

13 Corporate Life in Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*

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In recent years, scholarship on the political imagination of early modern drama has found inspiration in a variety of old traditions and new archives: in the rich mixture of classicism, legal thought, and theological debate that characterized Renaissance discussions of sovereignty and the polity; in the poor laws promulgated by Parliament and in the mercantilist policies of an expansionist Crown; in local disputes over office-holding and town governance; and in the regional and national patronage networks that gave structure to an emerging Tudor “State.”¹ The essay that follows draws together several of these concerns by reintroducing an institution that was fundamental to much of the period’s economic, theological, and political life: the institution of the corporation. Looking more closely at the history of the corporation helps us understand how changes in the organization of labor and capital put pressure on traditional forms of political association, at several scales, and it reminds us how indistinct “economic,” “moral,” and “political” questions could be for early modern people. Furthermore, corporations implied representational problems that were fundamental to the nature of *theater*, and this was not lost on playwrights, whose play companies were themselves awkwardly positioned within a predominantly corporate urban landscape. Finally, attending to the strange representational “life” of the corporation sheds valuable light on a larger theoretical problem shared by many of the essays in this volume: the problem of how collective associations of all kinds are formed through the circulation of affect among persons, bodies, objects, and ideas. These collective formations are both real and fictional at the same time. They are real *because* they are fictional, a paradox that is fundamental to the very definition of both “theatricality” and “politics” in the early modern period (as today) and that the institution of the corporation can help us understand more clearly.²

In what follows, my aim will be to examine these arguments by way of a detailed analysis of Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), a play that demonstrates both how central and how complex corporate ideas could become in the drama of the period.³ The play is a famous example of “London comedy” or “chronicle comedy,” as Jean E. Howard has called it, since Dekker draws on Thomas Deloney’s popular *The Gentle Craft* (1598), which had fictionalized the story of the historical Simon Eyre, a

young draper's apprentice who became Sheriff of London (1434) and then Lord Mayor (1445).⁴ As Dekker's Eyre rises from the shoemaker's workshop through the political hierarchy of London, he assumes the chains and robes of office and becomes increasingly identified with Guildhall, the official space of civic administration; his foundation of Leadenhall at the end of the play then introduces a second, more explicitly commercial institution that aims to position the craft guilds at the symbolic and economic center of the city. The play's hybrid historical sensibility thus illustrates the degree to which incorporated guilds and livery companies were not anachronistic medieval institutions persisting in a newly early modern landscape but had themselves become important vehicles for integrating new modes of highly capitalized investment and the values of a consumer-oriented market into urban society. And in this respect they resembled nothing so much as theaters: since actors continued to have many economic, legal, and affective associations with the craft guilds, and since the enterprise of commercial theater was itself employing a variety of legal and economic mechanisms—systems of credit and debt, a joint-stock division of property and profits, apprenticeships as well as hired actors—we may suspect that Dekker has more than mere shoemaking in mind.⁵

THE THEATER OF THE GROUP: NATION, CLASS, AND CORPORATION

Ever since Richard Helgerson's pioneering work on the representation of English nationhood during the sixteenth century, literary critics and historians of all stripes have recognized the importance of national ideas to the period's political imagination.⁶ Interpretations of *The Shoemaker's Holiday* have followed suit, often seeking to align the play's national historical plot—the wars with France that bookend its opening and closing scenes—with what is usually described as the play's "class" politics, as figured in its detailed portrait of trade and commerce. This interpretive gesture is itself a measure of how powerfully *The Shoemaker's Holiday* imagines the economic dislocations of its own moment in terms of collective affective experience: the conflicts of Dekker's play are conflicts among *groups* and not among "subjects" or individuals, a feature that accounts also for the strongly emblematic nature of its characterization.⁷ But however useful the notions of nation or class have proved to be for readings of the play, criticism has tended to reduce all types of group interest, group affiliation, or group experience to one of these two categories, emphasizing in particular the "unconscious," structural, or impersonal nature of class relations. In this way, criticism obscures the degree to which "class" or "nation" are only two of the group phenomena in the play, and hardly even the most explicit.

More recently, a third category for thinking about early modern political and economic life has become prominent: that of the city, and especially

the example of London, with its distinctive culture of consumption, its legal seasons and proximity to court, its demographic strains and social disturbances, and its well-established political traditions.⁸ Although it was not officially incorporated until 1608, the legal entity we still know today as the Corporation of the City of London had long been a composite of many different corporate groups, all of which had overlapping commercial rights, religious purposes, and political authority. As the historian Phil Withington has shown in exemplary detail, across England corporate institutions were vital to forging a coherent sense of urban identity, and through this “urbanity” a sense of affective belonging in the larger political community of the realm.⁹ Whether we regard *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, therefore, as forging a new national imaginary that can either integrate or exclude the foreign worker, or as creating new ideological alignments among the aristocracy, urban mercantile elite, and laboring guild members, or as asserting the primacy of masculine, homosocial economic structures over a household world in which women might retain a distinctive agency—to name several problems that have engaged some of the best criticism on the play—we should recognize that the play’s primary means of staging these relationships is to juxtapose different models of corporate identity with one another. The play brings these different corporate forms into relief not to resolve these conflicts, as critics sometimes argue, but to make these conflicts more visible, such that its “political” imaginary results from their ongoing confrontation.

As a way of advancing this argument forward a step, it will be helpful to consider Weber’s distinction between “class” and “status” (*Stände*) groups. For Weber, “classes” are defined exclusively by their access to the market and hence by their power and flexibility over market processes. As a social category, “class” is a sociological artifact, an analytic abstraction reconstructed through sociological observation that we derive from considering people only in relation to market forces and especially in relation to property.¹⁰ For Weber, “class” is not primarily a self-identified grouping, except in moments of opposition around market relations; “class,” in short, becomes self-conscious in moments of social action and is most visible when classes, or social groups positioned differently with regard to property and market, mobilize against one another. “Status,” in contrast, describes a highly self-conscious and highly ritualized way of defining group identity that depends on the possession and recognition of social honor. In this sense, “status” is always also a semiotic and ethical category since it depends upon what Weber calls “style of life” (932). In status terms, consumption implies the accumulation and expenditure of symbolic capital as the primary mode in which participation in the group is secured; success depends on knowing how to manipulate signs and appearances to produce symbolic capital and knowing how to consume it—as well as knowing how to leverage symbolic capital in order to position oneself advantageously in relation to the economic market.

Using Weber's categories, we may distinguish more clearly between social position relative to economic circumstances and social position relative to symbolic power; we may see how status groups always overlap with class groups (as when honor produces privilege over goods and a market advantage); and we can understand how status groups always secure power by means that are distinct from their economic position. Thus the "aristocracy" would at one moment be considered as a "class" (in relation to the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth) and at another would be considered as a "status" group (in its relation to symbolic power), and it is precisely in the interplay and changing relationship between these two aspects that large-scale transformations in social life become thinkable.

But Weber's categories also illuminate the importance of corporate institutions in early modern society, since the guilds and companies were economic instruments that at the same time conferred social status.¹¹ Corporate forms of all types allowed economic and symbolic forms of capital to be brought into alignment, in part by allowing different forms of wealth, such as land, labor, goods, money, or credit, to persist within the same collective institution. They also delimited lines of exclusion and differentiation: between those who were members of incorporated bodies and those who were not, between different companies in the same economic and political community, or between groups located within the structure of the company itself. In the 16th century, in short, one didn't have a corporate position in *addition* to a class position, or corporate identity *instead* of a class position: one's class position was a *function* of one's corporate membership (or lack of one) in a market that was profoundly shaped by corporate activity. It is important to emphasize that the guilds and companies themselves were instrumental in creating oppositions between "capital" and "labor" that we associate with the period, for instance, and both types of corporate bodies took their own shape from the conflicts between economic and status position that they generated. These conflicts that unfolded *within* the structure of the guild were not independent phenomena with their own "transitional" logic—they were the direct result of the companies' own activities and policies. The ongoing legal challenges between the Cordwainers (or shoemakers) and the Curriers in the late 16th century provide a useful illustration of this point, since they resulted from "class" tensions among traders, middlemen, and craftsmen who were situated within each company as well as across them. Here the corporate bodies of the Cordwainers and the Curriers have given a new shape to a division between traders and craftsmen that had existed from the very earliest examples of organized guild activity; both companies responded to this antagonism by exercising their respective authorities and by seeking *new* authorities from royal or civic officials, in this way reasserting themselves as institutional forms that had the power to regulate their members.¹²

We may now go a step further and, to Weber's distinction between class and status, add Bourdieu's insight that "class" always describes *a struggle*

over meaningful acts of classification.¹³ For Bourdieu, it is this conflict over the authority to bestow meaningful categories upon social experience that constitutes the essence of “political” conflict, and this is because the gesture of classification always also implies a representational principle:

A class exists in so far as—and only in so far as—representatives with the *plena potentia agendi* may be and feel authorized to speak in its name ... what we have [in the concept of “class”] is a sort of existence in thought, and existence in the minds of many of those who are designated by the different taxonomies as workers, but also in the minds of those who occupy the positions furthest removed from the workers in the social space. This almost universally recognized existence is itself based on the existence of [those] who have a vital interest in believing that this class exists and in spreading this belief among those who consider themselves part of it as well as those who are excluded from it; [those] who are capable, too, of giving voice to the ‘working class,’ and with a single voice to evoke it, as one evokes or summons up spirits, of invoking it, as one invokes gods or patron saints; [those] who are capable, indeed, of manifesting it symbolically through demonstration, a sort of theatrical deployment of the class-in-representation, with on the one side ... the entire symbolic system that constitutes its existence—slogans, emblems, symbols—and on the other side the most convinced fraction of the believers who, by their presence, enable their representatives to give a representation of their representativeness. (741–42)

Bourdieu might well be describing the associational world of *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, since, as we shall see, the play offers us “representatives” of several types who “stand for” the members of different groups and who, in doing so, endow those members with an explicit sense of group identity rather than a merely individual one. The play’s conflicts are structured around these different representative figures and the competing categories of group identity that they animate, and this conflict among group identities is played out in the “minds” of the other characters who identify with them. Also, of course, it plays out in the minds of the *audience*—for these are characters who “stand for” economic and status positions that exist both within *and* outside the fictional world of the play. The play is thus literally a “theatrical deployment” of the process of how group identity emerges as a result of a shared belief in representatives and in the meaningful categories of social classification they embody, even by those who are *not* members of the group. It is also a theatrical demonstration of how group identity lives in the “slogans, emblems, and symbols” that mediate it, in signifiers that are both material and immaterial, concrete and abstract, “real” but at the same time—this is the central paradox of the corporation—also “fictional.” These signifiers are taken up, literally “put on,” as well as endorsed or identified

with, by characters and audience members alike; in this way, the play provides a demonstration of theater *itself* as a form of public, and hence political, association.

As is often noted, Dekker polarizes his characterization around aristocratic and national political alignment on the one hand and models of urban citizenship rooted in corporate guild membership on the other, although the latter is in fact composed of two strata. Each of these strata has distinct markers of status and commercial resources: the Grocers, as figured in the character of Oatley, and the Shoemakers who surround Eyre throughout the play. Oatley sits between the aristocratic Lincoln and the craftsman Eyre, since he opens the play as the Lord Mayor and often invokes "Guildhall" (1.65, 70) as a base for symbolic gestures of authority; twice Oatley speaks of his "brethren" (1.66), by which he seems to mean both fellow guild members and fellow holders of civic office, and once Eyre has been elected Sheriff, Oatley congratulates him for having "entered into our society" (11.9), a term with marked corporate meaning in the period. But this assertion of a shared corporate membership obfuscates the fact that Oatley, in his ambition and his forms of wealth, as well as in the locations that characterize him—he resides outside the city in the village of Old Ford, where he entertains both Lincoln and Eyre, as well as inside the city on Cornhill Street—is pulled toward the aristocratic pole of the play's symbolic field. Aristocracy and membership in the retail guilds are both shown to be forms of oligarchy, defined either by conspicuous consumption (Lincoln) or by investment in overseas trade (Oatley).

The many different economic transactions that structure Dekker's play and provide much of its historical texture, therefore, always position characters in relation to the competing corporate systems of value that define a status position and result in different capacities for political power. The fact that Eyre, too, comes to profit from a speculation on Dutch commodities and that he does so in partnership with Oatley (and Scott) is doubly significant: first, because it legitimates a mode of speculative investment that was otherwise often viewed with suspicion, folding it into the possible forms of wealth that a common urban citizen with a corporate membership might access; and secondly because the alignment between Eyre and Oatley is only temporary—it is *merely* a partnership and not the more enduring form of association that corporate guild or chartered company membership provides. Similarly, when Oatley says "Let's have your company" (11.72) to Eyre later in the play as he ushers him offstage and into Old Ford, he uses the term to express a weak bond, one that is occasional or circumstantial and nothing like that of shoemakers. We may contrast this contractual arrangement, undertaken solely for individual profit, with Firk's cry at the end of the play, when he is asked by Oatley and Lincoln to reveal where Lacy, disguised as "Hans," may be found. "Shall I cry treason to my corporation?" (16.96), he demands, a betrayal that would be far more serious to the system of apprenticeship and civic power that depends on it than is

Lacy's own evasion of military service, and hence his obligation to King and nation, at the opening of the play.¹⁴

So what are the characteristics of this corporate group that the play displays so prominently for us? Most obviously, they are to be found in the entire system of values that animates the world of the workshop:

- in the dancing, singing, and jocular festivity that the play is at pains to demonstrate
- in its awareness of the "generation and blood" of the guild, as Eyre comments to Rose at one point (11.45), voicing a corporate alternative to the aristocratic preoccupation with blood lineage that Lincoln articulates in the play's first scene
- in the roving bands of shoemakers who dispense a rough justice in order to bring the marriage plots to a resolution
- in the idioms, the oaths and slang and insult, the mythical and literary references, many of them taken directly from the theatrical repertory system itself, that circulate among the shoemakers.

The figure of Hammon shows corporate membership to be as exclusionary as it is inclusive: he suffers a kind of civic excommunication from the world of the play, since, although he claims to be "a citizen by birth" (6.61), he has no membership in the many corporate bodies that make up the political, economic, and affective life of London. As a consequence, his moral personality is shown to be hollow, a shell that he tries to fill by speaking one of a variety of clichéd sonnet and romance idioms (i.e. 6.31–33 and 9.40–48). As Eyre declares to Rose, when told of Oatley's plan to marry her to Hammon, "those silken fellows are but painted images—outsides, outsides, Rose; their inner linings are torn" (11.42). Hammon is indeed a perfect dramatic illustration of ambiguity around the identity of the "gentleman" that has been well-documented by social historians, a status position that depended exclusively on a style of life, or on the ability to sustain the *performance* of status, without any of the traditional grounds for identity, whether blood, land, lineage, craft, or corporate membership. His language is as empty as his motives and as the price tag that he sees dangling from every hand; when he is rebuffed by Rose and turns instead to pursue Jane, he lapses clumsily into an approach that presumes the logic of a commercial transaction, asking "how sell you then this hand" (12.27) and eventually tries openly to buy her from Ralph (18.76–85).

The reaction of the shoemakers to Hammon's pursuit of Jane is extreme because they espouse such different systems of value: the shoemakers, despite all the scenes in which they seem to work and to make shoes, do not in fact espouse a strongly commercialist worldview; indeed, the entire plot of Jane and Ralph provides a qualitative and affective *moral* ground for shoemaking as a corporate enterprise, as opposed to the purely quantitative commodity logic associated with Hammon. The shoemakers,

furthermore, speak and act not on their own behalf but on behalf of Ralph, one of their corporate fellows, which concentrates the force of their objection—it is a whole collective who speaks against Hammond, many voices against one. Ralph is, after all, physically incomplete, having returned from the wars in France with a severely damaged (if not missing) leg, and it would seem that the violation of his physical integrity somehow threatens the integrity of the corporate body, which needs now to be reasserted as emphatically as possible. Earlier in the play, Hodge and Firk had already moved to rehabilitate the corporate body by exhorting Ralph to work all the harder. When Ralph returns and laments that his wife Jane “will be poor indeed / Now I want limbs to get whereon to feed” (10.78–79), Hodge reminds him that his corporate identity is to be found instead in his hands: “Limbs! Hast thou not hands, man? Thou shalt never see a shoemaker want bread, though he have but three fingers on a hand.” (10.80–82). Eyre has already asserted the same rhetorical equation to Jane in the play’s opening scene, upon Ralph’s conscription and departure: “Let me see thy hand, Jane. This fine hand, this white hand, these pretty fingers must spin, must card, must work.” (1.210–11). The act of physical labor becomes a signifier for corporate belonging, filling the absence of the marriage bond; the hand that shifts the shuttle or pricks with the awl is suddenly neither Jane’s hand nor Ralph’s hand but the hand of all shoemakers, a ghostly limb animated by a corporate personality that is as relentless and demanding as it is nourishing or comforting.¹⁵

But Dekker also uses his play to recompose an idea of national belonging from the legal and affective structures of the corporate forms that the play’s central scenes represent to us. The war between England and France that preoccupies the aristocratic characters is pushed to the edges of the play; it sweeps up Ralph, who disappears for much of the play’s action and then reenters as a masterless man who must be reintegrated into the corporate image of the guild. By the end, even the King invokes a corporate idea in order to rally the shoemakers to the wars, vowing to “incorporate a new supply” of troops to those who are already fighting in France (21.138–41) and in this way to transpose an idea of corporate belonging from the workshop to the national community. The gesture can be read either as the final comic fulfillment of a collective idea—a celebration of corporate *communitas* in which even the King becomes a member, rather than its head—or, more cynically, as a call to arms that Lacy will again evade and to which Ralph will only suffer more injury. But however we interpret the play’s conclusion, the form of imaginative fellowship is “national” only insofar as it has been accumulated out of overlapping corporate ideas, the nation built up out of the city, city from workshop, workshop from shoemakers—shoemakers who are also actors and who find their representative in a larger-than-life character who comes to stand for all of them, and for all the communities they form together, in a single figure: Simon Eyre.

THE CHARACTER OF THE CORPORATE PERSON

Eyre is best understood not as an individual, dramatic portrait, nor as a fictionalized historical figure, nor even as an impersonal, quasi-allegorical comic type: he is a figure for the peculiar idea of the corporate person. This “corporate person” contains a formal envelope projected off the actor’s body that can become a representative container filled with a range of collective identities, each of which might conflict with any of the others but each of which can be “stacked” within the actor’s frame. He is shown donning the trappings of corporate power, first the gold chain that is a sign of his office as Sheriff—the “worshipful vocation of Master Sheriff” (10.4–5), as Marjorie puts it—and later the “velvet coat and alderman’s gown” (7.104*sd*) that he borrows in order to meet with the Dutch ship captain. But this multiplication of identity results not in a fragmentation of personhood but in its concentration: when Eyre asks Hodge “how do I look,” Hodge can only respond, “Why, now you look like yourself” (7.114). Whereas Marjorie shows herself to be acting and only ends up missing the mark, in this way opening herself up to satire, Eyre manages to gather his own representational power into himself, inflating the corporation with his own personality even as he derives his identity from the signifiers of office. These props multiply his personality, since in the gown he becomes not one person, and not two—Simon Eyre the shoemaker and a City officeholder—but at least four:

When I go to Guildhall in my scarlet gown I’ll look as demurely as a saint, and speak as gravely as a Justice of Peace; but now I am here at Old Ford, at my good Lord Mayor’s house, let it go by, vanish, Madgy; I’ll be merry ... prince am I none, yet am I princely born! (11.11–15)

KING: Is our Lord Mayor of London such a gallant?

NOBLEMAN: One of the merriest madcaps in your land.

Your Grace will think, when you behold the man,

He’s rather a wild ruffian than a Mayor.

Yet thus much I’ll ensure your Majesty:

In all his actions that concern his state

He is as serious, provident and wise,

As full of gravity amongst the grave

As any Mayor hath been these many years. (19.1–9)

Shoemaker, citizen, Sheriff, saint: Eyre is a large presence on stage because he is stuffed full of corporations, the principle of the King’s Two Bodies translated into a semigrotesque comic figure. By the end of the play, workshop, office, London itself have been saturated by his bombastic jocularly, always somewhat defensive in its self-assertion; his oaths string together London neighborhoods, landmarks, saints, and national holidays, sometimes all at the same time.¹⁶

Dekker, in short, has borrowed some of the most important mechanisms of corporate membership—oath, trade, religious devotion, gift, legal bond—in order to bind together several collective identities at once, locating in theater the source of an imminent corporate personality that had previously been rooted in the symbolic gestures of the guild's old fraternal core: the collective feasts and processions, the masses and funeral rites, the charitable collections and disbursements, the veneration of the craft's patron saint.¹⁷ For, as David Scott Kastan has argued, the workshop really *is* a theater: we see actors acting like shoemakers who act as if they are working but actually produce nothing but the gestures of work, a symbolic activity that is itself interrupted by dances, songs, puns and other theatrical forms, out of which the workshop scenes, and the larger play, has been composed.¹⁸ Scene 13 shows the shoemakers making shoes, but they do not exactly make commodities, in the sense that the primary purpose of the object is not to be convertible to a price equivalent; one of the play's more fantastic aspects is that it tries to imagine something like a purely artisanal mode of production in which singular, nonreproducible objects are made to fill an individualized use-value without at the same time having an exchange value, to use Marx's language, which is why all the shoes mentioned in the scene also have proper names attached to them.

The paradigmatic example for the symbolic and theatrical logic I have been describing is, of course, the pair of shoes that Ralph presents to Jane at the opening of the play, the “rings for women's heels,” as he describes them, “cut out by Hodge, / Stitched by my fellow Firk, seamed by myself, / Made up and pinked with letters for thy name.” (1.228–234). As a collective artifact, the shoe is a metonym for the corporate personality that offers it as a gift, through Ralph, with the purpose of incorporating Jane, too, into the fellowship even as she slips her heel inside the shoe. Marriage acts as an equivalent to apprenticeship, a logic that Sybil makes explicit later in the play when she declares of Rose, who has seen through Lacy's disguise, “Tomorrow, if my counsel be obeyed, / I'll bind you prentice to the Gentle Trade.” (11.85–86). A similar image of reincorporation returns at the end of the play, when Ralph is presented with Jane's shoes by one of Hammond's servants and asked to make a copy of them:

RALPH: How? By this shoe must it be made? By this? Are you sure, sir? By this?

SERVINGMAN: How 'by this'? Am I sure, 'by this'? Art thou in thy wits? ... Dost understand me? Canst thou do't?

RALPH: Yes, sir, yes. Ay, ay, I can do it.—By this shoe, you say? I should know this shoe. Yes, sir, yes, by this shoe, I can do't.

...

... this shoe, I durst be sworn,
Once coverèd the instep of my Jane.

This is her size, her breadth. Thus trod my love.
 These true-love knots I pricked. I hold my life
 By this old shoe I shall find out my wife. (14.8–19)

The conceit of the shoe as an utterly singular, *non*-reproducible object is captured through the scene by the comic force (albeit a relatively weak one) of the repeated “this,” which strains to designate an object that can only exist as a concrete, immediate, singular presence: the shoe has a theatrical immediacy that words, and the translation of the play into print, cannot capture. This theatrical significance is all the more concentrated by the fact that the shoe is now also a structural link *back* to the opening of the play, a measure of the distance that has since unfolded and the bearer of all the symbolic value that resides in the relationship between Jane and Ralph, as well as a structural link *forward* to the resolution of the play and the final defense of the mystical body from the threats of Hammon and the commercial logic of the market he represents.

Jane’s shoe, in short, has become more than just a prop: it has become one of the key elements that holds the play together, circulating among characters, collecting the play’s most important values, and becoming an index of their relation to one another, like a radioactive isotope in the theatrical tissue. And since the shoe is both a fictional and a real object, it shows how plays in general emerge out of an assemblage of objects, bodies, and words that are equally hybrid in their ontology: the play is the sum total of these things that are also signs and signs that are also things, some of which act as standards of relative measure for the significance of all the others. The gold chain that Eyre wears offers another point of reference for this calibration of theatrical value, as does Firk the character, or the word “princely”: all are privileged signifiers around which the play’s imaginary comes to hang. All can be described as theatrical fetishes, a function that Jane’s shoe makes especially obvious. The importance of the shoe, in particular, derives from the fact that it is a shared fetish among many different characters, as well as from the different fantasies that it holds together: the fantasy of shoemaking as a guild fellowship; the fantasy of marriage and reincorporation into the fellowship of shoemakers, despite a loss of physical integrity; the fantasy of a play, which is itself an imaginary construct unfolding before its audience.

For this reason, Jane’s shoe demonstrates that the corporation, too, is a fetish, a fantasy structured around the absence of the missing limb, the scar or self-alienation that is necessary to all participation in the political community, as Roberto Esposito has argued, as the subject donates part of the self to the abstraction of the office.¹⁹ One of the compelling aspects of Eyre as a character is that he attempts to fill the office without any weakening or subtraction of personhood, as though the abstraction of the office could actually be filled by the “real” personality of the individual. Through his theatrical composition as a character we grasp that the personhood of the corporation, its identity and peculiar ontological condition as

a fictional-real hybrid, results from the objects, language, images and other formal resources that come to characterize it. At the same time, reciprocally, the idea of the corporation allows us to grasp more clearly how the theater is a particularly complex example of such a hybrid fictional-real assemblage, a collection of objects, words, gestures, movements, scenic combinations, ideas, character-forms, and other elements, all of which come to cohere into the temporary unity we call a “play.” This “corporate” dimension to theater can be measured by comparing the play that unfolds theatrically on stage, in all its distinctiveness and contingency, with the Epistle to the first printed edition of the *Shoemaker's Holiday*, addressed to us as readers, which Dekker calls “the argument of the play” (Epistle, 6–17). This bare sketch possesses none of the detail, none of the mechanism, none of formal translation that makes the play come to life; it lacks every dimension of *how* the play comes to be generated and apprehended as a theatrical event. Nor does the epistle capture any of the play's interest in the associational life of corporate forms, the symbolic oppositions among the characters who actually make up those forms and bring them into being, or the play's unusual ideological efforts to maintain a sense of corporate belonging at all costs.

DEKKER'S CORPORATE THEATER

By showing theater to be an institution that can provide a coherent personality for the city as a corporate entity—and to do so, moreover, by reconciling several different competing ideas of collective association with one another in a single figure—Dekker has shown theater to be necessary to urban life. He activates the symbolic and commercial means by which corporate life was sustained beyond or in addition to a formal charter, whether at the level of the guild or the city itself. But the theater, too, needed protection, for despite the many shared structures between professional acting companies and the craft guilds, the theater never incorporated—antitheatrical sentiments and civic policies had made it impossible. When the King appears at the end of the play to consecrate the foundation of Leadenhall by Eyre, he shows that corporate life, however self-sustaining, always requires some form of legitimating authority to ensure its continuity. The scene captures perfectly the historical situation of the guilds, which, as George Unwin showed long ago, always remained distinct from the legitimating authority of the Church, the Crown, or the Mayor and Commonalty of London. **It indeed** constantly moved among them, appealing to each of them in different moments as the fraternal body's right to an independent jurisdiction was in some way challenged.²⁰ But the scene also captures perfectly the historical situation of the play companies, for whom the monarch also acted as a royal patron: Eyre's founding of Leadenhall as a place for the shoemakers to continue their symbolic “work” can also be understood as addressing the play companies' own need for a theater, a place of commerce and assembly that

could become the equivalent of their guild hall under the protection of the monarch—and which, in the case of the Blackfriars Theatre, would become an actual hall after all.²¹

For this reason, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* is not simply a study of economic transformation and new political alignments but a subtle defense against the anti-theatrical polemic that surrounded it. The play proposes theater as a legitimate *art and institution of assembly*, in which many people might gather independently of their other associations and affiliations to watch plays come to life before their eyes: the incorporation *into* theater, by *means* of theater, of a general fellowship available for a penny. If civic authorities objected, as they often did, that the players distracted apprentices and tradesmen from their work, here we see them working conspicuously and affirming both urban and national allegiance; the real threat is a figure like Hammon, whose lack of corporate affiliation makes him suspect. And if the antitheatricalists railed against the theaters on the grounds that they were “publique assemblies of prophane plaies,” as Anthony Munday put it, or “brainesicke assemblies” and “the Counsell of the vngodly,” in the words of Stephen Gosson, where “the common people” “runne together by heapes” to form “a monster of many heades,” “a[n] assemblie of Tailers, Tinkers, Cordwayners, Saylers, olde Men, yong Men, Women, Boyes, Girles, and such like,” with no “grave, sober, discreete, wise” judgment that is “well exercised in cases of gouvernement,” then Dekker responds by showing his shoemakers forming a corporate community that can encompass both city and nation, with a Cordwainer for a Lord Mayor at its head.²²

By the turn of the seventeenth century, in short, theater had assumed a potential “political” importance not only because plays might stage controversial ideas or serve as an instrument of Crown propaganda, although companies of players had been maintained by monarchs and statesmen throughout the sixteenth century for precisely this reason, which provided an important motive for the early institutionalization of playing under a system of royal and aristocratic patronage. Theater had become “political” because it had itself become a distinct mode of association alongside, and in many ways outside, other corporate groups such as the guilds, companies, or the City itself. It was this associational potential that fueled some of the most enduring antitheatrical arguments and civic restrictions on playing, and it was a principle that playwrights and acting companies needed to affirm if theater was to continue as a commercial venture with growing literary ambitions.

NOTES

1. For further discussion, see Henry S. Turner, “Corporations: Humanism and Elizabethan Political Economy” in *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and Its Empire*, ed. Philip J. Stern and

- Carl Wennerlind (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 153–76, and Turner, “Toward an Analysis of the Corporate Ego: The Case of Richard Hakluyt” *differences* 20, nos. 2–3 (2009): 103–47.
2. See my further comments on fiction and theatricality in Henry S. Turner, “Generalization,” in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–23.
 3. All citations are to Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, ed. Anthony Parr (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990).
 4. See especially Jean E. Howard, *The Theater of a City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 20, and Simon Morgan-Russell, “‘How Far Is It, My Lord, to Berkeley Now?': English Chronicle History and the Rise of London City Comedy,” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 27 (2001): 245–62. On Dekker's use of London history, see David Novarr, “Dekker's Gentle Craft and the Lord Mayor of London,” *Modern Philology* 57 (1960): 233–39; on the play as a work of dynamic historiography, see Brian Walsh, “Performing Historicity in Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*,” *SEL* 46.2 (2006): 323–348; on the overlapping, multiple temporalities that the play activates through its references to London landmarks, see Jonathan Gil Harris, “Ludgate Time: Simon Eyre's Oath and the Temporal Economies of *The Shoemaker's Holiday*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71.1 (2008): 11–32.
 5. On the economic organization of the play companies, see Jonathan Gil Harris, “Properties of Skill: Product Placement in Early English Artisanal Drama,” in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Harris and Natasha Korda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35–66, to which I am particularly indebted for my own reading of the play; Roslyn L. Knutson, *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John Astington, *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Kathman, “Grocers, Goldsmiths, and Drapers: Freeman and Apprentices in the Elizabethan Theater,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55.1 (2004): 1–49; Kathman, “The Rise of Commercial Playing in 1540s London,” *Early Theatre* 12.1 (2009): 15–38; Kathman, “*The Seven Deadly Sins* and Theatrical Apprenticeship,” *Early Theatre* 14.1 (2011): 121–139; Ronda Arab, *Manly Mechanicals on the Early Modern English Stage* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2011), 28–31 and 34–35; and Henry S. Turner, *The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts, 1580–1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
 6. Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); see also Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Jonathan Gil Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Claire McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590–1612* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Cathy Shrank, *Writing the Nation in Reformation England, 1530–1580* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
 7. See, for instance, Peter Mortenson, “The Economics of Joy in *The Shoemakers' Holiday*,” *SEL* 16.2 (1976): 241–52; David Scott Kastan, “Workshop and/as Playhouse: Comedy and Commerce in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*,” *Studies*

- in *Philology* 84.3 (1987): 324–337; two paired essays by Paul Seaver (“The Artisanal World”) and David Bevington (“Theatre as Holiday”) in *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre, and Politics in London, 1576–1649*, ed. David L. Smith, Richard Strier, and David Bevington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 87–100 and 101–116; Marta Straznicky, “The End(s) of Discord in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*” *SEL* 36 (1996): 357–72; Ronda A. Arab, “Work, Bodies, and Gender in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 13 (2001): 182–212; Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 127–28 and 146–58; Marianne Montgomery, “Speaking the Language, Knowing the Trade: Foreign Speech and Commercial Opportunity in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*,” in *The Mysterious and the Foreign in Early Modern England*, ed. Helen Ostovich, Mary V. Silcox, and Graham Roebuck (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 139–152; and Steven Deng, *Coinage and State Formation in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), 161–86. Ivan Cañadas, *Public Theater in Golden Age Madrid and Tudor-Stuart London: Class, Gender, Community* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 77–106, esp. 89, points out the importance of a group imaginary to Dekker’s play.
8. Work on the urban dimension of early modern literature is too extensive for a single note, but see in particular Howard, *Theater of a City*, and Lawrence Manley, *Literature and Culture of Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), both with extensive bibliography; and the recent study by Adam Zucker, *The Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
 9. Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); see also Oliver Arnold, *The Third Citizen: Shakespeare’s Theater and the Early Modern House of Commons* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On the urban, guild roots of political identity in English plays see John Michael Archer, *Citizen Shakespeare: Freemen and Aliens in the Language of the Plays* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
 10. Max Weber, “Class, Status, Party” in *Economy and Society, Vol. II*. Ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 927–939.
 11. Cf. George Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), 160. For a somewhat less schematic, more deconstructive analysis of the problem of “class” in early modern culture, see Christopher Warley, *Reading Class Through Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
 12. See Unwin, *Gilds and Companies*, 84–85, 166, and 253; also Kastan, “Workshop and/as Playhouse,” citing Dekker’s own *Seven Deadly Sins*: the guilds “that were ordained to be communities, had lost their first privilege, and were now turned monopolies” (326–27); Arab, *Manly Mechanicals*, esp. 47 and 56.
 13. Pierre Bourdieu, “Social Space and the Genesis of Groups,” *Theory and Society* 14.6 (1985): 723–44.
 14. Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth*, 30–31, identifies apprenticeship as one of the most important mechanisms for constituting a corporate identity for the towns.

15. On the reincorporation of Ralph's wounded body into the symbolic body of the guild, see Arab, *Manly Mechanicals*, 55.
16. On this dimension of Eyre's characterization, see especially Harris, "Ludgate Time," an excellent analysis of the way that Dekker uses the convention of the oath to layer together several different temporalities for the theater audience.
17. On the fraternal basis of the guilds, see Unwin, *Gilds and Companies*, esp. 53, 93–109 and 110–126.
18. Kastan, "Workshop and/as Playhouse," 335–37.
19. See Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy B. Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
20. Unwin, *Gilds and Companies*, 28–29, 47–71, 80–81, 94, 105, 108, 159, 169–170, and 172.
21. See Unwin, *Gilds and Companies*, 165, and Kathman, "The Rise of Commercial Playing," esp. 17–22, on the practice of actors renting halls from the companies in order to perform their plays, a practice that resulted in increased attempts by civic authorities to restrict playing. On patronage models in the play, see Elizabeth Rivlin, *The Aesthetics of Service in Early Modern England* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), who argues that Dekker's play mixes a model of service "based on apprenticeship and guild fraternity" with one based "on court patronage and a patriarchal hierarchy" (93); also Cañadas, 84.
22. Anthony Munday, *A Second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theaters* (London, 1580), 71; Stephen Gosson, *Playes confuted in fiue actions ...* (London, 1582), B5r, B7r, D1r, C8v.