.” [“Yes, and all the workers of the world will be without work.”]

What happens to humans when they are left with no work to accomplish and only with leisure on their hands? Although war with the robots leaves the human race extinct, it is not the robots’ revolution that dooms humankind but its newfound idleness. Before robots even attack, we learn two bizarre circumstances in Act I: that war broke out in part because human workers resent being replaced by robots (even if such a replacement guarantees them unlimited leisure) and that women have stopped having children because there is no need for them in the labor-free paradise, or in “Harry Domin’s Sodom,” as Alquist eventually dubs the island. Čapek never explains to us why humans have an innate need to do work. What all these strange developments suggest is that humans have an intrinsic desire to work, to create freely, and to do what Fredric Jameson calls an “activity that is worth doing in its own right.”¹⁰⁵ While the humans of Čapek’s play idle, the robots come to take pride in their work and describe what they do not as *robota* but again as *práce*, as when robot Radius seizes control: “Není lidí. Roboti, do práce! Marš!” [Not people. Robots to work! March!] (Act II). The robots even justify their destruction of humans precisely because the latter no longer produce, as Radius succinctly explains to terrified Helena:

¹⁰⁴ Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.* (Praha : Aventinum, 1920). My translation unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 149.

“Nejste jako Roboti. Nejste tak schopní jako Roboti. Roboti dělají všechno. Vy jen poručíte. Děláte zbytečná slova.” [“You are not like robots. You are not as capable as robots. Robots make everything. You only give orders. You make empty words”] (Act I). Describing the difference between the activities of robots and humans, Radius uses the same verb *dělat*, which can mean both to “do” and to “make” in Czech to underline that robots “produce” all the material things in the world, whereas humans “produce” mere empty words. The capitalist mode of production might have rendered modern conditions of work routine and dehumanizing but the answer then does not lie in a total elimination of work.

Readings of the play usually focus either on *R.U.R.* as an example of “literature dealing with puppets, marionettes, automatons, and other inanimate creatures who come to life in one way or another [...] and rebel against their master,” or as an allegory about human phenomenology with robots standing in for the proletariat or for the Hegelian figure of the Slave.¹⁰⁶ In other words, instead of probing the relationship between robots and humans, critical commentary tends to focus either on the machine or the human. Kamila Kinyon, for example, noting that Čapek was a philosopher before he was a writer of fiction, persuasively reads *R.U.R.* as “an implicit criticism of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and of Kant’s categorical imperative.”¹⁰⁷ In her analysis, the process of biomechanical beings becoming humanized through their development of independent self-consciousness illustrates Hegel’s idea that “positive social progress may be expected to result from the labor of the slave,” or as Kojève summarizes Hegel: “If idle Mastery is an impasse, laborious Slavery, in contrast, is the source of

¹⁰⁶ Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio’s Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automatons, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 299.

¹⁰⁷ Kinyon, 379.

all human, social, historical progress. History is the history of the Working Slave.”¹⁰⁸ In a similar vein, Paul Menard argues that Čapek’s own “bourgeois anxiety manifests itself in the Robots’,” or “communists’ revolution,” echoing the Russian Revolution.¹⁰⁹ The play’s robots then become mere symbols for subjugated workers who eventually gain Marxist insight of their labor. Kinyon suggests that Čapek might be offering a critique of communism’s “misuse of Marxism” through the figure of robot Radius who by the end displays “self-serving will to power” (386). While such readings offers insights into the philosophical and theoretical themes that the play touches upon, it takes Čapek’s play perhaps a bit too seriously and misses its dark humor and biting satire of both capitalism *and* communism. The humans of *R.U.R.* are much less idealistic and its robots are much less conscious of their revolutionary potential than Helena from League of Humanity or the critics who read the play through a Hegelian or Marxist lens would like to believe.

A number of factors contribute to the rebellion of robots such as *křeč robotů* (‘robot’s cramp’) and the introduction of pain nerves in their manufacture. It is important, however, to keep in mind the manner in which robots develop the pain sensation that eventually leads to their so-called awakening of consciousness. Dr. Gall, Head of Physiology and Research Development, introduces pain nerves neither for the sake of scientific curiosity nor for the creation of “a soul,” as Helena believes robots to possess, but simply for production efficiency and profit. In the beginning of the play, we learn that robots sometimes “smash whatever’s in its hand, or stand still, or grind their teeth,” which the management calls *křeč robotů* (“robot’s cramp”) and link to a technical disorder. Helena immediately believes that this “fault of production” is a sign of their

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 382. Kinyon mentions that Kojève reads Hegel through the lens of Marx’s thought, bringing out the social implications of the *Phenomenology*, but that Čapek could not have read Kojève’s lectures in Paris in the 1930s before starting to write *R.U.R.* For more on this connection, see Kinyon, f5.

¹⁰⁹ Paul Menard, “I Am Your Worker/I Am Your Slave: Dehumanization, Capitalist Fantasy, and Communist Anxiety in Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R.*,” *To Have or Have Not: Essays on Commerce and Capital in Modernist Theatre*, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 121-30.

duše (“soul”). We ultimately do not know what causes *křeč robotů*— a glitch in technology or a seed of a soul. The intriguing suggestion of the play is that from the point of view of efficiency soul and glitch are the same thing. Critics who choose to read the play as staging an awakening of consciousness on the part of robots are following in Helena’s footsteps. But Čapek slyly plays on the ambiguity between machine and human with his biomechanical creations.

What we do know for certain is that Dr. Gall introduces pain nerves as “an automatic protection against injuries,” i.e. financial losses for the factory, so that robots would no longer be able to smash their heads. Pain nerves are thus meant to provide insurance against technical glitches. Čapek’s irony then is that expansion of robots’ consciousness due to pain happens because humans try to cut down on losses and make robot production more efficient, not because robots eventually become aware on their own of their alienated labor. This also strangely replicates human evolution where self-consciousness too is a mere byproduct. The scientists and managers of Rossum’s Universal Robots are not mad geniuses playing God but calculating capitalists. Indeed, on the verge of annihilation by the robots, Alquist tells Domin that “an end to the slavery of labor” was never the “dream of either of the Rossums” and that humankind is about to perish simply and banally “because of their concern for profits.” Human manual labor might have disappeared on the island, but not the work of managers, inventors, and CEOs. And, although humans attempt high-flung rhetoric to persuade one another during their last moments that all they ever wanted was progress in their labor-free utopia, they at the same time argue over whether to sell Rossum’s manuscript to the robots that contains the formula for their reproduction in exchange for their lives. Not only do humans argue about whether or not to sell this information (not knowing yet that Helena has burnt it), but they also bicker about whether to sell robots the whole formula or simply cheat and give them an incomplete version.

Rossum's Universal Robots holds quarters on a capitalist island, disguised as a utopia, and like Thomas Moore's 1516 original (albeit communist) *Utopia*, is buttressed by slavery. The island is thoroughly capitalist because the robots' labor not only satisfies the consumption of a would-be closed community but is also exploited for large-scale production. Let us not forget that the island exports robots, as the printed posters in the introductory scene make clear: "The Cheapest Workforce You Can Get: Rossum's Robots", "Latest Invention; Robots for the Tropics. 150 d. each!", "Everyone Should Have a Robot!", "Want to Reduce the Cost of Your Products? Order a Robot from Rossum's!"¹¹⁰ In a way, the island's economic system is comparable to that of the American South before the Civil War or the Caribbean, which Marx cites as an example of a capitalist society that runs on slave labor.¹¹¹

Even though Čapek's robots might not become aware of their subjugated position completely on their own, the very fact that human profit-seeking leads to scientific experiments that render robots hostile unveils Čapek satirical smirk — capitalism holds the seeds of its own destruction. Like Marx and Schumpeter, Čapek conveys the fear that capitalism will not be able to sustain itself and will lead to its own destruction. In 1923, when the play premiered in London and George Bernard B. Shaw, G. K. Chesterton and Commander Joseph Kenworthy participated in a serious public discussion of the meaning of the play, Čapek replied to them in *The Saturday Review* by noting that he "wished to write a comedy, partly of science, partly of truth."¹¹² Čapek stressed that *R.U.R.* was not only concerned with the menace of technology: "The danger, in fact,

¹¹⁰ "Nejlacinější práce: Rossumovi Roboti", "Tropičtí Roboti, nový vynález. Kus 150 d." "Každý si kup svého Robota!" "Chcete zlevnit svoje výrobky? Objednejte si Rossumovy Roboty."

¹¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I, Chapter 31: Genesis of The Industrial Capitalist*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm>. Apologetic discourses of slavery have always relied on questioning the humanity of the slave in a manner similar to the way that the humans of *R.U.R.* allow themselves to treat robots as not quite human.

¹¹² William Edward Harkins, *Karel Čapek* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 91-92.

is civilization itself, which threatens to overwhelm man by its sheer weight and impersonality. Human reason has created civilization, but is manifestly unable to control it.”¹¹³ In his pessimistic and grotesque portrayal of humanity, Čapek joins the ranks of virtuoso satirists such as Rabelais, Swift, and Twain.

Moreover, when we explore the relationship between human and machine without treating the play’s robots as mere symbols for the proletariat, we witness a certain ambiguity between human and machine that Čapek puts into creative use by spotlighting the labor of the actor. After all, actors play both humans and robots in *R.U.R.*, a set-up that creates comic misrecognitions, ambiguity, and insights into the actor’s own labor in the theatre. Stage directions indicate, for example, that in the introductory scene robots are to be dressed like people but be mechanical in their speech and movements, with a blank expression in their gaze.¹¹⁴ In the first scene, Helena Glory, spokesperson for the League of Humanity, mistakes robots for humans and humans for robots. She is shocked, for example, to find out that secretary Sulla to whom she has been speaking is a robot.

HELENA: To je humbuk! Vy jste šarlatán! Sulla není Robot, Sulla je děvče jako já!
Sullo, to je hanebné - proč hrajete takovou komedii?
SULLA: Já jsem Robot.

[HELENA: This is all humbug! You’re all charlatans! Sulla’s not a robot, she’s a living girl just like I am. Sulla, this is disgraceful—why do you play such comedy?
SULLA: I am a robot.]

Likewise, when offering to help the factory’s managers, she believes that she is preaching to oppressed robots:

DR. GALL: Jakou pomoc? Divadlo?
DOMIN: Pardon, slečno Gloryová. Jste si tím jista, že mluvíte s Roboty?

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ “Roboti v předešlé oblečení jako lidé. Jsou úsečná v pohybech i výslovnosti, bezvýrazných tváří, upřeného pohledu.”

HELENA (zarazí se): S kým jiným?

DOMIN: Je mi líto. Ti pánové jsou totiž lidé jako vy. Jako celá Evropa.

[DR. GALL: What help? A theatre performance?

DOMIN: Excuse me, Miss Glory, but are you sure you're talking to robots?

HELENA: (pauses) Whom else?

DOMIN: I'm sorry. These gentlemen are people, just like you are. Just like the whole of Europe].

Notice elements of metatheatricity in both instances of misrecognition. Helena accuses Sulla of “playing comedy” and Dr. Gall mentions a “theatre performance.” In *R.U.R.*, this device also reflects on the labor of the actor who can play both robot and human, but who also, like the humans of Čapek’s imaginary island, is in danger of losing her job to a puppet or automaton. Given the debate about the role of the actor in modern drama, Čapek’s play takes part in an intriguing exploration of how the actor’s labor itself fits (or not quite) the capitalist enterprise of theatre productions.

Labor of the Actor

The actor has been a figure of suspicion since the time of Plato and, especially, in modern drama when, as Martin Puchner has shown, suspicion of the theatre “plays a constitutive role in the period of modernism.”¹¹⁵ Once mimesis becomes a subject of scrutiny, as it is in modernism, theatre’s reliance on human performers becomes a problem, no matter “how estranged their acting might be.”¹¹⁶ Many modernist theatre practitioners thus turned to inanimate objects to resist mimesis. Gordon Craig, in his 1910 “A Note on Masks,” argues that there is only one actor

¹¹⁵ Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5. “From the point of view of reception, this fact causes a crises of the theatrical signs: we will never quite know which gestures and movements are part of the artwork and which ones are the result of accidents on stage” (6). See also Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: “success of modernism in the theatre depends on the theatre’s ability to resist the personal, the individual, the human, and the mimetic—all of which are tied to impersonating actors.”

who could serve as “the true and loyal interpreter of the poet” and “this is the marionette.”¹¹⁷ Inspired by Heinrich von Kleist’s “Über das Marionetten Theatre” (1810; “On the Marionette Theatre”), Oskar Schlemmer choreographs the *Triadisches Ballet* (1922) to show that the artificial movement of puppets and marionettes could possess more grace than those of humans.

The preference of puppets and marionettes over actors was an attempt on the part of modern drama not only to critique mimesis, but also to resist commodification that came along with employing real actors. This resistance was fraught with paradoxes, however. W.B. Worthen associates modernists’ use of puppets, automata, and the more “widespread machining of live performers” with the attempt to “channel a direct, nearly unmediated relation between author and audience, a transaction that avoids exchanging the commodified ‘personalities’ of live performers.”¹¹⁸ Automata were, in other words, enlisted in the service of a serious “art” drama, “whose cultural capital lies precisely in its avoidance of verisimilitude.”¹¹⁹ The obvious paradox of this artistic endeavor, according to Worthen, is that the signifying work of the modernist puppet is reminiscent of the relations of industrial modernization, revealing “an uneasy imbalance between modernist aesthetics and cultural change.”¹²⁰

Still, another argument for avoiding the use of paid actors is a Marxist one. As Nicholas Ridout points out, “the actor is paid to appear in public speaking words written by someone else and executing physical movement which has at the very least usually been subjected to intense and critical scrutiny by a representative of the management who effectively enjoys the power of hiring and firing,” and so the actor becomes “both sign and referent of the wholly alienated wage

¹¹⁷ Cited by Michael J. Walton, *Craig on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1983), 17.

¹¹⁸ W.B. Worthen, “Of Actors and Automata: Hieroglyphs of Modernism,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 9, 1 (1994): 4-8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

slave.”¹²¹ Bringing in W.H. Auden’s distinction between “work” and “labor,” one could also argue, however, that there are actors (the lucky ones no doubt) who perceive their paid work more like play rather than wage labor. At any rate, employing puppets and/or automata as a way to eliminate the actor’s “wage slavery” perversely echoes *R.U.R*’s duplicitous claim that, as a company, it wishes to dispense with human labor. But the actor’s labor can just as well be valorized by a Marxist argument. In a 1922 lecture, Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold argued that his system of acting called “biomechanics” was geared toward Soviet-Marxist philosophy:

The work of the actor in an industrial society will be regarded as a means of production vital to the proper organization of labor of every citizen of that society. It is equally essential to discover those movements in work, which facilitate the maximum use of work time. In so far as the task of the actor is the realization of a specific objective, his means of expression must be economical in order to ensure that precision of movement, which will facilitate the quickest possible realization of the objective.¹²² (Braun 197-8)

Soviet filmmaker and one-time theatre director Sergei Eisenstein further blurred the line between worker and actor by hoping to “abolish the very institution of theatre as such and replace it by a showplace for achievements in the field of the level of the everyday skills of the masses.”¹²³ In fact, Eisenstein would even recall that his discovery of cinema resulted from realizing the limitations of theatre while directing Sergei Tretyakov’s play, *Gas Masks*, in a real Moscow gas factory during working hours.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100.

¹²² Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. Edward Braun (London: Methuen, 1969), 197-98.

¹²³ Sergei Eisenstein, “The Montage of Attractions,” *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor, co-ed. with an introduction by Ian Christie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 87. Source: S.M. Eisenstein, “Montazh attraktsionov,” *Lef*, 1923, no. 3 (June/July), 70-1, 74-75.

¹²⁴ “The broadening of the palette, the inclusion of real objects, of genuine elements of reality, was one of the key tendencies of the time. Setting a play in a gasworks was naturally to move across to a means of expression such as a gasworks, and not just a gasworks but also its surroundings, and the street, the town and the country in our theatricalised spectacle. Hence it provided a perfectly natural exit to another means of expression—to cinema, which could seize the gasworks by the scruff of the neck and shove it wherever it was needed, without any stink of gas.”

The Working-Class Protagonist in Elmer and Treadwell

While the plays discussed so far deal with workers from a distance, essentially representing them in conflict with a protagonist from a higher social standing that tries to save them, the American expressionist theatre of Elmer Rice, Sophie Treadwell, and Eugene O'Neill place the working man and woman center stage. Since the beginning of American expressionism in the 1920s, critical commentary has identified its supposed influence by German expressionism.¹²⁵ Yet, as Julia Walker has persuasively argued, American theatrical expressionism was not a minor derivation of the better-known German movement, but a complicated artistic response to the forces of modernization in its own right.¹²⁶ According to Walker, the conflation of American and German expressionism stems in part from the fact that many of the era's scene designers studied the new stagecraft in Europe. Thus Robert Edmund Jones worked under Max Reinhardt in Germany before going on to design sets for O'Neill and Treadwell (7). But, as Walker points out, that scenic design might have been inspired by German expressionism does not necessarily mean that so was the writing process of the playwrights. It should be noted that the confusion also comes from the fact that the playwrights themselves, like

Sergei Eisenstein, "Theatre and Cinema," *Selected Works: Vol. 3. Writings, 1934-1947*, ed. by Richard Taylor, trans. by William Powell (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 3-4.

¹²⁵ For the relationship and possible influence that German expressionism might have had on O'Neill see Mardi Valgemae, "O'Neill and German Expressionism," *Modern Drama* 10 (1967): 111-123. Valgemae points out that O'Neill would have read German drama at his year at Harvard in George Pierce Barker's playwright course and had seen such German expressionist films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1921 upon its American release. For Elmer Rice's rapport with German expressionism see William R. Elwood, "An Interview with Elmer Rice on Expressionism," *Educational Theatre Journal* 20 (1968): 1-7. Elwood notes that while Rice denied direct influence of German Expressionism on his work, he himself used the word "expressionism" in a written comment to an actor to help the latter with his acting style. For the links between German expressionism and Treadwell's style, see Ginger Strand, "Treadwell's Neologism: 'Machinal,'" *Theatre Journal* 44. 2 (May, 1992), 163-175.

¹²⁶ Julia Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

O'Neill, would often describe the productions of their plays as "expressionistic."¹²⁷ And, in a letter to Ralph Block, movie producer and writer, dated 10 June 1921, O'Neill admits to seeing the American premiere of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), a German expressionist film, that opened his eyes to "wonderful possibilities" that he "had never dreamed of before."¹²⁸ While American playwrights were familiar with German drama and cinema of their time to some extent,¹²⁹ Walker identifies the roots of American expressionism in the "expressive culture movement," a broad program of personal and social reform advocating the performing arts as a means of overcoming the alienating conditions of modernity, influenced by S.S. Curry's theory of "expression" and the teachings of the French vocal instructor François Delsarte (5). Overall, the "expressive culture movement" sought to rehabilitate the human body through live performances during the historical moment when new technologies such as the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, and the medium of film threatened to displace the human body (2-3). American expressionism was also a response to the commercial and artistic competition ignited

¹²⁷ O'Neill used "expressionistic" to describe both *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. Eugene O'Neill, *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 30 and 154.

¹²⁸ Eugene O'Neill, *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 154.

¹²⁹ Georg Kaiser's early and popular *Von morgens bis mitternacht* (1912; *From Morning to Midnight*) is usually presented as evidence of such artistic influence. First performed in Germany in 1917, Kaiser's *Stationendrama* follows the wanderings of a bank cashier who snaps at work and embezzles 60,000 marks. Indeed, the episodic structure in which the audience witnesses one central character go through his or her (at times fantastical) travels can be discerned in O'Neill's expressionist *Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), and Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928). Although *Von morgens bis mitternacht* premiered at the Theatre Guild in New York in 1922 and at the Gate Theatre in London in 1925, translations of the play were widely available before then. For the relationship and possible influence that German expressionism might have had on O'Neill see Mardi Valgema, "O'Neill and German Expressionism," *Modern Drama* 10 (1967): 111-123. Valgema points out that O'Neill would have read German drama at his year at Harvard in George Pierce Barker's playwright course and had seen such German expressionist films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1921 upon its American release. For Elmer Rice's rapport with German expressionism see William R. Elwood, "An Interview with Elmer Rice on Expressionism," *Educational Theatre Journal* 20 (1968): 1-7. Elwood notes that while Rice denied direct influence of German Expressionism on his work, he himself used the word "expressionism" in a written comment to an actor to help the latter with his acting style. For the links between German expressionism and Treadwell's style, see Ginger Strand, "Treadwell's Neologism: 'Machinal,'" *Theatre Journal* 44. 2 (May, 1992), 163-175.

by the film industry. Just as characters are under the constant threat of losing their jobs in the plays of Rice and Treadwell, so the playwrights themselves are trying to hold on to their occupations by marketing their theatre product as distinct from cinema. While these plays certainly critique capitalist modernity to a certain degree, their solution to the competition of the film industry was to create theatrical machines that would amaze their audiences.

As the name of Elmer Rice's main character makes clear, Mr. Zero is as insignificant a laborer as they come. He toils away computing numbers until one day his boss fires him and replaces him with an adding machine. Zero snaps, kills his boss, and eventually ends up in the afterlife where he *chooses* to work at a gigantic adding machine. In Rice's play, the protagonist thus appears not so much as a pathetic victim of the capitalist order, but rather as guilty (at least in part) for his own mental enslavement. In the afterlife, Zero first finds himself to his own surprise in the Elysian Fields where he learns the enigmatic rule that "anyone may remain" there, but "only the most favored do remain." Structurally, this takes place in Scene 7, which is significant because seven is the total number of scenes that make up Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternacht* and O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*. As a *Stationendrama*, *The Adding Machine* could end here if Zero chooses peace and repose. The show goes on not because it must go on but because Zero, outraged at the supposed lack of morality or justice in the afterlife, voluntarily leaves. He is particularly incensed that there are no "good people" around in the Elysian Fields, just those who seemingly waste their time in "profane occupations," like "Dean Swift and the Abbe Rabelais," both "admired for some indecent tales which they have written." People here do not work but "paint pictures from morning till night," write songs, dance, read books, and laugh. Zero, in other words, does not know how to enjoy creative activities done for their own sake. In Scene 8, Zero finds a gigantic adding machine at which he obsessively toils away until a strange

character by the name of Lieutenant Charles tells him that his soul must return to the world. The twist ending of *The Adding Machine* is that Zero's soul has repeatedly been to the afterlife, "a sort of cosmic laundry," "thousand of times—fifty thousand at least." And each time he chooses to keep on working just as he did in real life, never taking the opportunity to stay in the Elysian Fields and revel in free creative play. Notice also that it is in the eighth scene, the number 8 being symbol for infinity, that we find out about the eternal return mechanism of Rice's play. The end of *The Adding Machine* loops back to its beginning. Apparently, even reincarnation in Rice's drama follows Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) to ensure maximum efficiency and production, as Charles informs Zero: "Do you think they're going to all of the trouble of making a soul just to use it once? [...] Why, man, they use a soul over and over again — over and over until it's worn out."¹³⁰ As for not remembering anything, Charles explains the cosmic management of souls in the following manner: "I guess economy's at the bottom of it though. They figure that the souls would get worn out quicker if they remembered." The play's pessimistic attitude toward the common worker is particularly evident when Charles tells Zero what he really thinks of him: "You're a failure, Zero, a failure. A waste product. A slave to a contraption of steel and iron. The animal's instinct, but not his strength and skill. The animal's appetites, but not his unashamed indulgence of them." Here, Rice foreshadows Sartre's existentialist drama *Huis Clos* (1944, *No Exit*) where human beings bear the responsibility for not being able to leave their own Hell, although the door repeatedly opens. Rice's play holds humans at least partly accountable for not leaving their routine, dehumanizing work, as the play's last words are: "Hell, I'll tell the world this is a lousy job!"

¹³⁰ Fredric Winslow Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper, 1911). This influential monograph described how the application of a scientific method to the management of workers could greatly improve productivity and prosperity (both of employer and employee).

While *The Adding Machine* critiques modern work conditions including the intense division of labor that leads to deadly simple, mechanic, and unskilled tasks, it also paradoxically finds inspiration in a kind of Taylorization of the stage. In fact, this creative Taylorization allows Rice to valorize theatre in the wake of competition that silent cinema triggered in the early 1920s, and to keep his own job as a playwright, even while his character Zero loses his. As Julia Walker has pointed out, before writing *The Adding Machine*, Elmer Rice worked within the Hollywood dream factory and experienced himself what it was like to be a “zero” (157). Not only did Rice hate the monotony of continuity writing that resembled more of an assembly line production than free creation, but he also resented the fact that it was the director of a successful movie that got all the credit (170). Thus, Walker reads *The Adding Machine* as “an affective allegory of Rice’s life in Hollywood” and as a “kind of exorcism, allowing Rice to cast off his feelings of servitude to the Hollywood system” (173 and 165). Indeed in a letter, Rice blatantly states: “No one possessed of an independent spirit or the desire to create should be a job-holder. The great mass of men seems to have a taste for timeserving and petty intrigue (letter 12/14/20).¹³¹ But, as a labor drama, Rice’s play achieves something more than an exorcism of his personal experiences.

The mechanization and Taylorization of the stage do not only reflect the dire working conditions of the real world for the purpose of critique. Nor is Rice’s innovative style a mere Utopian compensation for what is lost in capitalist modernity. Rather, Rice’s play displays a certain angst vis-à-vis its own creative practice. On the one hand, *The Adding Machine* clearly shows an alternative activity to that of the alienated labor of capitalist culture—the act of free creation celebrated in the Elysian Fields episode. On the other hand, Rice’s Taylorization of the stage enables the playwright to create a riveting theatre piece that does not depend on mimesis

¹³¹ Cited by Julia Walker, 172.

and realism alone and can thus compete with cinema. Simply put, the playwright himself is locked in and inspired by the law of competition ignited by capitalist culture.

It is significant, for example, that the play's opening lines refer to cinema, as Mrs. Zero complains to her husband: "I'm getting sick o' them. Westerns. All them cowboys ridin' round an' foolin' with them ropes. [...] I can't see why they don't have more of them stories like *For Love's Sweet Sake*." By the time Mrs. Zero finishes her nagging monologue, the audience might long for the silent melodramas that Mrs. Zero herself enjoys.¹³² Rice shows his audience what is at stake from the beginning. Cinema and its machinery loom over Rice's drama, which fights the competition by offering the audience a dark comedy of efficient production. Thus actors playing the family friends of Mr. and Mrs. Zero, numerically named from One to Six, are recycled in the court scene where they conveniently add up to become the twelve jurors. And stage directions constantly note the reuse of sets, props, and costumes, echoing the final, efficient reuse of human souls. Moreover, Rice's drama opens in Zero's bedroom the walls of which are "papered with sheets of foolscap covered with columns of figures."

The "adding machine" of the title thus refers not only to the computing device that replaces Zero inside the play, but to Rice's play as a whole, which becomes a kind of performance machine that could potentially run on loop with Zero constantly reincarnating. It is a machine that makes Rice's theatre entertaining to watch and it is a machine that generates a work of art that can compete with film melodramas of its time, precisely because it offers something more than mimesis. In this manner, Rice's *Adding Machine* also exhibits features of

¹³² The first film to feature synchronized dialogue sequences would not premiere until 1927—*The Jazz Singer*.

what Ezra Pound would call “machine art” in 1930.¹³³ Pound praises the machine as an example of art “generating, producing, and making something” instead of merely imitating.¹³⁴

In a similar vein, Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1928), which is often read as a rewriting of *The Adding Machine* with a woman as the central subject, operates as a performance machine.¹³⁵ Upon first glance, the play critiques capitalism along with its associated patriarchy and sexist work environment (the character of Young Woman has no choice but to marry her domineering Boss). Much ink has been spilled over the pessimistic portrayal of gender dynamics in a play where a young woman is pitilessly crushed by various machineries: the workplace, the media, and finally the justice system, as she ends her life in the electric chair.¹³⁶ But little attention has been given to the play’s sheer aesthetic innovation that Treadwell, a female playwright herself struggling in the old boys’ network of 1920s Broadway, was able to achieve paradoxically thanks to machines.¹³⁷ After all, her neologism “Machinal” echoes “Bacchanalia,” the mystic festival of Bacchus, and hints that her play too will be a kind of festival of machines, expressing both angst and fascination at the sublime of the machine.

¹³³ Ezra Pound, *Machine Art and Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years: Essays*, ed. Maria Luisa Ardiszone (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹³⁴ Ibid. “In Greek culture, *poieō* and *technē* both include the meaning of an activity of generating, producing, and of making something. Aristotle utilizes two different words to distinguish the production of art from the production of nature; however, both words have the meaning of producing something. If *technē* opposes mimesis, poetry, like art, is considered a making instead of an imitative activity” (24).

¹³⁵ Jerry Dickey, “The Expressionist Moment: Sophie Treadwell,” *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, ed. Brenda Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66-81.

¹³⁶ See Jerry Dickey, “The Expressionist Moment: Sophie Treadwell,” *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, ed. Brenda Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66-81. Barbara Ozieblo and Jerry Dickey, eds., *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹³⁷ Indeed, at a certain point, even Elmer Rice expressed concern that Treadwell might have stolen some ideas for her *Machinal* from his play *The Subway*, written five years before *Machinal*: It [*The Subway*] has been in almost every producer’s office in New York. I do not know Miss Treadwell, but I do know that she is a professional play reader. I do not wish to imply that she deliberately borrowed from *The Subway*, but I do feel that the conclusion that she read the play and was influenced by it—consciously or unconsciously—is an inescapable one. Cited by Walker, 272.

Machine Acoustic

The first scene of *Machinal* performs a kind of industrial symphony composed of sounds generated by office machines and speech patterns of different employees. The scene has to be heard in the theatre or at least read aloud for it to generate its musical effect. In the list of characters, titled “Characters and their machines,” Treadwell makes sure to note the machine of each character as though it were an instrument. The Stenographer “plays” the typewriter, the Clerk—the filing cabinet and manifold, the Adding Clerk—the adding machine, and the Telephone Operator fiddles on the switchboard. Language becomes poetic and takes on a musical quality thanks to Treadwell’s careful orchestration of repetition and her humorous manipulation of clichés. For example, although most of the things that the office clerks say are unbearably banal, a certain musical pattern emerges from both human voices and machines, producing sheer aesthetic pleasure. The Filing Clerk repeats on cue “hot dog,” while the Adding Clerk spits out meaningless numbers. The Telephone Girl adds to the music ensemble her inflection in tone, as she is usually the one who asks questions. In other words, Treadwell realizes a kind of “machine acoustic” that Pound would imagine in *Machine Art* (1930). According to Pound, unpleasantness of sounds in factories is only due to their being associated with “the needs of work” not to the form of the sounds themselves (75). If such sounds were combined for the beauty of their own forms, a machine acoustic would become possible.

Such machine acoustic was in the making from the very emergence of labor dramas. Already, in *The Weavers* (1892), Hauptmann found inspiration in the sounds of spinning looms and ticking clocks, as his stage directions make evident. Toller and Kaiser used a variety of

factory noises in their productions set in the industrial world. To render the subjective experience of Mr. Zero when he gets fired, Rice does not hold back on sound effects:

The music swells and swells. To it is added every offstage effect of the theatre: the wind, the waves, the galloping horses, the locomotive whistle, the sleigh bells, the automobile siren, the glass-crash. New Year's Eve, Election Night, Armistice Day, and Mardi Gras. The noise is deafening, maddening, unendurable. Suddenly it culminates in a terrific peal of thunder. For an instant there is a flash of red and then everything is plunged into blackness.

Here, stage directions of sound effects border on the impossible. Eugene O'Neill became so obsessed with getting the "continual metallic nasal purr of the generators" pitch perfect for *Dynamo* (1929) that he urged his sound designers and producers to "pay a friendly call on the General Electric people."¹³⁸ The playwright wanted General Electric to be involved even though his own play shows the danger of obsessing over modern technology. According to O'Neill, "sound is the most original and significant dramatic value modernity has to contribute to the theatre" and he was willing to pay for it. O'Neill even regretted that "the tom-tom in *Emperor Jones*" was never what he meant it to be, although "with a little extra expense and trouble" it could have been done perfectly."¹³⁹

The machine art of naturalist and expressionist drama does not merely critique capitalist culture, nor does it repress signs of labor in the manner of the impressionistic strategy. Instead, the playwrights discussed above can be said to make use of the *expressionistic strategy* of modernism. They openly display signs of labor and expose their angst over capitalist modernity and over their own place in it. Rather than offer us a symbolic resolution or a wish-fulfilling narrative, they allow themselves to be inspired by the sublime of new technologies. Just as their plays often imagine alternative activities to that of alienated human labor, they also make

¹³⁸ Bogard and Bryer, 300-301.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

creative use of the new technologies that inspired in them both fear and fascination by rearranging the sights and sounds of capitalist modernity into new visions and symphonies for the theatre.

It's A Jungle Out There: Human, Animal, and Capital in the Early Drama of Brecht and O'Neill

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered father distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
Then spoke the thunder... (396-400)
—T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922).

“Discourse of the Jungle”

A plethora of recent titles about navigating the stock market and the world of business reveal the enduring metaphor of the jungle to describe the intricacies of capitalism: *Monkey Business: Swinging Through the Wall Street Jungle*; *Roar! Get Heard in the Sales and Marketing Jungle: A Business Fable*; *Zebras and Cheetahs: Look Different and Stay Agile to Survive the Business Jungle*; *Jungle Rules: How to Be a Tiger in Business*, and many more. Written in the style of camping survival guides, these books associate the economic laws of supply and demand and business competition with biological instincts of survival and to supposedly natural behavior of animals. It is not by accident, perhaps, that Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, one of the most successful multinational commerce companies, settled on *Amazon* as a name because it represented to him a place that was “exotic and different” and was one of largest rivers in the world, encouraging customers to become explorers of a current of goods.¹ Jungle-inspired metaphors such as “the urban jungle,” “survival of the fittest,” “struggle for existence,” “laws of the jungle,” etc. are not innocuous phrases but rather suggest a complicated historical web of interactions among imperialist, economic, biological, and literary discourses that took root with the rise of European imperialism, sprung at the end of the nineteenth century, and still affects us today. As we will see, many of these expressions, such as the infamous “survival of the fittest,” were meant to explain complex phenomena but became reductive catchphrases. To begin to entangle this thicket of language surrounding the jungle—the uses and misuses of various

¹ Ann Byers, *Jeff Bezos: The Founder of Amazon.com* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2006), 46-47.

terms— is to begin to understand some of the premises and prejudices on which capitalist culture grows.

The word “jungle” stems from the Hindi and Marathi *jangal* meaning “desert,” “waste,” “forest,” and the Sanskrit *jangala* meaning “dry,” “dry ground,” or “desert.”² On Anglo-American soil, its semantic meaning shifted from uncultivated, waste ground to “land overgrown with underwood, long grass, or tangled vegetation; also, the luxuriant and often almost impenetrable growth of vegetation covering such a tract.”³ The word “jungle,” meaning “tangled vegetation,” already appears in Charles Darwin’s 1839 *Journal and Remarks*, commonly referred to as *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Darwin’s exciting travel memoir and field journal that details his observations at the time when he was developing his theory of evolution by natural selection.⁴

“Jungle’s” first appearance in the English language, in 1776, is the result of translation work carried out on behalf of the East India Company.⁵ Hoping to increase colonial hold over the Indies, Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of Bengal, commissioned Nathaniel Brassey

² “jungle, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 2013. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 20 March 2013. <<http://www.oed.com.ezpprod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/102075?rskey=3qPAeF&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>>.

³ *Ibid.* According to the *OED*, “the change in Anglo-Indian use may be compared to that in the historical meaning of the word *forest* in its passage from a waste or unenclosed tract to one covered with wild wood. In the transferred sense of *jungle* there is apparently a tendency to associate it with *tangle*.”

⁴ Darwin is so taken by the new sights and sounds that he encounters in Brazil that he searches for words to describe details to readers who might have never travelled to faraway lands: “Such are the elements of the scenery, but it is a hopeless attempt to paint the general effect. Learned naturalists describe these scenes of the tropics by naming a multitude of objects, and mentioning some characteristic feature of each. To a learned traveller this possibly may communicate some definite ideas: but who else from seeing a plant in a herbarium can imagine its appearance when growing in its native soil? Who from seeing choice plants in a hothouse can magnify some into the dimensions of forest trees, and crowd others into an entangled jungle?” Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle: Charles Darwin’s Journal of Researches*, ed. Janet Browne and Michael Neve (New York: Penguin Classics, 1989), 367.

⁵ For the history of representations of late-Victorian London as an “urban jungle” see Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2000), 179. McLaughlin mentions that “jungle” appears through the work of East India Company, but does not go deeper into its etymology. His study *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* is primarily concerned with literary representations of late-Victorian London as an urban jungle between 1885-1920 when “through increasingly expanding networks of world trade, London was the center of circulation for a tangled jungle of styles, languages, immigrant laborers, and commodities” (26).

Halhed, a British grammarian, to translate into English the Persian abstract of the Sanskrit text *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits*.⁶ The term “jungle” is listed in the glossary and is defined as “lands wholly uncultivated” and specifically in Chapter XIII as “land waste for five years, or whatever longer time it may happen” (190). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, another meaning of the “jungle” as that of “the dwelling-place of wild beasts” appears in 1783, again linked to the history of the East India Company, but this time from the pen of Edmund Burke.⁷ Burke took issue with the company’s exploitation of and violence toward the native population. In his speech about Fox’s East India Bill, Burke condemned colonial slaughter that had left the land “a dreary desert” and “a jungle full of wild beasts,” the word “beasts” pointing to the colonizers themselves.⁸ Thus from the very beginning of its use in English, “jungle” is steeped in a history of imperialist and economic machinations. With the publication of Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Books* (1894-1895), the word “jungle” would become firmly entrenched in the Anglo-American consciousness and associated not only with the “dwelling place of wild beasts” but also with “the law of the jungle.” The latter turn of phrase often gets erroneously conflated with “survival of the fittest” and with cutthroat competition, but

⁶ “Halhed, Nathaniel Brassey.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press. 20 March 2013. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11923>>. The *Translator’s Preface* begins with the following: “The importance of commerce of India, and the advantages of a territorial establishment in Bengal, have at length awakened the attention of the British Legislature to every circumstance that may conciliate the affections of the natives, or ensure stability to the acquisition. Nothing can so favorably conduce to these two points as well-timed toleration in matters of religion, and an adoption of such original institutes of the country, as do not immediately clash with the laws and interests of the conquerors.”

⁷ See footnote 2.

⁸ Edmund Burke, “Speech on Fox’s East India Bill [December 1, 1873],” *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke (1792-1827)* (Toronto: Gale ECCO, 2010). Print.

Kipling's "law of the jungle" describes not Darwin's "struggle for existence," but rather ideas of hierarchy and authority.⁹

Noting a proliferation of literary and cultural texts centered on animality and jungle metaphors in the United States between 1894 and 1914, Michael Lundblad's pioneering study *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U.S. Literature and Culture* (2013) proposes a term for this phenomenon— "discourse of the jungle." Arguing that by the end of nineteenth century "discourse of the jungle" becomes an ideology that constructs "the nature of 'the beast' in terms of both 'real' animals and the human being as a Darwinist-Freudian animal," Lundblad takes on the question of the animal that has become of central concern to philosophy and literary studies.¹⁰ In particular, Lundblad examines the ways in which the jungle metaphor and the imagery of wild beasts were evoked to "naturalize" and justify behaviors such as heterosexuality, labor exploitation, and racism and the ways in which texts (mostly U.S. prose fiction) not only constructed but also *resisted* this "discourse of the jungle."¹¹

"Discourse of the jungle" was also prevalent in modern drama, particularly in the jungle imagery of the early expressionist plays of Bertolt Brecht and Eugene O'Neill. As John Walker has pointed out, expressionist theatre often renders the modern city as a paradoxical site that is at once "a technological anti-utopia and primeval jungle" where economic imperatives turn

⁹ "Now these are the Laws of the Jungle,/ and many and might are they;/ But the head and the hoof of the Law/and the haunch and the hump is—Obey!" Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1985), 189.

¹⁰ Michael Lundblad, *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U.S. Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2. For more books centered on the question of the animal, see in particular: Élisabeth de Fontenay, *Le Silence des bêtes, la philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998); Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louis Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Lundblad, 2 and 6.

individuals into beasts locked in a hostile competition for survival.¹² But not all playwrights merely reproduced “the discourse of the jungle;” they also questioned and resisted it. In the case of Brecht and O’Neill, one sees a change in their use of jungle imagery already evident in their early works that often get lumped together. Although three of Brecht’s first full-length plays—*Baal* (1918), *Trommeln in der Nacht* (*Drums in the Night*; 1918-1920), and *Im Dickicht der Städte* (*In the Jungle of Cities*; 1921-1924 and 1927) are often discussed together, there is a significant shift in the manner in which *Baal* and *In Jungle of Cities* treat the comparison of humans to animals.¹³ Likewise, while O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920) stages a man’s regression to the primitive, *The Hairy Ape* (1922) probes the very boundary between animal and human. The two playwrights both found inspiration in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* and Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* (1906) and wrote respectively *In the Jungle of Cities* and *The Hairy Ape* around the same time.¹⁴ Surprisingly, *The Jungle*’s political message failed to interest young Brecht, who would not pick up Marxism till 1926.¹⁵ Thus Brecht composed *In the Jungle of Cities* when he was not yet seriously immersed in Marxism, still fascinated and anxious about Americanism and the modern city, while O’Neill composed *The Hairy Ape* at a time when he was reevaluating and relinquishing his earlier socialism and labor activism. Given these two playwrights’ ambivalent attitudes toward capitalist modernity, it should come as no surprise that “the jungles” present in their dramas are not simply the sites of brutal competition of animalized

¹² John Walker, “City Jungles and Expressionist Reifications from Brecht to Hammett,” *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, 1998 Spring; 44 (1): 119-33.

¹³ For a discussion of the three early plays together, see Tory Meech, “Brecht’s Early Plays,” *Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks: 65-78.

¹⁴ For O’Neill’s interest in Kipling, see Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O’Neill* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 79-80; Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O’Neill: *The Man and His Plays* (New York: Dover Publications, 1947), 14; Louis Sheaffer, *O’Neill: Son and Playwright* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), 69. For Brecht’s interest in Kipling and Sinclair see Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America* (Columbus: Published for Miami University for the Ohio State University Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America*, 20.

humans. Why is the technological associated with the primitive? Why is the worker's body linked to that of an animal? By exploring these questions, *In the Jungle of Cities* and *The Hairy Ape* reveal how capitalism maintains, negotiates, and depends on a certain human-animal boundary. Before delving into the plays themselves, it is helpful to look at the historical context in which these plays were written and to which they were in part responding. Of specific importance and interest is the history of ideas circulating around the human-animal boundary in discussions about human labor.

From Division of Labor to Survival of the Fittest

The cross-pollination of economic and biological terms around the work of Charles Darwin in particular shows how porous and unstable the human-animal boundary is. If the concept of the division of labor did not directly influence Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, then at least it inspired him to use metaphorical language. The influence of Malthus's theory of population on Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is well known and often commented upon (Darwin himself acknowledged the influence), but the language of economics pervades Darwin's text in general.¹⁶ While it is difficult to prove that Darwin had any real interest in or grasp of political economy (there is a complete blank in Darwin's record of his reading on the subject), he would not have needed to have any particular in-depth knowledge of political economy to apprehend the concept of the division of labor that was pervasive in the general literature of the time, especially in the theories of zoologist Henri Milne-Edwards.¹⁷ The

¹⁶ Charles Darwin, *Autobiography* in Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. 2 vols (New York: Appleton, 1896), I, 68. Darwin indicates that reading Malthus in 1838 was a key factor in arriving at his theory of natural selection.

¹⁷ Scott Gordon, "Darwin and Political Economy: The Connection Reconsidered," *Journal of the History of Biology* 22. 3 (Autumn 1989), 437-59.

phrase “the economy of nature,” for example, appears thirteen times in *Origin of Species* as a metaphor that describes how nature allocates resources by laws that are strangely reminiscent of human economics. Here is how Darwin describes the production of wax by hive-bees:

The bees, of course, no more knowing that they swept their spheres at one particular distance from each other, than they know what are the several angles of the hexagonal prisms and of the basal rhombic plates; the motive power of the process of natural selection having been the construction of cells of due strength and of the proper size and shape for the larvae, this being effected with the greatest possible economy of *labor* and wax; that individual swarm which thus made the best cells with least *labor*, and least waste of honey in the secretion of wax, having succeeded best, and having transmitted their newly-acquired economical instincts to new swarms, which in their turn will have had the best chance of succeeding in the struggle for existence.¹⁸

The beehive is described as nothing less than a site of production governed by economic laws and by management rules of labor and waste, foreshadowing Taylorization. Nature, in Darwin’s assessment, is portrayed as a kind of efficient manager that makes sure that her animals are engaged in the most efficient labor. This metaphor of labor management, however, does not appear in the first edition of *the Origin of the Species* (1859) where Darwin merely mentions the waste of wax.¹⁹ In Darwin’s life, his pioneering study went through six editions and it constantly changed as Darwin read other thinkers, such as Herbert Spencer.

The dialogue between Darwin and Spencer is particularly interesting, as the two thinkers borrowed and modified each other’s words. Thus Darwin borrowed the term “survival of the fittest” from Herbert Spencer and used it as a synonym for natural selection in the fifth edition of

¹⁸ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 6th edition (New York: Empire Books, 2011), 162.

¹⁹ In the first edition the paragraph reads: “The bees, of course, no more knowing that they swept their spheres at one particular distance from each other, than they know what are the several angles of the hexagonal prisms and of the basal rhombic plates. The motive power of the process of natural selection having been economy of wax; that individual swarm which wasted least honey in the secretion of wax, having succeeded best, and having transmitted by inheritance its newly acquired economical instinct to new swarms, which in their turn will have had the best chance of succeeding in the struggle for existence.”

On the Origin of Species (1869).²⁰ Darwin made sure to remark, however, that he used the phrase in “a large and metaphorical sense.” And Herbert Spencer introduced the term in his *Principles of Biology* (1864) after reading Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Spencer notes that “survival of the fittest,” which he sought to express in “mechanical terms,” is “that which Mr. Darwin has called ‘natural selection,’ or the preservation of favored races in the struggle for life.”²¹

While Herbert Spencer’s reputation as a Social Darwinist is largely unwarranted and is the product of the interpretive caricatures of both G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903) and Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1955), Darwin’s “struggle for existence” entered the common lexicon as a catchphrase whose complex meaning was soon lost and was taken up by the likes of Andrew Carnegie to justify labor exploitation. From early on, Marx and Engels were critical of such a ubiquitous and light use of the term, especially when applied to economic thought. In a letter to Pyotr Lavrov (1875), Engels writes that he accepts the theory of evolution, but considers Darwin’s method of proof (struggle for life, natural selection) only “a first, provisional, imperfect expression of a newly discovered fact.”²² He reminds Lavrov that until Darwin’s time the same people who now saw everywhere only *struggle* for existence (Vogt, Büchner, Moleschott), at one point emphasized precisely *cooperation* in organic nature, the fact that the vegetable kingdom supplies oxygen and nutriment to the animal kingdom and conversely that the animal kingdom supplies plants with carbonic acid and manure. While Engels thought that both conceptions were “justified within certain limits,” “one [was] as one-sided and narrow-minded as the other.” Most important, Engels identifies the broken-telephone dialogue

²⁰ R.B. Freeman, “On the Origin of Species,” *The Works of Charles Darwin: An Annotated Biographical Handlist*, 2nd ed. (Kent, England: Wm Dawsons & Sons Ltd, 1977).

²¹ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, vol. 1. (1864-67) (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2009), 444.

²² Friedrich Engels, Letter to Pyotr Lavrov. Nov 12-17, 1875. <https://www.marxists.org>. 25 March 2013.

between the discourses of biology and socio-economics that borrow terms from each other and use them as shorthand metaphors for complex phenomena:

The whole Darwinists teaching of the struggle for existence is simply a transference from society to living nature of Hobbes's doctrine of *bellum omnium contra omnes* [from Hobbes's *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, Chapter 13-14] and of the bourgeois-economic doctrine of competition together with Malthus's theory of population. When this conjurer's trick has been performed [...], the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is now claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved. The puerility of this procedure is so obvious that not a word need be said about it. (786-87)

One almost wishes that Engels had said something more about the "puerility of this procedure," since the irresponsible and unproblematic use of terms like "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest" helped perpetuate "the discourse of the jungle." This discourse, which relied on jungle and animal imagery, represented humans like animals locked in a cutthroat economic competition. So pervasive was this discourse that even labor activists like Upton Sinclair fell into its trap.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) represents the "inhumanity" of capitalism by rendering Chicago as an urban jungle where human beings are mere beasts of prey, where the meat kings are ready to slaughter their workers like animals, and where only the fittest survive. Sinclair and his supporters hoped that his naturalist novel would expose the exploitation of the typical American factory worker at the turn of the twentieth century through the example of Chicago's meatpacking industry.²³ Arthur Conan Doyle nicknamed Sinclair "Zola of America" and Jack London described *The Jungle* as the "*The Uncle Tom's Cabin* of wage slavery" that

²³ Sinclair spent six months living in and researching Chicago stockyards.

revealed “what our country really [was], the home of oppression and injustice, a nightmare of misery, an inferno of suffering, a human hell, a jungle of wild beasts.”²⁴

Sinclair’s predominantly middle and upper class readers, however, fixated instead on food safety. One of Sinclair’s most famous readers, Theodor Roosevelt, made sure to emphasize in his letter to the writer his unshakeable belief in the idea that “a man not very strong physically and working at trades that did not need intelligence, could raise himself to a position where he had steady work and where he could save and lead a self-respecting life.”²⁵ The twenty-sixth president of the United States was willing to look into the “arrogant and selfish greed on the part of the capitalist” and into the “specific evils” of the meatpacking industry that Sinclair pointed out, “if their existence [were] proved,” but he was not open to questioning the ideology of the work ethic and the American dream of pulling oneself by one’s bootstraps (letter 03/15/1906).²⁶ Thus public pressure led not to the improvement of the laborers’ lot but to the passage of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 as well as the establishment of the Bureau of Chemistry, later renamed the Food and Drug Administration. Sinclair himself opposed this legislation because he worried that it would boost the power of large meat packers and exacerbate labor exploitation. It did. In *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, the muckraker bemoaned the fact that *The Jungle* was misunderstood and that he “aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach.”²⁷ Lundblad suggests that the legislative result and readers’ neglect of the working class is less surprising if we consider Sinclair’s representation of workers as “depraved

²⁴ 1905 letter from Jack London cited in Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1960), 20.

²⁵ Letter from Theodor Roosevelt cited in Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters*, 13. Letter March 15, 1906.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Harold Bloom ed., *Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle* 27 (Infobase Publishing, 2002), 11. *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (October, 1906).

animals” who handle food.²⁸ Naturalizing “animal instincts” in the city-jungle serves as the perfect excuse for ignoring both the squeals of the hogs and the workers.²⁹ In his *Autobiography*, when Sinclair mentions the infamous passage of the continuous flow of hogs in the slaughterhouse, he claims that it does not deal with “the moral claims of dying hogs” but was rather intended “as a hilarious farce.”³⁰ In short, the question of the animal is not Sinclair’s main concern and he is not interested in probing the relationship between the representations of animals and workers, even though this very relationship had a significant impact on how his novel was received.

Overall, the afterlife and reception of Sinclair’s naturalist novel, written in a documentary-like style, gives weight to Fredric Jameson’s assertion that it is the form of the work of art—its genre, structure, style—rather than its mere content that has the greatest revolutionary potential.³¹ Following Adorno, Jameson sees the greatest opportunities for challenging the dominant socio-economic system not in the works of realism (as Lukács does), where, as in Emile Zola’s novels the problems of society can be laid before the reader directly, but in works of writers like Samuel Beckett who remake language as something difficult.³²

While *The Jungle* did not bring attention to the faults of the capitalist economic system in the manner that Sinclair had hoped, his novel did inspire two modern playwrights’ representations of capitalist modernity, in particular their artistic renderings of the modern metropolis. Brecht’s *In the Jungle of Cities* and O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* both render the modern

²⁸ Lundblad, 116-17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁰ Cited in Lundblad, 109.

³¹ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form; Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

³² *Ibid.*

city (Chicago and New York respectively) as a paradoxical site that is at once a technological, nightmarish landscape and a primeval jungle. Yet, instead of simply comparing humans to animals, both Brecht and O'Neill probe the use of animal imagery and the human-animal boundary.

“Man Lives like a Lizard”

At the time of writing *In the Jungle of Cities*, Brecht found inspiration for the imagery of his mythical Chicago in Kipling and Sinclair.³³ On September 11th, 1921, after moving to Berlin, Brecht jots down in his notebook the first mention of the theme of the big city that would occupy him throughout his life:

Als ich mir überlegte, was Kipling für die Nation machte, die Welt “zivilisiert,” kam ich zu der epochalen Entdeckung, dass eigentlich noch kein Mensch die größte Stadt als Dschungel beschrieben hat. Wo sind ihre Helden, ihre Kolonisatoren, ihre Opfer? Die Feindseligkeit der größten Stadt, ihre bösertige, steinerne Konsistenz, ihre babylonische Sprachverwirrung, kurz: ihre Poesie ist noch nicht geschaffen. (*GW* 18:14)

[As I considered what Kipling did for the nation that “civilizes” the world, I came to the epochal discovery that actually nobody had yet described the big city as a jungle. Where are its heroes, its colonizers, its victims? The hostility of the big city, its malicious, stony consistency, its Babylonian confusion of language, in short: its poetry, has not yet been created.]³⁴

By the time Brecht begins to write his play, Joseph Conrad had already portrayed London as “a tangled jungle of styles, languages, immigrant laborers, and commodities” in *Heart of Darkness* (1899)³⁵ and James Joyce had rendered the urban poetry of Dublin in *Ulysses* (1904) where “the

³³ For Brecht’s sources for his image of America, see Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America* (Columbus: Published for Miami University for the Ohio State University Press, 1981).

³⁴ Cited in Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America* (Columbus: Published for Miami University for the Ohio State University Press, 1981), 12.

³⁵ For the history of representations of late-Victorian London as an “urban jungle” see Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2000), 179. This study is primarily concerned with literary representations of late-Victorian London as an urban jungle

law of the jungle” is mentioned in the Circe episode.³⁶ Brecht’s innovation lies then not so much in the jungle imagery itself, as in the handling of the play’s abundant animal motifs. Beside such names of characters as The Baboon, the Bear, and the Worm, a variety of animal imagery is used to describe humans throughout the play: Tiere, Hunde, Geier, Vertierung, Elefant, Viecher, Wild, Schwein, Skarabäus, Bestie, Krokodilshaut, Tierleichen, Lamm, Wachtel, Alligatoren, Igel, Krebse, Raubtiere, Fliegen, Menagerie [animals, dogs, vultures, bestialization, elephant, vermin, game, pig, scarab, beast, crocodile skin, animal corpses, lamb, quail, alligators, hedgehog, crabs, beast of prey, flies, menagerie.]³⁷ In *Theatre of the Revolt*, Robert Brustein explains the play’s comparisons between humans and animals as evidence of the influence of Neo-Romantic art on young Brecht, in particular the influence of Frank Wedekind and Georg Büchner.³⁸ At the turn of the twentieth century, Neo-romantic art associated human flesh with the quality of pork and beef and tended to portray all natural instincts as vile and gruesome. An earlier Brecht’s play, *Baal*, indeed, displays such Neo-Romantic elements, as it follows the career and downfall of a ruthless poet who satisfies his instincts without conscience and dies in a swinish degradation in the thicket of a forest, amidst offal and urine, declaring that the world is merely “the excrement of God.” The poet Baal regresses to the beastly and the primitive. Brecht’s *In the Jungle of Cities*, however, does not employ animal imagery merely to signal human regression. The play’s language is not merely metaphorical, but rather shows the drama’s central characters attempting

between 1885-1920 when “through increasingly expanding networks of world trade, London was the center of circulation for a tangled jungle of styles, languages, immigrant laborers, and commodities” (26).

³⁶ J. J. O’MOLLOY: (*Hotly to the populace*) this is a lonehand fight. By Hades, I will not have any client of mine gagged and badgered in this fashion by a pack of curs and laughing hyenas. The Mosaic code has superseded the law of the jungle. I say it and I say it emphatically, without wishing for one moment to defeat the ends of justice, accused was not accessory before the act and prosecutrix has not been tampered with. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2010), 414.

³⁷ Listed in Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America*.

³⁸ Robert Sanford Brustein, *The Theatre of the Revolt: An Approach to The Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 235.

to find in the animal kingdom what has been lost to humans in the modern city life determined by economic necessity— individual freedom and interpersonal contact. Moreover, while the play’s central combat may at first sight appear to echo elements of the Social Darwinist “survival of the fittest,” its conflict runs deeper.

Brecht’s *Im Dickicht der Städte*, subtitled “Der Kampf zweier Männer in der Riesenstadt Chicago“ [The Fight between two men in the gigantic city of Chicago], was written between 1921-1924 and revised in 1927. This early drama deals with a “metaphysical fight” between two men—Shlink, a Malayan lumber merchant, and George Garga, a one-time book clerk. To see how enigmatic the nature of this fight is a brief plot summary is in order. The battle sets off when Shlink and his sidekicks Skinny, Der Pavian [The Baboon], and Der Wurm [The Worm] enter C. Maynes’ Lending Library and try to buy Garga’s opinion on a book: “Ich bitte Sie, betrachten Sie die Verhältnisse des Planeten und verkaufen Sie” [“I ask you to consider the conditions of the planet and sell.”]³⁹ Shlink seems to already know many details about Garga’s private life (from Garga’s girlfriend Jane Larry) like his naïve dream of abandoning all responsibilities and moving to Tahiti. Garga tells the intruders that he can sell them the opinions of writers like Mr. V. Jensen and Mr. Arthur Rimbaud, but not his own: “Ich bin keine Prostituierte.” [“I am not a prostitute”] (128). Choosing to uphold his free will, Garga refuses to sell his opinions for the sake of his family’s financial security or for an opportunity to travel to Tahiti. Shlink is actually thrilled to discover that Garga is what he calls “ein Kämpfer” [“a fighter”] and he declares war on Garga, promising to shake the foundations of his life: “Und an diesem Vormittag, der nicht wie immer ist, eröffne ich den Kampf gegen Sie. Ich beginne ihn damit, dass ich Ihre Plattform erschüttere.” [“And on this unusual morning I declare war on you. I begin by shaking your

³⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Im Dickicht der Städte, Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), 134. Subsequent page references in German are to this edition. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

foundations”] (129). What follows is a strange turn of events: Shlink gets Garga fired from the bookstore and hands over his entire lumber business to him. Upon accepting this challenge, Garga sells the same lot of lumber twice, fires all of Shlink’s employees, stops the entire business operation, and disappears for a while. In the meantime, the newly poor and homeless Shlink asks Garga’s family for shelter and slowly worms his way into the hearts of Garga’s relatives. Garga’s girlfriend Jane and sister Marie end up working as prostitutes at the Chinese Hotel run by Shlink’s crowd. Garga eventually resurfaces and marries Jane only to find out on his wedding day from Shlink that the police want someone to take the rap for the crooked lumber deal. Garga decides to turn himself in and serve a three-year prison time. He waits for the day of his release to send a letter to the police stating that Shlink raped his sister and wife. Garga and Shlink meet for the last time in a deserted workers’ tent in the gravel pits by Lake Michigan where Garga realizes that the goal of their fight was to touch the opponent by hating them: “Jetzt, gegen Ende, verfallen Sie also der schwarzen Sucht des Planeten, Fühlung zu bekommen. [...] Durch die Feindschaft!” [“Now, towards the end, you’ve become victim to the black addiction of the planet, the desire for touch. [...] Through hatred!”] (186). Spurred by Garga’s letter and racial hatred, an angry mob arrives to lynch Shlink. Garga declares himself the winner of the metaphysical struggle, sells the lumber business along with his entire family, and moves not to Tahiti but to an even bigger urban jungle—New York. What does it mean to engage in a “metaphysical fight” and what does it mean to touch the opponent through hatred? Garga’s eventual departure for New York makes the drama even more puzzling. The Nazis present in the audience during the play’s premiere at the Residenztheatre in Munich on May 9th, 1923, certainly did not approve, as they kept throwing stink bombs at the actors.

Brecht must have been aware of the difficulty of his enigmatic play because in the 1927 definitive version he added the following famous note for his readers and spectators:

Sie befinden sich im Jahre 1912 in der Stadt Chicago. Sie betrachten den unerklärlichen Ringkampf zweier Menschen und Sie wohnen dem Untergang einer Familie bei, die aus den Savannen in das Dickicht der großen Stadt gekommen ist. Zerbrechen Sie sich nicht den Kopf über die Motive dieses Kampfes, sondern beteiligen Sie sich an den menschlichen Einsätzen, beurteilen Sie unparteiisch die Kampfform der Gegner und lenken Sie Ihr Interesse auf das Finish.

[You are in the year of 1912 in the city of Chicago. You are witnessing an inexplicable wrestling match between two people and the downfall of a family that has come from the savannahs to the jungle of the big city. Do not rack your brains over the motives of this fight, but get involved in the human stakes, assess impartially the fighting form of the opponent and direct your attention to the finish.] (125)

Despite Brecht's insistence that the wrestling match between the opponents is "inexplicable," critical commentary has tried to ponder the motives behind the fight precisely to understand its human stakes. From an existential revolt to a homoerotic love-hate story, reminiscent of the personal drama of Verlaine and Rimbaud, Brecht's play has inspired a plethora of readings.⁴⁰

Overall, *In The Jungle of Cities* has been read either as prefiguring the theatre of the absurd or as providing a proto-Marxist critique of capitalist "dog eat dog" morality. In the former vein of interpretation, Martin Esslin suggests that *In the Jungle of Cities* "anticipates the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Adamov, which it resembles by its insistence on the impossibility of communication."⁴¹ And Charles R. Lyons, highlighting the theme of human isolation, notes that it is easier to re-approach Brecht's early work after experiencing the early plays of Beckett,

⁴⁰ For existential revolt, see Robert Sanford Brustein, *The Theatre of the Revolt: An Approach to The Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 241. For readings that underline the homoerotic nature of the fight between Ganga and Shlink see Martin Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Works* (New York: 1916) and Eric Bentley, *Bentley on Brecht*, 3rd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

⁴¹ Martin Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Works* (New York: 1916). Cited in Charles R. Lyons, "In the Jungle of Cities: The Isolation of the Human Soul," *Bertolt Brecht: The Despair and the Polemic* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 25.

Ionesco, and Albee, in which a sense of absurdity colors human actions.⁴² In the vein of capitalist critique, John Walker suggests that in Brecht's expressionist play "the arbitrary violence and apparent lawlessness of city life create an atmosphere of anarchy" where "economic imperatives set individuals in hostile competition [that] replicate primeval conditions" and "where survival is based on a struggle against all others."⁴³ In short, according to such an assessment, the characters of Garga and Shlink are locked in the Social Darwinist survival of the fittest. Linking the play's homoerotic theme with its supposed proto-Marxist message, Hedwig Fraunhofer argues that Brecht "critiques not only capitalism as a socio-economic structure, but also its libidinal economy, by feminizing both capitalism and libidinal drives in the play."⁴⁴ According to Fraunhofer, the play's homosexuality can be seen as a structure that contradicts the conventions and social institutions of capitalism, including the bourgeois family.⁴⁵

While neither of these rich interpretations is out of bounds, it is important to note that Brecht does not become seriously involved in Marxism until 1926. To be sure, Brecht would heavily revise his early play in 1927 and subsequently argue that it was about class struggle all along. Yet, as Patty Lee Parmalee notes in *Brecht's America*, during the time that the young playwright was composing *In the Jungle of Cities*, he was both anxious and fascinated by Americanism and the modern metropolis. This is evident from the fact that he read not only Sinclair's dark and critical *The Jungle* but also the gangster novel *The Wheel (Hjulet; 1905)* by

⁴² Charles R. Lyons, 25.

⁴³ John Walker, "City Jungles and Expressionist Reifications from Brecht to Hammett," *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, 1998 Spring 44 (1): 119-33.

⁴⁴ Hedwig Fraunhofer, "Fear of the Feminine: (Homo)Sexuality and Economics in Brecht's *Jungle of Cities*," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature and Culture* 15 (1999): 117-18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

the Danish writer Johannes V. Jensen that celebrates Chicago as the “American pulsing of life” and technology as a “marvelous” thing.⁴⁶

Sinclair’s *The Jungle* was indeed on Brecht’s mind, as the playwright mentions it in his 1920 review of Schiller’s *Don Carlos* for the newspaper *Volkwillen*:

Aber in diesen Tagen lese ich in Sinclairs “Sumpf” die Geschichte eines Arbeiters, der in den Schlachthöfen Chicagos zu Tod gehungert wird. Es handelt sich um einfachen Hunger, Kalte, Krankheit, die einen Mann unterkriegen, so sicher, als ob sie von Gott eingesetzt seien. Dieser Mann hat einmal eine kleine Vision von Freiheit, wird dann mit Gummiknüppeln niedergeschlagen. (*GW* 15:9-11)⁴⁷

[But recently I’ve been reading in Sinclair’s *Jungle* the story of a worker who is starved to death in the slaughterhouses of Chicago. It’s a matter of simple hunger, cold, illness, which will do a man in as surely as if they were appointed by God. Once this man has a modest vision of freedom, then he is beaten down with rubber nightsticks].⁴⁸

Given Brecht’s admiration for Sinclair’s novel (he urges potential readers of *Don Carlos* to pick up *The Jungle* as well), it should come as no surprise that Brecht’s representation of the modern metropolis should fixate on “cold Chicago.” Around the same time, Brecht writes in his notebook that he is pondering a thing called “Freedom” or “The Enemies” (“Ich grübele wohl da so etwas herum in eine Sache, die ‘Freiheit’ heißt oder ‘Die Feindseligen.’”)⁴⁹ As some critics have pointed out, if any motive can be found behind Garga’s defiance it is his unrelenting idea of freedom that he borrows from Rimbaud’s Romantic idealism.⁵⁰ As in Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, we find in Brecht’s play an immigrant family moving to the big city only to see their dreams crushed and we have a central character desperately trying to hold on to “a modest vision of freedom.” In a way, both Shlink and Garga are immigrants, as Shlink grew up on the Yangtze River in

⁴⁶ Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America*, 26.

⁴⁷ Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America*, 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Parmalee’s translation.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰ See Brustein, 320-25.

Malaysia and Garga's family comes from the "prairie lands" to the big and cold city of Chicago. But instead of using metaphorical language to simply animalize Shlink or Garga in the manner of Sinclair, Brecht shows the two characters initially trying to consciously become like animals. Garga wishes to escape his dreary surroundings and his ties to social and economic institutions. Shlink wants to experience a genuine connection with another being. Both look at the life of animals to find examples that they could imitate, but they fail in part because their views of animals are too simplistic and idealistic. Garga, for instance, borrows his views of animals from literary representations. When Shlink tries to buy his opinion on a book and then proceeds to destroy his life, Ganga challenges his opponent by quoting lines from Rimbaud's poem *Une Saison en Enfer (A Season in Hell)*: "Das ist die Freiheit. Hier meinen Rock! *Er zieht ihn aus.* 'Ich bin ein Tier.' [...] 'Ich bin unbewandert in der Metaphysik.' 'Ich verstehe die Gesetze nicht, habe keine Moral, bin ein roher Mensch.'" [That is Freedom. Here's my coat! (*He takes it off.*) 'I am an animal.' [...] 'I have no knowledge of metaphysics.' 'I do not understand the laws, I have no moral sense, I am a raw man" (134).

Throughout the play, there are numerous references to Ganga shedding his skin like a lizard or taking off his clothes, echoing his desire to escape the financial and personal burdens of being the breadwinner in his family. In contrast, members of his family and Shlink's crew are constantly telling Garga to put on a clean shirt, reminding him of his social and financial obligations. Alluding to Ganga's initial dream of Tahiti, Shlink disdainfully dubs it "das einfache Leben" ["the simple life"] and compares it to the life of a lizard: "Man lebt wie eine Eidechse" ["Man lives like a lizard"] (129). Shlink's challenge then seems to make Garga acknowledge that other human beings, including Shlink himself, demand his care and commitment. For this purpose, Shlink makes Garga watch the destruction of his loved ones. But, for Garga, at least in

the beginning, the fight with Shlink offers a chance to assert his freedom and becomes an activity seemingly different from the one that dominates the modern city—the incessant production for the market.⁵¹ At first blush, Garga and Shlink can be said to look for alternative activities and ways of relating to others that are not based on the medium of commercial exchange. For a while they attempt to find such an activity in their irrational and hostile wrestling match. They do not, at least in the beginning, think of this fight as a Social Darwinist struggle for existence. The ideology of the struggle for existence justifies the rules of the market economy that the two characters are trying to escape, even if their motives for doing so—Garga’s belief in autonomy and Shlink’s desire for contact—are in opposition to each other. In short, Brecht’s play creatively resists rather than replicates the reductive jungle metaphor of Social Darwinism.

Thus, throughout the play, Garga is constantly trying to abandon work and to stop the cycle of production, either through his daydreams of Tahiti or by impeding business operations. When Shlink hands over to Garga his lumber business, Garga physically shuts off the sawmill, fires all the employees, and tells them that instead of watching them work, he would rather see them sit down in a friendly game of poker with their former business managers.⁵² This last remark of Garga reveals him looking for activities that would impede the business cycle.

Shlink too tries to adopt a behavior that he thinks natural of animals. He does so not in order to gain freedom, however, but to cure his feeling of isolation and to touch another human being— something that has become nearly impossible in the modern city where, as Georg Simmel notes, all relationships and activities have become instrumental and depersonalized,

⁵¹ See also Louis Tremaine, “Freedom and Social Identity in Brecht’s *In the Jungle of Cities*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 39 (1983): 23-37. In his analysis, Tremaine focuses on how Garga attempts to cut his ties to the social and economic institutions, which constrain him, but without looking at the importance of animal imagery.

⁵² Garga: “Jetzt, wo es hier für Sie nichts mehr zu tun gibt, bitte ich Sie, mit Ihren einstigen Geschäftsführern ein kleines Pokerspiel zu arrangieren, Shlink.” [“Now that there is nothing to do here for you, I ask you to arrange with your former management a small poker game, Shlink.”] (140).

driven by calculation, efficiency, and self-interest.⁵³ For this goal, Shlink is not afraid to risk self-destruction, calling himself Garga's slave. Toward the end of the play, Shlink reveals if not a clear-cut motive behind starting the fight then an idea that has obsessed him for a while. He tries to explain to Garga what their fight has meant to him by evoking the behavior of animals:

Ich habe die Tiere beobachtet. Die Liebe, Wärme aus Körperrnähe, ist unsere einzige Gnade in der Finsternis! Aber die Vereinigung der Organe ist die einzige, sie überbrückt nicht die Entzweiung der Sprache. Dennoch vereinigen sie sich, Wesen zu erzeugen möchten. [...] Ja, so groß ist die Vereinzelnung, dass es nicht einmal einen Kampf gibt. Der Wald! Von hier kommt die Menschheit. Haarig, mit Affengebissen, gute Tiere, die zu leben wussten. Alles war so leicht. Sie zerfleischten sich einfach. Ich sehe sie deutlich, wie sie mit zitternden Flanken einander das Weiße im Auge anstierten, sich in ihre Häuse verbissen, hinunterrollten, und der Verblutete zwischen den Wurzeln, das war der Besiegte, und der am meisten niedergetrampelt hatte vom Gehölz, das war der Sieger!

[I've been watching animals. Love, or the warmth given off bodies moving in close to each other, that is our only mercy in the darkness! But it's only the union of organs, it doesn't bridge for the division caused by speech. Nevertheless, they unite, want to create beings. Yes, loneliness is so powerful, there cannot even be a fight. The forest! That's where mankind comes from, from right here. Hairy, with ape's mouths, good animals that knew how to live. Everything was so easy. They just tore each other to pieces. I can see them now—how they stared into the whites of each other's eyes, how they stood there, panting, then buried their teeth in the jugular vein, rolling down on the ground: and the one who bled to death down there among the tree roots, he was the loser, and the one who had trampled down most of the undergrowth, he was the winner.] (187)

In this moment of Shlink's confession, we can notice how Brecht's drama departs from a reductive animalization of humans struggling for existence in an urban jungle. Shlink does not use the trope of "dog eat dog" to justify his business activities (after all, he gives the lumber business to Garga and tells him that he wants to become his slave), but rather tries to see if animalistic violence and hatred can paradoxically bring him closer to another human being and offer some form of contact. Interestingly, whereas Garga takes his animal metaphors from literature, Shlink says that has been "observing" animals.

⁵³ Georg Simmel, "Metropolis and the Mental Life," *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324-40.

At the end of the play, Garga is the one to stop the fight by abandoning his naïve ideal of freedom. His last gesture in the play is to pocket the money earned from selling his business and family members, thereby revealing his newly acquired cynicism and entry into the world of commodities and reified relationships. Garga pronounces the last dismal words of the drama, which Brecht told Arnolt Bronnen held the meaning of the play: “Allein sein ist eine gute Sache. Das Chaos ist aufgebraucht. Es war die beste Zeit.” [“To be alone is a good thing. The chaos has been used up. It was the best time”] (193).⁵⁴ Interestingly, in the first version of the play (1923), the last line uttered by Garga is a slightly different: “Das Chaos ist aufgebraucht, es entließ mich ungesegnet. Vielleicht tröstet mich die Arbeit... Ich fühle mich vereinsamt.” [The chaos has been used up, it let me go me unblessed. Perhaps work comforts me.... I feel alone.]⁵⁵ In the earlier version, Garga contemplates that work (“Arbeit”) might comfort him in his loneliness, whereas in the later version Garga now acknowledges that, while his fight with Shlink was “the best time,” human loneliness is a “good thing” and inescapable. He cannot change the way of the world and so decides to become part of the system.

By the end, Garga not only lets go of his naïve dreams of finding animal-like freedom, but also embraces the rhetoric of the struggle for existence, when he tells Shlink why he, Garga, is ultimately the winner: “Es ist ganz platt, Shlink: der jüngere Mann gewinnt die Partie.” [“It’s as simple as that, Shlink: the younger man wins”] (188). And Garga uses the pocketed money to buy a ticket not for Tahiti but for an even more ruthless urban jungle—New York. He swaps the Rimbaud-influenced Romantic representations of animals as unfettered creatures for those

⁵⁴ Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America*, 14.

⁵⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Im Dickicht der Städte: Erstfassung und Materialien*, ediert und kommentiert von Gisela E. Bahr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 105.

influenced by Social Darwinism. Shlink warns him, however, that he will only walk away with what he calls “bare life”:

Shlink: Sie aber kommen heraus, Ihr nacktes Leben in der Tasche?

Garga: Das nackte Leben ist besser als jedes andere Leben.

Shlink: Tahiti?

Garga: New York.

[Shlink: But you’ll get away with your bare life in your pocket?

Garga: Bare life is better any other life.

Shlink: Tahiti?

Garga: New York.] (188)

For Shlink the fight was never solely about survival or the struggle for existence. In hopes of getting close to another being, he was willing to sacrifice his life. Thus Shlink takes Garga’s eventual preoccupation with his own “bare life”—Garga now wants to “save his skin” rather than shed it— as an act betrayal. With Shlink’s death and Garga’s selling-out, the play ends on a dark note. So dark, in fact, that Robert Brustein suggests that Communism, which Brecht would later embrace, helped the playwright attribute an external cause to the “cruelty, greed, and lust that he [found] in life” as well as furnished him with a formal discipline to handle his existential revolt.⁵⁶

However pessimistic *In the Jungle of Cities* might be, as an expressionist work of art it succeeds in poetically reworking the reductive “discourse of the jungle.” At first blush, Brecht’s play might strike one as imagining an alternative fight to that of the Social Darwinist struggle for existence in capitalist economy. Their fight may seem inexplicable and irrational, as Garga and Shlink create their own logic and rules, seemingly different from those of the market economy. And yet, are Garga and Shlink successful in escaping capitalist ideology? As Boltanski and Chiapello emphasize in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the incessant and insatiable process of capital accumulation is in itself “amoral”—it is ideology (that is constantly changing) that

⁵⁶ Brustein, 232.

justifies the participation of agents in capitalism.⁵⁷ Brecht's play seems to be asking: once stripped off its ideology, what does the quest for capital amount to? A metaphysical wrestling match with no rational? A fierce animal fight? Survival of the fittest? After all, it is Ganga, the strongest and youngest of the two, who makes it out alive. Brecht's strange early play leaves its audience with the disturbing possibility that Shlink and Ganga may have never truly left the capitalist economy.

Eugene O'Neill's Animal in Captivity

As Eugene O'Neill himself professed to Upton Sinclair in a letter, he had been a great fan of his "ever since way back in the Jungle days" (letter 08/12/23).⁵⁸ O'Neill's admiration was reciprocated, as Sinclair was enthusiastic about O'Neill's work as well. Sinclair even tried his hand at playwriting and hoped that O'Neill would help him get his play *Hell: A Verse Drama and Photoplay* (1924) produced with the Provincetown Players. Nothing came out of it.

While Brecht's early drama links animality to ideas of freedom, independence, and contact, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) renders the beast as a hunted creature and *The Hairy Ape* (1922)—as an entrapped one.⁵⁹ *The Emperor Jones* tells the tale of Brutus Jones, an African-American former ex-convict, who escaped to a Caribbean island and established himself as an emperor there. In the course of the drama, his subjects rebel against his corrupt rule and

⁵⁷ Boltanski and Chiapello, 35.

⁵⁸ Eugene O'Neill's Letter cited in Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1960), p. 280. "Thank you for sending me Hell. I'll look forward to it—but just now I'm 'off' reading as all my time is mortgaged to a new play I'm in the midst of and which I want to finish before leaving here. I'm sure glad to know you're a 'fan.' It's reciprocated, believe me! I've been one of yours ever since way back in the Jungle days, and I think I've read everything of yours—except *The Goose-Step*—since then."

⁵⁹ Erika Rundle notes the significance of the rhyme of "stage" and "cage." See Erika Rundle, "The Hairy Ape's Humanist Hell: Theatricality and Evolution in O'Neill's 'The Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life,'" *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 30 (2008), 60.

hunt him down in a forest. Like Brecht's early *Baal*, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* ends with its title character regressing to an animal-like state and dying in the jungle. And like Brecht's later *In the Jungle of Cities*, *The Hairy Ape* shows an evolution of style from *The Emperor Jones*, specifically in the way it problematizes its protagonist's animalization. To a certain degree, *The Emperor Jones* buys into "the stereotypical mold of the primitive" and treats the African-American experience as "a source of exoticism, naïveté, lyricism, and melodrama."⁶⁰ By contrast, *The Hairy Ape* goes to heart of the human-animal boundary. One of the central questions of *The Hairy Ape* is whether the protagonist, the laborer Yank, belongs and what (if anything) differentiates him from a "hairy ape" held in captivity.

The Hairy Ape alludes to various frameworks of captivity from sites of supposedly "scientific" study (zoo) to sites of entertainment (circus, theatre) to sites of labor (the ship's stokehole). The opening stage directions describe the stokehole "as crowded with men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing—a confused, inchoate uproar swelling into a sort of unity, a meaning—the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage."⁶¹ This image foreshadows the "beast in a cage" of the last scene—the zoo's gorilla—as well as Yank's eventual recognition of his own entrapment. Moreover, O'Neill elaborates on the material of this entrapment by indicating that "the effect sought after is a cramped space in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel" and that "the lines of bunks, the uprights supporting them, cross each other like the steel framework of a cage" (251). In this way, the first scene introduces the leitmotifs that will be important for the play: ape, steel, cage. The steel cage of the stokehole will later be echoed in the prison of Blackwell's Island where Yank is briefly incarcerated and in the

⁶⁰ See for example, Carme Manuel, "A Ghost in the Expressionist Jungle of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*," *African American Review* 39:1-2 (2005), 66-67.

⁶¹ Eugene O'Neill, *Four Plays by Eugene O'Neill: Anna Christie; The Hairy Ape; The Emperor Jones; Beyond the Horizon* (New York: Signet Classics, 1998), 251. Subsequent text references are to page numbers in this edition.

zoo cage where he eventually dies. The steel cage also suggests Yank's overall condition that he has unwittingly helped build with his labor and may remind one of Max Weber's "iron cage." To be precise, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Max Weber uses the expression *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, meaning "shell as hard as steel," which due to the famous translation of Talcott Parsons is now better known in English as the "iron cage."⁶² Weber employs the term to describe the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order that creates a rigid, mechanized, and dehumanized society. According to Peter Baehr, Weber's use of "shell" instead of "cage" is significant. While "a cage confines human agents, but leaves their powers otherwise intact, a 'shell' suggests that modern capitalism has created *a new kind of being*."⁶³ Indeed, in the beginning of the play, Yank is not simply trapped in a cage, but is utterly unaware of the alienation of his labor. Instead Yank completely identifies his being with the machine, describing himself as "the steel" that makes the world go round:

I'm at de bottom, get me! Dere ain't nothin' foither. I'm de end! I'm de start! I start somep'n and de woild moves! It—dat's me!—de new dat's moiderin' de old! I'm de ting in coal dat makes it boin; I'm steam and oil for de engines; I'm de ting in noise dat makes yuh hear it; I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles; I'm de ting in gold dat makes it money! And I'm what makes iron into steel!, dat stands for de whole ting! And I'm steel—steel—steel! (261)

The inspiration behind Yank's character and especially the pride that he takes in his hard work was O'Neill's friend Driscoll, a Liverpool Irish stoker, who committed suicide by jumping off a liner in mid-ocean. Originally written as a short story, *The Hairy Ape* was, according to O'Neill's own admission, a search for an explanation as to why Driscoll, who was so proud of his "superhuman endurance in the stokehole" and seemingly in harmony with the universe would

⁶² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), 121.

⁶³ Peter Baehr, "The 'Iron Cage' and the 'Shell as Hard as Steel': Parsons, Weber, and the *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*," *History and Theory* 40 (May 2001): 153-69.

take his own life.⁶⁴ What could have possibly driven such a man to despair? O'Neill did not believe that "the terrific heat" that sometimes drove stokers "temporarily nuts" could be the reason, because Driscoll "always proudly thrived on it," as Yank does in the play.⁶⁵ When the older drunken stoker Paddy reminisces about the times when sailors "worked under the sky" and under "a warm sun on the clean decks" ("Work—aye, hard work—but who'd mind that at all?"), Yank retorts that "de coal and de smoke" are "fresh air" and "food" for him (258). On a metatheatrical level, Paddy and Yank are themselves characters that once belonged on the deck underneath the sky, instead of inside the boiler room, as both appear in O'Neill's *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1917), an early "sea play" that opens as "the full moon, half-way up the sky, throws a clear light on the deck."⁶⁶ In *The Hairy Ape*, however, Yank believes that it is Paddy who is too old and does not belong, while he himself belongs with the engine. What shakes Yank's confidence is his loss of the sense of "belonging." While most critics identify Yank's encounter with Mildred, the spoiled daughter of the owner of Nazareth Steel, as shaking the foundations of his belonging, Yank's confidence is challenged from the very beginning of the play. When Yank hears "a very drunken sentimental tenor" singing longingly about "home," he immediately becomes defensive: "Home? Home, hell! I'll make a home for yuh! I'll knock yuh dead. Home! T'hell wit home! Where d'yuh get dat tripe? Dis is home, see?" (256) Yet Mildred challenges Yank's faith in a way that destroys all his defenses.

⁶⁴ Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill: Life with Monte Cristo* (New York, Applause Theatre Books, 2002), 309.

⁶⁵ On March 11, 1941, in a letter to Ralph E. Whitney, O'Neill writes describes Driscoll in the following manner: "He committed suicide later by jumping off a liner in mid-ocean—to the bewilderment of everyone who knew him, for there never lived a more self-assured, self-contented guy, seemingly. As for the terrific heat driving him temporarily nuts, which sometimes happened with stokers in those days, that was hard to believe of him because he had always proudly thrived on it." Travis Bogard and Jackson Bryer eds., *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Travis Bogard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 515. In an article for the *American Magazine*, November, 1922, O'Neill admitted: "It was the why of Driscoll's suicide that gave me the germ of the idea [for *The Hairy Ape*]."

⁶⁶ Eugene O'Neill, *Seven Plays of the Sea* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

Curiously, Mildred is likewise associated with a caged animal. Calling herself “a waste product in the Bessemer process,” Mildred is aware of the hypocrisy behind her halfhearted social work and compares her own “posing” to the conspicuousness of a caged leopard’s spots:

MILDRED—[*Again affected and bored.*] When a leopard complains of its spots, it must sound rather grotesque. [*In a mocking tone.*] Purr, little leopard. Purr, scratch, tear, kill, gorge yourself and be happy—only stay in the jungle where your spots are camouflage. In a cage they make you conspicuous. (265)

The capitalist’s daughter compares her urban habitat of high society and its vicious laws to that of the jungle and the habitat of the working class (the stokehole) to a cage where her affected good will is out of place.⁶⁷ Mildred can take neither the heat nor the sight of Yank’s brutish physical appearance, fainting and calling him “oh, the filthy beast!” The stage directions signal that Yank “feels himself insulted in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride” (273). Mildred herself never uses the phrase “the hairy ape.” Rather, it is Paddy—who, in the early play *The Moon of the Caribbees*, is called by other sailors “a hairy ape”—is the first one to call Yank that. Paddy remarks that Mildred looked at Yank “as if she’d seen a great hairy ape escaped from the zoo”:

YANK—[*Fiercely.*] I’ll brain her! I’ll brain her yet, wait ‘n’ see! [*Coming over to Paddy—slowly.*] Say, is dat what she called me—a hairy ape?

PADDY—She looked it at you if she didn’t say the word itself. (278)

The rest of O’Neill’s drama follows Yank in his quest to find out where he belongs. Mildred never comes back on stage, though she remains on Yank’s mind.⁶⁸ We see Yank looking at luxurious shop windows on Fifth Avenue, unsuccessfully trying to join The Industrial Workers

⁶⁷ R. Viswanathan reads Mildred’s comparison to a leopard as an allusion to Rudyard Kipling’s short story “How the Leopard Got His Spots.” For more on the influence of Kipling’s *Jungle Books* on O’Neill see R. Viswanathan, “The Jungle Books and O’Neill,” *The Eugene O’Neill Newsletter* 11.2 (Summer-Fall 1987): 3-7.

⁶⁸ Alfred Santell’s 1944 Hollywood film version of *The Hairy Ape*, however, made the would-be romance between Yank and Mildred the central conflict.

of the World, and even serving time in prison. Walking up from a nightmare in jail, Yank wonders: “I tought I was in a cage at de Zoo—but de apes don’t talk, do dey?” (291) Finding out where and how he belongs means for Yank also proving that he is *not* a mere ape. This is why O’Neill’s protagonist keeps objecting to the label and asserting: “I’ll show yuh [Mildred] who’s ape!” Several of the play’s characters call Yank a “hairy ape” such as Paddy, the IWW secretary, and his prison inmates, but he initially resists: “Hairy ape, huh? I’ll hairy ape yuh!” (288). Yet in his quest to find out what differentiates him from the animal, Yank finds himself viciously caught in what Giorgio Agamben has identified as the “anthropological machine,” “an optical machine constructed in a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape.”⁶⁹ According to Agamben, in trying to be human, we try to recognize ourselves in the non-human. In doing so, however, the human becomes nothing else but the exclusion of the animal and the animal is in turn only the inclusion of the human.⁷⁰ Like Marx, Yank first attempts to prove that his ability to engage in free production differentiates him from the animal. It is no wonder then that the crucial moment when Yank finally accepts the title “hairy ape” takes place in prison when he has lost not only his job—his professional place in society—but also his ability and confidence to produce freely. The chorus of inmates asks him: “Who are you?” To which Yank responds: “I was a fireman—stokin’ on de liners. [*Then with sudden rage, rattling his cell bars.*] I’m a hairy ape, get me?” (291) Yank’s admission that he *is* a hairy ape thus comes in the wake of losing his original place in society—his occupation as a stoker.

The short story, the manuscript of which was destroyed, ended with Yank successfully

⁶⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 26-27.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

joining the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).⁷¹ By contrast, the 1922 play refuses to offer a simple solution to what O'Neill saw as the universal condition of humanity. Instead we are left with an ambiguous ending: Yank ends up at the zoo, opens the cage, and attempts to communicate with the gorilla only to be crushed by the animal's embrace. The closing words of the drama resist an easy resolution: "perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs." In revising the material for stage, O'Neill envisioned Yank as "a New York tough of the toughs"⁷² and as "a symbol of man who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way."⁷³

Indeed, a few critics have linked the animal imagery in *The Hairy Ape* to notions of the primitive. Noting the play's jungle imagery, R. Viswanathan argues that O'Neill's play alludes to Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books* (1894-1895), as the protagonists of both works— Mowgli and Yank— can be said to confront a similar identity crisis. Mowgli believes that he *belongs* in the jungle like the rest of the animals but must ultimately confront the conflict between his human impulses and acquired animal traits.⁷⁴ Alongside Sinclair's work, O'Neill certainly read Jack London, Conrad and Kipling, in whose works the sea and the jungle loom large in the background.⁷⁵ Viswanathan concludes that the animal and jungle imagery of the *Hairy Ape* underscores "the idea that machine-fettered man has made an ape of himself" and regressed to "a primitive mode of living" (4). Similarly, in line with thinking about the primitive, James A.

⁷¹ Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 389.

⁷² Bogard and Bryer, 32.

⁷³ Barrett H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays*. 2nd edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1947), 84.

⁷⁴ R. Viswanathan, "The Jungle Books and O'Neill," *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* 11.2 (Summer-Fall 1987): 3-7.

⁷⁵ For O'Neill's interest in Kipling, see Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 79-80; Barrett H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays* (New York: Dover Publications, 1947), 14; Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), 69.

Robinson links the jungle imagery to a concept elaborated by historian Anthony Rotundo—the ideology of the “masculine primitive”—that developed at the end of the nineteenth century in reaction to anxieties provoked by Darwin’s blow to anthropocentrism and the emergence of the New Woman.⁷⁶ According to Rotundo, masculine primitive culture defined “man as the master animal who could draw on primitive impulse when reason would not work,” evaluated men “according to their physical strength and energy,” and saw life as a “competitive jungle struggle” (7-8). As a young man O’Neill participated in this culture, as he repudiated the bourgeois values of his middle-class parents by working on ocean liners and hanging out with rowdy lower-class sailors and bohemians. While providing this rich historical background, Robinson argues, however, that “Yank—and probably O’Neill—comes to conceive his situation as that of the traditional tragic hero in conflict with an immutable force that transcends social concerns” (106). In other words, Yank understands his dilemma not politically (his proletariat consciousness is never truly awoken) but rather existentially. Treating the jungle metaphor and the animal imagery in the play as merely signifying the primitive or the regressive, however, misses the mark.

To begin with, O’Neill does not animalize or render Yank primitive in an unproblematic and reductive manner that Sinclair does with Jurgis Rudkus in the *Jungle*, but rather explores the very boundary between the human and the animal, so that his audience can no longer ignore the laborer. If the masculine primitive culture played any role in O’Neill’s own development then *The Hairy Ape* certainly questions the way this culture links the behavior of men to those of jungle beasts. Nor is it fair to characterize Yank as conceiving his problems in an existential way because he does not realize his historical situation as a member of the proletariat. To a certain

⁷⁶ James A. Robinson, “The Masculine Primitive and the Hairy Ape,” *The Eugene O’Neill Review* 19. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1995): 95-109.

extent he does. But Yank wants something more than a mere change in labor conditions, better pay, or an opportunity for social mobility. Yank explains as much when the passive program of the Industrial Workers of the World disillusioned him:

Dey're in de wrong pew—de same old bull—soapboxes and Salvation Army—no guts! Cut out an hour offen de job a day and make me happy! Gimme a dollar more a day and make me happy! Tree square a day, and cauliflowes in de front yard—ekal rights—a woman and kids—a lousey vote—and I'm all fixed for Jesus, huh? Aw, hell! What does dat get yuh? Dis ting's in your inside, but it ain't your belly. Feedin' your face—sinkers and coffee—dat don't touch it. It's way down—at de bottom. Yuh can't grab it, and yuh can't stop it. It moves, and everyting moves. (300)

In other words, Yank wants to feel the way he did before his encounter with Mildred and before Paddy's remarks made him wonder whether or not he were merely a "hairy ape." When he arrives at the offices of the IWW it is not in hopes of ameliorating his working conditions or becoming a Marxist, but in hopes of finding again a free activity that will allow him to believe that his existence matters in the world, that it is forming that world. And Yank's new thirst for terrorist violence that so disturbs the IWW is again a desire for such an activity that could transform the world. Yank entertains the thought that if he can no longer be "the steel" because it is the capitalist, the owner of Nazareth Steel, who has placed him in a cage of steel, then perhaps he, Yank, can be the fire to melt it: "He made dis—dis cage! Steel! IT don't belong, dat's what! Cages, cells, locks, bolts, bars—dat's what it means!—holdin' me down wit him at de top! But I'll drive trou! Fire, dat melts it! I'll be fire—under de heap—fire dat never goes out—hot as hell—breakin' out in de night" (295).

Yank's enigmatic quest to find out if, where, and how he belongs has spurred many interpretations of the play from Marxist readings of alienated labor to Sartre-influenced analyses of existentialism to Nietzsche-inspired studies of Dionysian elements in O'Neill's drama.⁷⁷ There

⁷⁷ See respectively Hubert Zapf, "O'Neill's Hairy Ape and the Reversal of Hegelian Dialectics," *Modern Drama* 31.1 (March 1988): 35-40; Lewis A. Lawson, "Yank Smith's Fall: A Sartrean Reading of *The Hairy Ape*," *Sense*

seems, however, to be a general trend in the critical commentary of *The Hairy Ape* to distinguish between the play's social themes—urbanization, capitalism, and labor—and its philosophical and spiritual concerns. Robinson, for example, speculates that O'Neill's reluctance to develop the cultural implications of his play's argument is not surprising, given his Roman Catholic education—"which stressed transcendent rather than historical conceptions of authority" (106). And Julia Walker reminds us that most critics tend to view O'Neill's treatment of the theme of alienation as "not truly concerned with the economic exploitation of labor," but rather "abstracted and de-politicized into philosophical—or more properly, spiritual—terms."⁷⁸ Interestingly, Walker's own rich analysis of *The Hairy Ape* treats the play as an "affective biography" of O'Neill's oedipal and professional concerns. According to Walker, Yank's quest to belong echoes O'Neill's quest to belong as a professional playwright in the age of technological reproduction, at a time when drama is still considered "the bastard art" and when a strong anti-performative foundation lies at the base of high modernism.⁷⁹ In other words, even if O'Neill's drama does not simply deal with the economic exploitation of labor, themes of professionalization and of work as a calling remain important for understanding the stakes of the play.

Perhaps, O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* is more successful than Sinclair's *The Jungle* in drawing attention to questions of labor and work in capitalist modernity precisely because it does not engage in socialist propaganda. Instead, the question of labor and the role that the human-

and Transcendence: Essays in Honor of Herman Servotte (Louvain: Leuven UP, 1995), 163-173. Maurice M. LaBelle, "Dionysus and Despair: The Influence of Nietzsche Upon O'Neill's Drama," *Educational Theatre Journal* 25 (1973): 436-42.

⁷⁸ Julia Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre; bodies, voices, words* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 10. See also Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

animal distinction plays in it become an occasion for a philosophical and spiritual meditation, as available political solutions (represented by Long and the IWW in the play) do not yet provide satisfying answers. As such a philosophical meditation, *The Hairy Ape* looks back on O'Neill's own early interest in and disillusionment in labor activism. To understand why *The Hairy Ape* does not end on the triumphant note that the short-story version of it did, it is helpful to look at how labor activism is represented and ultimately abandoned in *The Hairy Ape*. But first it should be noted that many early spectators and critics did respond to the labor conditions represented in the play.

The Berlin premiere of *Der haarige Affe* (*The Hairy Ape*) in 1924, for example, was received as a socialist play about the calamity of the proletariat in light of the political drama of Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller.⁸⁰ Peter Stein's 1986 famous revival at the Theatre at Lehnin Square, Berlin reveals the play's continual potential to serve as a vehicle for politics. The production struck a leftist cord by employing a chorus made up of "stokers, capitalists, police, prison inmates, union members, and finally apes" (59). And Stein's program notes included alongside his own translation of O'Neill, lines by John Dos Passos describing the financial empire of J.P. Morgan, a photograph of a row of cell blocks in an Alabama prison, IWW posters, a picture of the zoo scene from a 1929 Moscow production, and even Friedrich Engels's text *Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man* concerning the development of the human hand from that of the ape (60). Moreover, in the title of his review of this production, "Im

⁸⁰ Ward B. Lewis, "Politics and a Proletarian Tragedy: A Comparative Analysis of the Reception of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* in Germany and in the United States," *Eugene O'Neill in China: An International Centenary Celebration*, ed. Haiping Liu and Lowell Swartzell (New York: Greenwood, 1992), 59-69. Subsequent page references are to this article.

Dickicht der Städte verloren,” (“Lost in the Jungle of Cities”), Jurgen Beckermann clearly alludes to Bertolt Brecht’s early drama *In The Jungle of Cities*.⁸¹

In a similar vein, Alexander Tairov’s Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, Russia deemed *The Hairy Ape* appropriate for the new political climate of the recently established Soviet Union and premiered O’Neill’s drama on January 14, 1926.⁸² Although not a fan of the expressionist staging of the play, The Soviet People’s Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky otherwise praised the would-be political content of O’Neill’s drama: “It is socially valuable... It approaches the ideal of a genuine, finished, irreproachable social tragedy. The play tells us two things. First of all it shows the colossal revolutionary potential of just this downtrodden proletariat, and secondly it shows how very solid are the walls of the American social cauldron.”⁸³ The Kamerny Theatre would go on to stage O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* and *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* and showcase these productions on tour in Europe in the 1930s.⁸⁴

The Broadway premiere of *The Hairy Ape* in 1922 by contrast did not provoke political reactions. Mr. Hornblower of *Theatre Magazine* was one of the few critics to review the play in a political light, describing it as “a study profound and moving in its picture of the futility of brute power in its sole opposition to the conventions of society and the overwhelming authority of capitalistic control.”⁸⁵ Throughout his life, O’Neill himself resisted overt political readings of *The Hairy Ape*. In an interview from 1922 shortly after the *Hairy Ape* was written, O’Neill admitted that he was once an active socialist but now had “come to feel so indifferent toward

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Katherine Weinstein, “Towards a Theatre of Creative Imagination: Alexander Tairov’s O’Neill,” *Eugene O’Neill Review* 22. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1998): 157-70.

⁸³ Ibid., 162.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 164.

⁸⁵ Cited by Lewis, 36.

political and social movement of all kinds.”⁸⁶ In a letter to Lawrence Langner concerning the play’s 1941 revival, O’Neill again emphasizes the broader scope of his drama (letter 08/17/41):

It is, spiritually speaking, a surprisingly prophetic play. Not superficially, about labor conditions, although the C.I.O. is offspring of the I.W.W. One Big Union Idea (which no one seems to realize), but about Man, the state we are all in of frustrated bewilderment. Also we have certainly failed to “belong” and then unlocked the cage and turned the Gorilla loose. Etc. Etc. The symbol and real meaning of the play would be much clearer now than when it was done. Very few got it then.⁸⁷

Certainly, in contrast to Sinclair’s socialist pronouncements at the end of *The Jungle* (“Chicago will be ours!”), O’Neill’s play resists and even satirizes such socialist leanings through propagandist Long’s pompous speeches and attempts to awaken Yank’s consciousness: “Yer been lookin’ at this ‘ere ‘ole affair wrong. Yer been actin’ an’ talkin’ ‘s if it was all a bleedin’ personal matter between yer and that bloody cow. I wants to convince yer she was on’y a representative of ‘er clarss. I wants to awaken yer bloody clarss consciousness” (284). The playwright’s satire is particularly caustic when the IWW rejects Yank as a dangerous terrorist and refuses his attempt to belong with them: “Oh, hell, what’s the use of talking? You’re a brainless ape.” With these words, the secretary of the organization animalizes Yank who is perceived to be nothing but a lumpenproletarian, completely uneducable on the subject of class conflict. Yet what was O’Neill’s own experience with socialism?

Revisiting O’Neill’s socialist past, Patrick J. Chura and Gene A. Plunka read *The Hairy Ape* and Yank’s alienation in socio-economic terms. Neither insists that the play deals *solely* with labor conditions or argues that spiritual interpretations are out of bounds, but rather explore the ways in which O’Neill deals with his own past interactions with labor activism. Citing the predominance of steel references in the play, Plunka takes *The Hairy Ape* to be in part a response

⁸⁶ Gelb, 498.

⁸⁷ Bogard and Bryer, 522.

to the death of steel magnate Andrew Carnegie in 1919 and speculates that O'Neill's negative attitude toward Carnegie might have been the consequence of his friendships with such pro-labor militants as John Reed and Mary Vorse.⁸⁸ In a similar vein, Patrick J. Chura analyses the play's allusions to "vital contact," a fashion in the first decades of twentieth century taken up by genteel radicals who wanted to interact with members of the working class.⁸⁹ In fact, the Provincetown players who helped launch O'Neill's career attempted to do just that—market themselves as belonging with the working class. In *The Hairy Ape*, a prime example of such "vital contact" is of course Mildred's descent into the burning hell of the stokehole to "discover how the other half lives" (278). As Chura notes, instead of endorsing vital contact, O'Neill questions what often turns out to be "a pernicious and malignant force, incompatible with the workers' subjective needs" (160).

Mildred's encounter with Yank can be read as a parody and critique of a similar moment in Georg Kaiser's *Die Koralle* (1917; *The Coral*), the first play of the *Gas* trilogy.⁹⁰ In Kaiser's version, the Millionaire's Son tells his father about his descent into their yacht's engine room (which by the way is never shown on stage). Witnessing the exploitation of stokers inspires the Son to champion the cause of the proletariat. Shortly after the son's confession, an injured stoker is brought onto the deck. Upon seeing the laborer's disfigured body and after tending to his burns, the Millionaire's Daughter joins her brother. Having served as a common seaman in his youth, O'Neill emphasized his working-class credentials, something that neither Georg Kaiser

⁸⁸ Gene A. Plunka, "Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and the Legacy of Andrew Carnegie," *Eugene O'Neill Review* 23. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1999): 35-36.

⁸⁹ Patrick Chura, "'Vital Contact': O'Neill and the Working Class," *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Literature Journal* 49.4 (Winter 2003): 520-46.

⁹⁰ For the relationship and possible influence that German expressionism might have had on O'Neill see Mardi Valgema, "O'Neill and German Expressionism," *Modern Drama* 10 (1967): 111-123. Valgema points out that O'Neill would have read German drama at his year at Harvard in George Pierce Barker's playwright course and had seen such German expressionist films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1921 upon its American release.

nor Ernst Toller could do.⁹¹ No doubt, O'Neill took several issues with Kaiser's reductive representation of the working class: the silence of the laborer present on stage as nothing more than a mutilated body, the hope placed entirely on the enlightened capitalist. The American playwright changes a few variables and ups the stakes in his version of the story — industrialist's daughter meets stoker. O'Neill's play immediately opens inside the boiler room of a Transatlantic Ocean Liner and showcases the site of labor. But instead of giving us readymade solutions to questions of labor, O'Neill's drama meditates on what activities, if any, differentiate the human from the animal.

Recently, scholars have broached the question of animality in the play and have taken seriously the appearance of the gorilla in the last scene as one of the first moments in modern drama where the animal on stage is not there merely used for violent entertainment or comic relief.⁹² Una Chaudhuri thus reads *Hairy Ape*'s last scene in the zoo as an "encounter of difference," arguing that the climax of O'Neill's play is a "classic piece of 'boundary work'" that uses "animality to configure human subjectivity in performance."⁹³ Erika Rundle's singular and groundbreaking analysis of *The Hairy Ape* as "a primate drama" treats O'Neill's play as an evolutionary drama that undertakes a serious discussion of species in the wake of Darwin's blow

⁹¹ For more on how O'Neill flaunted his supposed "working-class" background (O'Neill's father was a successful albeit not a well-respected actor), see Patrick Chura, "'Vital Contact': O'Neill and the Working Class," *Eugene O'Neill and his Contemporaries: Bohemians, Radicals, Progressives, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Eileen J. Hermann and Robert M. Dowling (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2011), 175-99.

⁹² See in particular: Una Chaudhuri, "Zoo Stories: 'Boundary Work' in Theatre History," *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History*, ed. W.B. Worthen and Peter Holland (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 136-150; Randy Malamud, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Erika Rundle, "The Hairy Ape's Humanist Hell: Theatricality and Evolution in O'Neill's 'The Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life,'" *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 30 (2008), 48-144; and Erika Rundle, "'The Monkey Problem': Notes on Staging the Ape," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 31 (2009): 123-47.

⁹³ Una Chaudhuri, "Zoo Stories: 'Boundary Work' in Theatre History," *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History*, ed. W.B. Worthen and Peter Holland (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 140.

to anthropocentrism.⁹⁴ According to Rundle, O'Neill's most subversive gesture is to join in the last scene "together the stoker, the zoo animal, and the theatre audience as members of the same club, the Hairy Apes, a group to which they may all, at last, 'belong'" (131). The potentials of reading *The Hairy Ape* as a critique of humanism are rich and productive. In her interpretive move, Rundle joins animal studies critics who, informed by developments in both the humanities and empirical societies, have argued for some time that the human-animal distinction stubbornly maintained by so-called human "props" (language, consciousness, society, tool use, etc.) does not hold rigorously. It is important to note, however, that O'Neill's last stage direction is enigmatic as it is brief: "And, *perhaps*, the Hairy Ape at last belongs" (my ital.). We do not know for sure if Yank belongs anywhere after his death.

What has been overlooked in the otherwise-attentive commentaries about the animal in *The Hairy Ape*, however, is the very relationship between the two issues — the alienation of the human (whether in economic or spiritual terms) and the question of animal. Specifically, the question that O'Neill leaves suspended is role that human labor plays in differentiating between the animal and the human in capitalist modernity. Finding out where he belongs means for Yank also proving that he is *not* a mere beast. As O'Neill himself admitted in an oft-quoted letter to Kenneth MacGowan he was interested in the "brutal dehumanization of modern industrialization": "I have tried to dip deep in it, to probe in the shadows of the soul of man bewildered by the disharmony of his primitive pride and individualism at war with the mechanistic development [*sic*] of society."⁹⁵ The difficult question that *The Hairy Ape* seems to pose is: what does Yank's labor make him — human, less of a human and more of a "hairy ape,"

⁹⁴ Rundle, "*The Hairy Ape's* Humanist Hell," 52. Rundle's analysis indeed stands "in stark contrast with the preponderance of O'Neill criticism from 1922 to present, which forgoes any serious discussion of species."

⁹⁵ Cited by James J. Martine, *Critical Essays on Eugene O'Neill* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984), 32.

or neither? Instead of an answer, O'Neill's labor drama reveals what is flawed about the question in the first place.

In the last scene, Yank finds himself face to face with a gorilla that O'Neill describes as squatting "on his haunches on a bench in much the same attitude as Rodin's *Thinker*," the very first pose that we see Yank assume when we meet him in the beginning of the play. Yank opens the animal's cage and holds his hand, albeit in a mocking manner, as the stage directions indicate:

[The gorilla scrambles gingerly out of his cage. Goes to Yank and stands looking at him. Yank keeps his mocking tone—holds out his hand.] "Shake—de secret grip of our order."
[Something, the tone of mockery, perhaps, suddenly enrages the animal. With a spring he wraps his huge arms around Yank in a murderous hug. There is a crackling snap of crushed ribs—a gasping cry, still mocking, from YANK.] "Hey, I didn't say, kiss me."

Several attentive critics have noted how O'Neill's play pushes against the limits of stage representation and brings the relationship between animal and human to the fore. Throughout its production history, O'Neill's *Hairy Ape* has posed challenges to both theatre directors and actors. While the ape might assume the same pose as Yank there is no easy way of getting around what Erika Rundle calls the "monkey problem," the actor in the gorilla suit who might elicit laughter at the very moment of Yank's tragic death.⁹⁶

What could Yank have done differently? Upon first glance, the answer might lie in the activity of free production as imaged by Marx taking place in his ideal communist society, or in the life of peace and laziness as described by Adorno, or finally in what Jameson calls an "activity that is worth doing in its own right."⁹⁷ What leads Yank to his death, however, is neither his alienated labor nor mere unemployment, but his voluntary decision to open the cage

⁹⁶ Erika Rundle, "'The Monkey Problem': Notes on Staging the Ape," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 31 (2009): 123-147.

⁹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 225.

and *mock* the gorilla. Let us not forget that he maintains the mocking tone even as he is dying from the animal's grip, still trying to maintain his own superiority over the creature.

Labor such as Yank's, unskilled and performed for mere survival, is what buttresses capitalism. On the one hand, Yank is a victim. On the other hand, through his interaction with the ape, Yank reveals his own complicity with capitalist values. It is the mocking *tone*, the sound of Yank's speech and not his words, that enrage the gorilla. Yank's tone reveals first and foremost a position of superiority and disdain. Yank even resents the gorilla for belonging in the real jungle: "Youse can sit and ope dream in de past, green woods, de jungle and de rest of it. Den yuh belong and dey don't. Den yuh kin laugh at 'em, see? Yuh're de champ of de woild." Yank believes that, while the gorilla can remember an earlier place of belonging—the jungle, his own sense of belonging has always been an illusion. Finally, instead of trying to communicate with the gorilla, Yank taunts the animal that they should get even with the society that has enslaved them both by "knock[ing] 'em down." As Yank offers a hypocritical handshake, he announces to the gorilla his plans: "I'll take yuh for a walk don Fif' Avenoo. We'll knock 'em offen de oith and croak wit de band playin.' Come on, Brother." In short, Yank himself wants to get even with the society of Fifth Avenue by using the gorilla's strength. The gorilla has never been to or heard of Fifth Avenue. Paradoxically, Yank wants to attain power by exploiting the animal that he calls his "brother." In this manner, Yank would be reenacting capitalism's exploitation of animals.

As John Berger notes in *Why Look at Animals*, "the nineteenth century, in western Europe and North America, saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by twentieth-century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated between

man and nature was broken.”⁹⁸ According to Berger, whatever the changes in productive means and social organization, humans have always depended upon animals for food, work, transport, clothing, and “what distinguishes men from animals was born of their relationship with them” (18). If O’Neill’s labor drama explores the relationship between the animal and the human, it does so in part by asking what capitalism as an economic and political system brought to our relationships with animals. It is not by accident that Yank learns that the most sought product on Fifth Avenue in Scene V is monkey fur: “Monkey fur—two t’ousand bucks! [*Bewilderedly.*] Is dat straight goods—monkey fur? What de hell —?” And Yank’s last encounter with the gorilla shows how little humans know or understand about the animal that has been caged supposedly for “conservation” and the “public study” of zoos. The very challenge of an actor imitating an ape on stage highlights how theatre, much like the zoo, is also complicit in creating the relationship of hierarchy. It is not that Yank’s labor makes him less or more human than the ape, it is his desire to prove that he is more than an ape, his insult at being called “hairy ape,” that is a problem to begin with and that sets the drama into motion. After all, when we first meet Paddy, Yank’s wise friend, O’Neill’s stage directions mention “his face is extremely monkey-like with all the sad, patient pathos of that animal in his small eye.” Notice how O’Neill’s language compares Paddy to a monkey not as an insult, not to demean Paddy, but to describe his “sad, patient pathos.”

Both Brecht’s *In the Jungle of Cities* and O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* address the debates surrounding the human-animal boundary in capitalist culture. Instead of simply reproducing the reductive metaphors of the urban jungle, however, they call attention to the language used. O’Neill draws his audience’s attention to the sobriquet “the hairy ape”: what it signifies and why Yank resists it. Brecht stages an amoral wrestling match between two men who come up with

⁹⁸ John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 12.

their own rules that cannot be explained by Social Darwinist logic alone. The characters in Brecht's play are prisoners to their simplistic and idealistic view of animals whom they try to imitate, while in O'Neill's drama *Yank* ultimately falls because he tries to the very end to retain a sense of superiority over the gorilla. What both plays reveal is that beneath the soil of capitalist culture lie the bones of animals.

From angry crowds of workers wrecking machines to a lonely man looking at the face of an animal, labor dramas are all different. But what makes it productive to look at them together is their shared concern in exhibiting and understanding what becomes of work, labor, and play in capitalism. As such, *labor drama* is more helpful than terms such as naturalist or expressionist, as it permits us to explore these plays' contradictory and at times ambivalent attitudes toward capitalism that mingles angst with fascination. Expressionism, by contrast, has often been associated with an acid critique of capitalist modernity and industrialization, pivoted against Futurism's ecstatic celebration of speed, technology, and violence. For the most part, the playwrights of labor dramas do not simply criticize or blindly celebrate modern working conditions, but rather continually find in the latter sources of inspiration and innovation for theatre productions. And in these creative labors, we might call them what Camus finally calls Sisyphus — happy.

Conclusion

In May 1895, Friedrich Engels published *Supplement to Capital, Volume III* where he shed light on the growing importance of the stock exchange:

The position of the stock exchange in capitalist production in general is clear from Volume III, Part 5, especially Chapter 27. But since 1865, when the book was written, a change has taken place which today assigns a considerably increased and constantly growing role to the stock exchange, and which, as it develops, tends to concentrate all production, industrial as well as agricultural, and all commerce, the means of communication as well as the functions of exchange, in the hands of stock exchange operators, so that the stock exchange becomes the most prominent representative of capitalist production itself.¹

Under the subtitle “Stock Exchange,” Engels offers his readers a short outline enumerating the changes that have been transforming the capitalist production such as: the growth in scale of capitalist operations beyond the scope of individually-owned companies, the “gradual conversion of industry into stock companies,” “railway swindles,” “the accumulation of the number of *rentiers*, people who were fed up with regular tension in business and therefore wanted merely to amuse themselves or to follow a mild pursuit as directors or governors of companies,” the Limited Liability Act of 1855, “a tremendous number of new banks, all shares delimited,” and financial speculation as “a confirmation of the Calvinist doctrine that predestination (alias chance) decides, even in this life, blessedness and damnation, wealth, i.e., enjoyment and power, and poverty, i.e., privation and servitude.”² If, as Marx once noted, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness,” one wonders how, had they had the time, Marx and Engels would have written in detail about the ways that the new culture of speculation and financialization was changing the

¹ Friedrich Engels, “Stock Exchange,” *Supplement to Capital, Volume III*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/supp.htm><http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/supp.htm>. 20 Sept. 2013.

² Ibid.

human consciousness and imagination.³ It is, perhaps, appropriate that the final text of *Capital* should end on an outline in progress. The form of the quickly sketched outline of seven bullet points echoes the fast-paced and fluctuating movements of stock prices, or notes hastily jotted on a business pad during a meeting of shareholders. By the end of the nineteenth century, modern drama came into the position to chronicle and comment on the new economic developments that were transforming capitalist culture and pick up where economists like Marx and Engels left off. In this new role, modern drama proved to be a formidable rival to economic theory by casting the same socio-economic issues in a different light. As we have seen, instead of treating financial speculation as “a confirmation of the Calvinist doctrine,” Ibsen’s drama captured the uneven and often tumultuous shift from Providence to the invisible hand of the market. The 1870s saw a wave of financial scandals that showed the elusive nature of speculation, which oscillates “somewhere between gambling and investment.”⁴ The anxiety over the possibility that one could make “something out of nothing” was pervasive. Yet a theatre production often hovers in this uncertain area of speculation, since a theatre company has to first invest in the preparation and rehearsal of a show before reaping the profits. There is always, however, a risk that the production might be a flop and that the company will face financial loss and debt. It should come as no surprise then that plays often compare financial speculation to a theatre production, or make metatheatrical references to their own productions as feats of financial speculation. In Balzac’s *Mercadet* (1840; *Le Faiseur*), the maid of a corrupt speculator compares the daily lies that she has to deliver to fend off her employer’s creditors to acting in the theatre. In Shaw’s 1936 farce *The Millionairess*, Epifania, the titular millionairess of the play, will only marry a

³ Karl Marx, Preface to *A contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859, trans. T.B. Bottomore and M. Rubel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 67.

⁴ Edward Chancellor, *Devil Take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation* (London: Macmillan, 1999), x.

man who can make “fifty thousand pounds in six months with a capital of one hundred and fifty” (252). When one suitor, Alastair, rises to the challenge and shows up with the cash, everyone assumes at first that he has made his money on the stock exchange until he reveals that he managed to produce a successful play and sell the film rights to Hollywood. Incidentally, in 1960, Shaw’s own play would be loosely adapted into a swanky romantic comedy starring movie star Sophie Loren.

Modern drama also differentiated itself from the naturalist novel and financial melodrama, even if it did borrow some key aesthetic elements from both. Instead of naturalizing the laws of supply and demand and the business cycle, playwrights from Ibsen to Brecht unmasked such staples of capitalist ideology as dog-eat-dog competition, the work ethic, the division of labor, and the optimistic prognosis of the future. Instead of merely dehumanizing the workers so that they became machines or animals (or something in between), modern dramatists questioned those very categories—animal, human, machine—through the work of the actors in the theatre. The playwrights did not spare themselves, as they took into account their own complicity and participation in the culture of capitalism. Finally, they explored the dynamic relationship between capitalism and critique. The question at the end of Shaw’s *Major Barbara* is not simply “whether money will make morality its servant or whether moral forces will put money to their use,”⁵ but also whether critique can shake the foundations of capitalism or whether capitalism will disarm critique.

There is a reason why our story of modern drama’s representation of capitalism (1870-1930) ends with early Brecht. In “Notes on the opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*” (1930), Brecht would shed light on theatre’s complicity with the capitalist regime that it attempts

⁵ Bernard Dukore, *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1980), 110.

to critique: “Our existing opera is a culinary opera.”⁶ The innovations that would take place after expressionism would involve the very apparatus of the theatre— the later works of Brecht and Artaud’s theatre of cruelty. The blind spot of the playwrights discussed in this study is that they did not extensively tamper with the apparatus of the theatre in the radical way that Brecht would attempt to in the 1930s and beyond. They remained conservatively *on stage*, though the expressionist playwrights did revolutionize what that stage could represent — dreams, emotional states, different time zones.

Still, questions posed by modern dramatists reverberate to this day. The issue of labor, for example, would continue to interest postwar and contemporary artists. The ambiguous position of the actor simultaneously being a worker, laborer, and player is spotlighted in Beckett’s mimes *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II*. The first explores the human desire and need to work with tools. The single actor of the play “looks at his hands” and performs various tasks, prompted by the sound of a whistle. *Act Without Words II* stages the daily routines of two characters A and B. A who is slovenly, “perhaps a poet,” has the task of carrying a filled sack stage left and then crawling back into his own sack. B who has to carry a sack stage right is more orderly, constantly consulting his watch, map, and compass. Beckett, who was infamous for his somewhat despotic attitude toward actors (often physically restricting their movements by putting them into urns and sacks), seems to also offer here a critique of theatre’s use of the actor’s labor. Contemporary theatre artist and director David Levine goes even further in this critique by highlighting certain features of acting as an institution: the process of auditions, Actors’ Equity, and even acting techniques that have become household brands such as “The Method.” For his project, *Hopeful* (2009), Levine assembled and displayed thousands of

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre: Notes on the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*,” *Brecht on Theatre (1918-1932): The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), 34-5.

unsolicited headshot-and-cover-letter submissions from around New York City. The installation probes the notion of a “culture industry” and the waste inherent to show business with its huge pools of surplus labor. Another project, titled *Bauerntheatre* combines elements of theatre, land art, performance art, and endurance art. American actor David Barlow became the farmer from Heiner Müller’s *Die Umsiedlerin* (1961; *The Resettled Woman*) and for a month plowed fields and planted potatoes for ten-hour shifts in a rural area north of Berlin.

Conversely, other artists bring human labor to the fore by removing human bodies from the stage. The musical-theatrical installation by Heiner Goebbels, *Stifters Dinge* (*Stifter’s Things*), first presented at the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne in September 2007, allowed spectators to watch a machinery at work, seemingly by itself, “a composition for five pianos with no pianists, a play with no actors, a performance without performers — one might say a no-man show.”⁷

Blake Fall-Conroy’s clever, interactive *Minimum Wage Machine* (2008-2010) made use of machine art and real money to allow any participant to “work for minimum wage.” A hand crank powers the machine’s mechanism and electronics, while pennies are stored in a Plexiglas box. Turning the crank yields one penny every 4.97 seconds, for \$7.25 an hour, which is the minimum wage for New York State. If the participant stops turning the crank, they stop receiving money. Thus the installation allows the participant to experience *first-hand* the routine, mechanized tacks that pay minimum wage.

Speaking of hands, German-American artist Hans Haacke has created several artworks that expose the fiction of the invisible hand of the market. His *Gift Horse, Model for Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square, London* (2013) alludes to Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) by having an electronic ribbon attached to the front leg of the horse transmit the FTSE 100 ticker, which is

⁷ For more on this work of art, see Nicholas Ridout, “On the Work of Things: Musical Production, Theatrical Labor, and the ‘General Intellect’,” *Theatre Journal* 64 (2012), 389-408.

the stock price of the most successful corporations on the London Stock Exchange. His *Invisible Hand of the Market* (2009) drives the point in a more direct manner by featuring a pendulum in the form of a cartoonish hand waving back and forth. This pendulum-hand substitutes the word “hand” in the text of the installation—“The Invisible ... of the Market,” acting as a gigantic wall emoji.

Finally, other artists have taken the term “capitalism” head on. On 20 September 2013, Steve Lambert’s installation “Capitalism Works for Me! (True/False)” opened at the Crossing the Line Festival and relied on the answers of passersby. A giant illuminated scoreboard, set in Times Square, kept a running tally of how the public had voted on the thesis: “Capitalism Works for Me!” The idea for this interactive piece came to Lambert when he realized that, although capitalism was a “big issue that needed to be talked about,” there was no public forum for it.⁸ In this way, the pedestrians of Times Square were urged to become active members of an imagined electorate with the ability to pronounce judgment on the current socio-economic situation. Whether these creative and critical artworks will be successful in inspiring change or whether they will be subsumed by the business of entertainment remains to be seen.

⁸ Steve Lambert, interview by Jeremy M. Barker, “Crossing the Line 2013: At the Intersection of Social Practice and Inter-Disciplinary Art,” *Culturebot*, 19 September 2013, <http://www.culturebot.org/2013/09/18985/crossing-the-line-2013-at-the-intersection-of-social-practice-and-inter-disciplinary-art/> (accessed 20 October 2013).

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