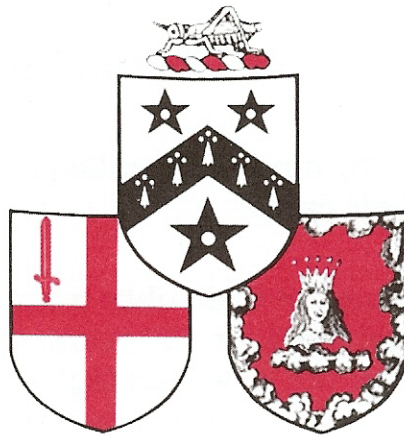


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# LITERARY LONDONERS

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## **Citizen Authors and Their Heroes: Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and Sir Thomas Gresham**

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The first of the Elizabethan dramatists I am going to be talking about today, Thomas Dekker, has an outstanding claim to be considered both as a “citizen author” and as a “literary Londoner”. Of course all the Elizabethan dramatists lived and worked in London, but Dekker was born and died in the tiny City and probably never went more than a few miles outside it in his life. Shakespeare was born in Stratford, and returned to it as his spiritual home. Marlowe and Middleton were born in London but educated at Oxford or Cambridge, a formative experience. Jonson made himself the poet of the Court and of the stately homes. Dekker was not a university man: his education must have been at a Grammar School such as Merchant Taylors’ or St Paul’s (where Sir Thomas Gresham had gone in his time), and although some of his plays were performed at Court, they were primarily aimed at an audience of citizens like himself. Dekker’s heroes are rarely kings or princes like Shakespeare’s: when monarchs appear in his plays, it is often in an unflattering light. The hero of his best-known play, *The Shoemakers’ Holiday* is Simon Eyre, a Lord Mayor of London who starts life as a shoemaker. He is based on an historical figure whose rise to wealth and fame in the 15th century had become, by Elizabethan times, legendary.

Thomas Heywood is another author whose plays usually offered a citizen audience heroes and heroines they could identify with. His best-known play *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, concerns the minor gentry in the North of England, while in *The Fair Maid of the West* he took a heroine who is a tanner’s daughter. And, in the second of his two plays entitled *If you Know Not Me You Know Nobody* he chose a citizen hero *par excellence* - none other than Sir Thomas Gresham, the great Elizabethan merchant and benefactor of the City, founder of the Royal Exchange and of Gresham College, who had died only about thirty years before the play was written.

Sir Thomas Gresham and Simon Eyre are heroes who have a lot in common. They both lived and worked in the City, made a lot of money and rose to positions of eminence: Gresham was royal agent and three times master of the Mercers’ Company. They both used their wealth to endow the City with institutions for the public benefit. The historical Simon Eyre was not actually a shoemaker, and he had built a chapel at Leadenhall rather than Leadenhall itself. The Hall was used as a leather market, hence the association with shoemakers grew up. Dekker’s play follows this tradition, which had featured in a book by Deloney, and shows Simon Eyre founding Leadenhall, then feasting all the apprentices of London, needing “a hundred tables five times covered”, at his own expense. *The Shoemakers’ Holiday* and *If you Know Not Me You Know Nobody* are thus very comparable plays, comedies in which a cross-section of the citizen world, rich and poor, is presented, and whose heroes both, in the last Acts, meet and



host the reigning monarch as well as announcing their own philanthropic schemes. These can be seen as plays in which the City celebrates itself, and this raises the question of exactly what values they affirm. Could great wealth really be acquired completely innocently? Was it better or worse than hereditary wealth? Did it pose a threat to the power of the Crown? Furthermore, since the Royal Exchange is the ancestor of the stock market, and Simon Eyre gets rich by speculating in commodities, were Dekker and Heywood glorifying the inception of the capitalist system, with all its unacceptable aspects?

When we look closely at these two plays, what we find is not a crude self-glorification of the City or the world of commerce, but a healthy mixture of self-affirmation with a degree of self-criticism.

*The Shoemakers' Holiday* is a play of exuberance and vitality, with a complicated plot all centred around the house - which is also the workshop - of Simon Eyre, "the mad shoemaker of Tower Street" as he calls himself. Tower Street was the street that led straight up to the Tower of London (not the modern one which is near Charing Cross) and all the houses, streets, churches and other places mentioned in this and Heywood's play are very precise geographical locations. Unlike Shakespearean comedy, this city comedy takes place in a very recognizable simulcrum of the audience's world, and if we put together all the references to City places and buildings in the writings of Dekker and Heywood, together with Middleton, Webster and Ben Jonson, we could compile an A-Z of the Elizabethan City of London. Eyre, a frisky and ebullient master shoemaker, employs two journeymen, Roger and Rafe, and an apprentice, Firke. But Rafe is called away to fight in a war despite being newly-married. His place is taken by Hans, apparently a Dutchman but really an Englishman, Rowland Lacey, the nephew of an earl, who has adopted this disguise in order to woo Rose Otley, the daughter of the Lord Mayor of London. Lacey overcomes the opposition of Sir Roger Otley and his own uncle to marry Rose, helped by the ingenious band of shoemakers. He in return gives Simon Eyre the tip-offs and essential contacts that enable Eyre to start dealing in commodities and soon become rich. Eyre's verbal extravagance is matched by his fiscal generosity (if it were not so, there would be a grave indecorum). When he becomes the new Lord Mayor and hosts the King at the Guildhall, all his household are invited and told they will be given an annual holiday.

The marriage of Rose and Lacey transcends social barriers: Rose is born in what Lady Bracknell would call "the purple of commerce" while Lacey has "risen from the ranks of the aristocracy", but their union denies any incurable hostility or rivalry between these groupings. Since both accept the authority of the monarch in the last Act, they are not allowed to be contenders for power. Dekker's myth of social cohesion also belies the friction which existed historically between the apprentices, who were given to brawls and riots, and the City authorities, the Corporation, who were apt to respond with harsh discipline. Simon Eyre becomes a new and likeable Lord Mayor, but he remains a sort of honorary young man, with a foot in either camp.

Not all readers have liked Simon Eyre, and some modern directors of the play have met the problem head-on by making him deliberately dislikeable, a surly tycoon who insults his wife and exploits his workmen. Can someone so concerned to get rich quick really be a hero, either admirable or acceptable? And when we look closely, there are some worrying details: Eyre is put on the road to wealth by buying a shipload of goods cheap from a Dutch skipper, and to do this he dresses as an Alderman of the City of London. In Dekker's source-story, it was made clear that this was merely a pose to impress the foreigner, in fact a confidence trick. In the play, Dekker never makes it clear whether it's a trick or not. Simon Eyre must surely be elected an Alderman at some point, since becoming Lord Mayor one is required to be both an Alderman and a Sheriff - which he clearly does become later. But if he starts his career with a deception, even if carried out in the spirit of an apprentice's frolic, this casts a shadow of doubt over his heroic status, and over the ethics of the mercantile world as a whole. Dekker is too subtle to offer any crude certainties, and the same can be said about other figures in the play.

Lacey, the young aristocrat who is determined to marry a Lord Mayor's daughter, wins our respect by showing that he can work in an honest trade, but this cosy example of the Protestant work-ethic falters when we reflect that he has bought his way out of the army in order to do, while Rafe, who cannot afford to buy himself out, returns half-way through the play minus a leg. The other shoemakers reassure him that he can still earn his living, but with his wooden leg Rafe makes a melancholy addition to the dance in Act IV, and the apprentice Firke makes a cruel remark aside: "Thou lie with a woman to build nothing but Cripplegates!". The idea that acquired characteristics such as lameness could be inherited was widely believed before the study of genetics became a science. Rafe's reunion with his wife Jane is presented as both right and happy, but the shadows in this play, once we start examining them, are very black indeed. Notice the way that Firke uses the metaphor of Cripplegate: the original was still in existence in the northern wall of the mediaeval City of London. Everything in this play is inseparable from the fabric of the City itself, and Firke cannot think without it.

The more sympathy we feel for Rafe, the less this makes us like Lacey, and if the young aristocrat is not very heroic, even despite being a lover (and all the world loves a lover) then this tends to unsettle the play's myth of social cohesion: barriers of class have apparently been transcended but will surely re-assert themselves as soon as Lacey, now married, gives up his pose as a shoemaker and returns to a life of wealth and ease, while Rafe and Jane return to one of obscurity and hardship. Simon Eyre himself has a low opinion of courtiers, and tells Rose not to marry one: "Courtiers...those silken fellows are but painted images, outsides, outsides, Rose, their inner linings are torne..." He does not realise at this point that Lacey is an earl's nephew and heir, but we do. There is some uncertainty because Dekker does not tell us whether Lacey, at the end of the play, is going to re-join the army and take part in the new campaign announced by the King. If he did, he might, in a way, redeem himself - prove himself to be no deserter but as good a man as Rafe, whom he sent to the front. Dekker leaves it unresolved. It's not only the plot that is complex in this play: every scene and incident raises all sorts of uncomfortable questions.



Likeable or not, Lacey is a very slick and street-wise young man, and one of the things he is smart about is money. Eyre acknowledges his help later on, saying "Hans, thou shalt have a hundred for twenty", although it was not money but know-how that Lacey supplied. And money was the usual reason that made young noblemen, in this era, link themselves closely with the City of London. When we look at a list of the founder members of the Virginia Company (one of the earliest joint stock companies), it includes the Earls of Pembroke and Southampton and members of the Sidney and Neville families, as well as prominent and wealthy citizens such as Sir Thomas Smyth, a former Sheriff of London, and his brother-in-law Sir John Scott, who was on the Virginia Company Council. These last two names are of interest to a Dekker scholar because Dekker addressed some of his longest and most intimate dedications to Smyth and Scott, along with their wives: the dedications to his book of prayers, *Four Birds of Noahs Ark*. These show that Dekker was on friendly terms with the Smyth and Scott family, and admired them for their religious zeal. (Dekker was an extremely devout man, a militant Protestant.) He also, more discreetly, admired them for their implication in the Essex rebellion of 1601. This Sir Thomas Smyth, now Treasurer of the Virginia Company, was the very same Sheriff Smyth in whose house the ill-fated Earl had taken refuge on the day of his rebellion, in the City of London. Smyth and Scott had both been imprisoned in the Tower because of their part in the rebellion, and it is this that Dekker is alluding to in his dedication when he compares Smyth to Daniel in the lion's den (as Waage has shown). Dekker's plays attest his support for the Essex faction in various different ways.

There has been a lot of research now into the politics of the Virginia Company. It had an oppositional stance (with a small "o"), not only because so many of its members were old Essex supporters, but because its Charter enabled it to escape from the fiscal control of the King. In this company, noblemen did rub shoulders with citizens and sheriffs, as they do in *The Shoemakers' Holiday*, though it seems likely that in the historical company it was the City merchants who were giving investment advice to the noblemen, rather than the other way round. We would laugh, wouldn't we, if Heywood had shown Queen Elizabeth giving financial advice to Sir Thomas Gresham. Fiction takes liberties, but not quite such liberties. Dekker could be very vague about financial matters, and so could Heywood as we will see when we come to him in a minute, yet despite that they could still be very perceptive.

In the last scene of *The Shoemakers' Holiday*, Simon Eyre hosts the King at the Guildhall: this is something Dekker introduced which is not in his source. The role of the King is to bring "harmony" out of the "discord", forcing Rose's father and Lacey's uncle to accept their marriage. He does this in a jokey way, by pronouncing the couple divorced one minute, then re-married the next. This arbitrary power, if presented in any other context but that of comedy, could appear a lot less acceptable: it would be threatening and sinister, like Hammon's attempts to buy Jane from her husband Rafe. *The Shoemakers' Holiday* is an early play of Dekker's, written in 1599 two years before the Essex rebellion, and in Dekker's later plays we do not find kings, or even earls, being presented in such a friendly light: far from it. After that crucial event in 1601, Dekker could no longer write a myth of social cohesion with even partial conviction. In

later plays such as *Satiromastix* and *Match Me In London*, Dekker presented kings who attempt to divorce wives from their husbands, as paradigms of tyranny.

The curious title of Heywood's play, *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody (Parts I and II)* was a proverbial Elizabethan expression for fame. Sir Thomas Gresham, its hero, was certainly famous in 1606, and in the tiny City the Royal Exchange was one of the newest and proudest landmarks. Dekker actually mentions it too, in one of the best passages of *The Gull's Horn-Book*: "The theatre is your poets' Royal Exchange, upon which their muses, that are now turned to merchants, meeting, barter away that light commodity of words..." Heywood's play was not even the first to be written about Gresham: a Latin play by one J. Rickets, entitled *Byrsa Basilica sive Regale Excambicum in honorem Thomae Greshami* is preserved in M.S. in the Bodleian Library, and it is dated 1570, during Gresham's own lifetime.

Heywood's play is highly episodic, and dramatises various aspects of Gresham's career, public and private. In the early scenes, we see him buying a sugar monopoly from the Barbary King for £60,000; sending his nephew, John, to work in France; and being reconciled with one Sir Thomas Ramsey, with whom he has been at a law-suit, through the mediation of a Dr Nowell, Dean of St Paul's. Ramsey and Gresham meet in Lombard Street, "on the Lumbard," as was then the custom. Dr Nowell suggests a compromise to their quarrel, which arose when Gresham gazumped Ramsey for Osterley manor, and which they admit has only poured money into the pockets of lawyers for seven years. Then it starts to rain, and this gives Gresham the idea of building a covered meeting-place for merchants in London. All of these events have some historical basis: a Thomas Ramsey is listed in Fuller's worthies as being Sheriff of London in 1568. And Dr Alexander Nowell, who was Dean of St Paul's from 1561, was according to the D.N.B. "a great composer of private quarrels". Nowell's portrait still hangs in the Bodleian Library, and (unless any better source can be suggested) Heywood may actually have heard some of this story from Nowell himself, because Nowell lived to the age of ninety-five, only dying in 1602. He was also a benefactor of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where Heywood is thought to have studied, so they could have met either there or in London.

Anyway, in the play, Dr Nowell subsequently invites Gresham, Lady Ramsey and Gresham's friend Hobson, to view a gallery in his house where the portraits of famous benefactors of the City and realm are displayed. This gives the chance for a quick history lesson, and distinguished among the examples Nowell brings is, "Sir Richard Whittington, three times Mayor, Sonne to a knight, and prentice to a mercer..." who is an obvious precursor of Gresham. This allusion at least admits that Whittington was not born poor, and entirely self-made: in almost every case, such a myth was wont to attach itself to the names of citizen heroes. Heywood, who was always interested in feminist issues, deliberately mentions several women whose bequests and foundations raise them to heroic status too. Dr Nowell's listeners are inspired to embark on good works, and very soon Gresham's Exchange is built and we see it being admired by a group of lords, who declare it finer than any comparable building in Christendom. However, at this point in the play, Gresham is overwhelmed with bad fortune. A comet is seen in the



sky: the Barbary King dies and the new King repudiates Gresham's monopoly before he has made a penny from it; hence Gresham loses £60,000. John, his nephew, runs riot in France wasting a lot of money. And just when Gresham is receiving the Imperial ambassador to a banquet at his house, it is announced that one of his ships, bearing a load of statues to ornament the new Exchange, has been sunk. Why does Heywood present Gresham in such a situation, apparently the victim of immense bad luck?

T. S. Eliot complained, in a very condescending and patronising essay on Heywood, that Heywood is not "moral" enough. Well, it's a useful rule of thumb to follow in life, that whatever T.S. Eliot says about anything is always wrong. Heywood's plays seem to me to be a bit too moral, but their most fascinating details are only revealed to a scrutiny which is not being overtly moralistic. Eliot's essay, which even asks "whether Heywood's output has enough coherence to be treated with the dignity of an *oeuvre*..." is full of wild inaccuracies, for instance he praises Thomas Middleton for writing passages which are in a play by three quite different authors.

To return to Gresham and his misfortunes, one reason Heywood may have done this is that it gives an opportunity to show the audience Gresham's splendid moral fibre: his fortitude and resignation in adversity, and all that sort of thing. But there could be more to it than that, and I can suggest another interpretation which makes this scene rather more interesting. To understand it, we first have to understand that there was something very odd about Queen Elizabeth visiting Gresham's Burse, as it was first called, and honouring it with the title of the Royal Exchange. Gresham's Burse had been modelled on the one in Antwerp, where he spent so much of his time as the financial agent of the Crown. In Antwerp, the trade in bills of exchange was unregulated by the government, but in England the Crown had long claimed a prerogative of controlling currency exchange and regulating the rates. This control, like any arbitrary control, could be highly unwelcome to those trying to operate in an open, international market (look what happened with the ERM!). The title of "Royal Exchange", or "Cambium Regis" was given by Tudor monarchs to the minister whose job it was to exercise this control. Yet Elizabeth did, in 1571, bestow the very same title on Gresham's Burse, where merchants from all over Europe were doing free-trade business. Gresham was a great expert on rates of exchange, having advised the Queen for many years on how to manipulate them or choose favourable moments for doing business, so he could hardly have pleaded ignorance!

Odder still, five years later, in 1576, Queen Elizabeth's government issued a new proclamation which again said "that by the laws and statutes of this realm no man ought to make any exchange or rechange of money but such as her majesty shall authorise", and went on to vest this authority in three London merchants. This Act, like the numerous Tudor statutes against usury, seems to have been completely ignored in practice.

So what was Queen Elizabeth doing, by appearing to give her blessing to Gresham's Burse in 1571, and what were all the merchants dealing there guilty of? Were they outlaws? Were the Mayor and entire Corporation of London defying the law and the

Crown in building an Exchange in the first place? Surely the setting up of Gresham's Burse was really a triumph for the powers of the City and of market forces against the claims of the Crown and of arbitrary control. The monarch could hardly have all the dealers in the Exchange arrested and thrown into the Tower, English and foreign alike, all but three. She needed them to lend her money on a regular basis, and so did everybody else. In Heywood's play, Queen Elizabeth is actually shown borrowing money from Gresham's friend Hobson. She couldn't kill the goose that laid her golden egg. So Elizabeth's recognition of the Exchange was an act of realism, passed off as royal favour, and this scene in Heywood's play looks very different when we re-visit it in that light.

Instead of viewing the loss of Gresham's ship as a disaster, I think we should see it as a symbolic triumph. The ship was carrying a cargo of marble statues for the newly-built Exchange, statues of past sovereigns, but those symbols of royal authority will not be needed. It is not just the statues, but one aspect of the royal prerogative itself, that is being lost. (Of course I cannot prove that Heywood knew all these details of Elizabethan finance and legislation, but no-one can prove he didn't, and ultimately it doesn't matter, because the reading still works, still fits the text as we have it.

Now what about the Barbary King, or rather kings, the first of whom is inconsiderate enough to get himself killed at the battle of Alcazar, while the second sees no reason either to honour the agreement with Gresham, or to refund him his £60,000? Instead, the new King sends Gresham a present consisting of a pair of slippers, and a dagger. Gresham responds by making light of it: he puts on the slippers, comments on what a good fit they are, "he had the just length of my foot", and then goes on to exhibit his insouciance by drinking a toast to Queen Elizabeth with a goblet of wine into which he has just had crushed a pearl, worth £1,500. He tells his guests, "A London merchant Thus treads on a kings present". To prove that his generosity is not dimmed by these losses, he goes on to mention his new "schoole of the seuen learned liberal sciences Which I have founded here near *Bishops gate*..."

Clearly the citizen hero is very admirable, and the Barbary King is very dishonourable and deplorable: but the Barbary King is still boss, and he has trodden Gresham underfoot like a pair of slippers. Perhaps we should bear in mind that it was the monarch, at least his representative, who imposed censorship of the stage in 1606, not the Corporation or citizens of London. One could say what one liked about Gresham, but one couldn't say what one liked about a king - unless it was a king of a *very* distant and heathen country, such as the Barbary Coast. Tudor and Stuart monarchs regularly exacted forced loans, and increasing rates of tax (mostly via import duties) from the merchant classes of London, and if Heywood wanted to show where his sympathies lay, he might have been using the Barbary King as a way of doing it. Why does the King send a dagger? What could Gresham do with it? Perhaps the slippers and the dagger are symbolic, representing the choice that must be made when people push one around. Either one must get very tough indeed, or otherwise choose the slippers and be, like them, downtrodden forever. Gresham says that it is *because* the Barbary King will not repay his money that he cannot afford to buy a new shipload of royal statues.



Maybe all that is too fanciful, and it would be wrong to suggest that Heywood is completely uncritical of the mercantile classes of London. The main reason he includes the figure of Hobson seems to have been as a contrast to Gresham. While Gresham is an idealised, somewhat romanticised figure of the merchant prince, Hobson is a mundane, vulgarly comical tradesman and landlord, who also practises money-lending, as did most merchants at this time. There were no banks, of course: money had to be borrowed from an individual or sometimes a syndicate. Hobson boasts that he has got rich by any means that came to hand, for instance, prayer-beads:

*Am I worse because in Edward's days,  
When Popery went downe, I did ingrosse  
Most of the beads that were within the kingdome,  
That when Queen Mary had renew'd that Church  
They that would pray on beads were forc'd to me?  
I made them stretch their purse-strings, grew rich thereby;  
Beads were to me a good commodity.*

Religious issues that were causes for martyrdom to other people are, to Hobson, just another chance for profit. If we smile indulgently at this, we can hardly smile later in the play when Hobson, inspecting his properties on the Bankside, meets an ex-tenant of his whom he has evicted, along with his wife and children, for debt. This pauper, John Rowland alias Tawney-Coat, says that his debt arose because he helped out neighbours poorer than himself. Now homeless, he is forced to labour for a very low wage, and he still owes Hobson twenty pounds:

*Though I be stirring earlier than the larke,  
And at my labour later than the lambe,  
Towards my wife and childrens maintenance,  
I scarecly earn me threepence by the day.  
...I haue this quarter by exceeding thrift,  
Bare clothing, and spare dyet, scrap'd together  
Fiue shillings in a purse, which I lay vp  
Towards your worships debt...*

Hobson cannot bear to take the money, and gives it back to him. Later, he actually gives the man forty pounds to set himself up in a new business, and this is a nice didactic touch, but the earlier scene makes a keen impression and it draws attention to a general problem. At a rate of five shillings a quarter, it would have taken him twenty years of grinding poverty to pay back twenty pounds, and Heywood is not a very good capitalist because he says nothing at all about interest. If the interest were only 5%, this debt would be mounting faster than the pauper could ever repay it. The Bankside was a very disreputable area, full of tenements and brothels, and this episode amounts to a serious charge against the class of Hobsons.

There is no mention of interest either, when Hobson lends money to Queen Elizabeth, via a messenger the first time. He meets her at Gresham's house towards the end of the play, cheekily introduces himself and assures her that she can borrow more from him whenever she wants. The historical Elizabeth in fact had to resort to such means as detaining the ships of the Merchant Adventurers in port sometimes until they would agree to give her another loan. It never occurred to the merchants of this generation to club together to place conditions on a loan or a subsidy: that still lay far in the future.

I have said that Gresham in the play is idealised. However, if we look closely enough, Heywood does raise some doubts about him too. What about the ethics of gazumping, for a start? And quite early in the play, Gresham's nephew John, who is sent to work for Hobson, accuses Gresham of having cheated him out of his patrimony. The accusation is only made behind Gresham's back, so Gresham has no chance to deny it, and from what we see in the play John is a wild and dissolute young man, quite capable of lying and cheating, while Gresham is widely respected. So the odds are on Gresham, but that cannot be taken as one hundred percent certainty and, like Simon Eyre's possible impersonation, it creates a sense of discomfort. Why doesn't the playwright put our minds at rest? Probably because a mind at rest is a bored mind, and anyway life just isn't like that.

The historical Gresham did, according to Stanley Bindoff, have a cousin called Sir John Gresham, an M.P. who got into debt and eventually forfeited his house, Mayfield in Sussex, to Sir Thomas as a result. And according to Burgon's 19th century biography of Gresham, there was an assistant by the name of John Gresham working for him in his Antwerp office in 1554. Was this the "nephew" of the play? Could he have been a son of Sir John who felt diddled out of his patrimony because of the transaction with his father? Even if he existed, this would not resolve the problem in the play because of course the characters in the play are not the historical personages themselves, but only representations of them. If we were to identify them, there would be a lot more worrying evidence: most biographers agree that Sir Thomas greatly exaggerated the amounts he was owed by the Crown for his expenses, and milked the treasury of at least £10,000, perhaps £40,000, but Queen Elizabeth turned a blind eye to it, and must have thought he was worth every penny.

One of the more surprising bequests in Gresham's Will was a sum of £50 from which annual charitable payments were to be made to the inmates of five London prisons: Newgate, Ludgate, the King's Bench, the Marshalsea and the Counter in Wood-Street. This must have brought them a little cheer, and among them was Thomas Dekker because about forty years after Gresham's death, Dekker had to interrupt his playwriting career to spend seven years in the King's Bench prison, for debt. His creditor was John Webster, senior: not the playwright, but his father, who was a coachmaker and a member of the Merchant Taylors' Company. Dekker had just written the poetry for the 1613 Lord Mayor's Pageant when he was arrested for debt. The Lord Mayor that year was a Merchant Taylor and so his Company had put on the pageant, *Troia-Nova Triumphans*. The most likely reason why Dekker was imprisoned seems to be that he somehow ran up debts in connection with the rolling-stock (carriages) needed for



putting on the pageant, or maybe he stood security for somebody, which we know he did in other cases. Even though Webster senior died in 1615, Dekker was not released from prison until very late in 1619. The unusual form of Gresham's charity reveals that he was a thinker and not just another philanthropist, and the same can be said of his foundation of Gresham College.

The Elizabethan era was a great age for the foundation of grammar-schools: dozens of them, all over the country, were established by worthy benefactors none of whom ever stopped to question their society's assumption that education meant teaching little boys to speak Latin. Higher education meant going to Oxford or Cambridge. Gresham evidently did stop to question that definition, and took a longer view altogether. It was a very radical thing to make lectures in so many subjects available in English to anybody who wanted to hear them, regardless of their sex, or whether they could afford it, or whether they conformed to the Church of England - requirements which all prevailed at Oxford and Cambridge well into the 19th century. Gresham's idea seems to have caught on, and in the 1590s several other public lectureships were, for a time, established in London: one of them, actually, in the Leaden Hall. Gresham's foundation did certainly assume that commerce would support learning, while learning - of certain approved kinds - was an end in itself. Some might call this elitist, but it was quite a widespread assumption in England until about fifteen years ago.

How did Dekker eventually get out of gaol? There is no clear evidence, but probably through the charitable intervention of one of his rich friends, perhaps Sir Thomas Smyth or Sir John Scott, or, most likely, of Edward Alleyn. Alleyn was the distinguished actor who had, through marriage, inherited the fortune of the theatre-owner Philip Henslowe, a fortune he eventually used for the foundation of Dulwich College. It originally included a row of almshouses, as well as the school, which is still flourishing today. We know that Dekker knew Alleyn because two letters from Dekker to Alleyn survive in the papers at Dulwich College. They were written from prison, and one of them congratulates Alleyn on obtaining a charter for the College, and refers to some verses which Dekker had written in praise of it: verses now lost but never mind, because Dekker went on to write a play *The Wonder of A Kingdom*, which is, among other things, a celebration of Dulwich College and of Alleyn's philanthropy. (Its sub-plot was probably written by John Day, but I'm here going to concentrate on its main plot.) Because *The Wonder of A Kingdom* disguises its contemporary matter using fictional names and a setting in Italy, it is generically different from *The Shoemakers' Holiday* and *If you Know Not Me*, but it is also generically related to them, a sort of cousin, in fact. Like the others, it is an encomium of the charitable foundation established by a rich Londoner, a foundation which both serves London and offers proof that the virtues of generosity and learning flourish there.

But, unlike the other plays, *The Wonder of A Kingdom* does not offer any golden myth of social cohesion. It was written much later, in the 1620s, and by this time Dekker had grown less tolerant and genial; his criticisms of corruption are not made in an oblique or marginal fashion, except for the change of names. The later play in fact presents a simple dichotomy, opposing the noble charity of its hero Gentili, to the selfish

extravagance of the aristocrat Signior Torrenti. They stand like emblems of true and false nobility, the true nobility being moral and the false nobility that of birth and rank. It is a black-and-white scheme, and while this rigid approach is less interesting artistically, it is very interesting historically, because it attests that England in the 1620s was an increasingly dis-integrated society. Barriers of rank, gulfs between one ethos and another, were no longer so easily transcended, nor was Dekker so keen to assert that they could be.

Kate McLuskie, writing in 1994, has said that in the earlier “prentice plays” of the Elizabethan period, we find “citizen chauvinism”. If applied to Dekker and to his play, that would be quite a serious charge, and Dekker has certainly been very selective. He never wrote a play in praise of, for instance, the charitable bequests of Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton. This learned nobleman was a Catholic, and one of James I’s privy councillors, yet he also had friends in the Mercers’ Company, which he appointed to administer his charitable trusts such as the Trinity Hospital. Some members of the Howard family did eventually become Mercers, so this is an example which could be thought to transcend simplistic divisions between courtier and citizen. But by the time Dekker wrote *Wonder of A Kingdom* he was determined to emphasise, not transcend, those divisions, and his attitude is a piece of cultural history.

Iacomo Gentili, the hero of *Wonder of A Kingdom*, invites his friends to see his “hospitall” (the term by which Dulwich was known when it was founded). They are warm in their praise, saying “*Rome* in her Auncient pride, never rais’d up A worke of greater wonder, then this building,” and Gentili says “My heires shall be poore children fed on almes, Souldiers that want limbes, schollers poore and scorned, And these will be a sure inheritance.” He is proud of the fact that he has no coat of arms: “No Herald needs to blazon Charities Armes,” and he is not pleased when his friends call the building “kingly” or compare it to a “pallace”. “Pray call it not so: The humble shrub, no Cedar here shall grow.” Gentili dresses in a “suit of gray” with a velvet gown, cap and chain: costly but sober, in contrast to the extravagant courtier Torrenti who appears “gorgeously attyred”. Torrenti has built another remarkable edifice, which he invites his friends to admire: it is a banqueting-hall, insane in its splendour, where only gallants and royalty will be his guests.

When told that the common people praise Gentili’s building more highly than his own, Torrenti snarls, “the common people are Rascalls, lying devills, Dung-hills, whose savor poisons brave mens fames.” It was in this period that the Royal Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, designed by Inigo Jones, had been built for James I, and Dekker probably intended some disparaging reflection on that building: not on its architecture, but on the ethos which he saw it as representing. It was a decadent ethos, with an extravagant absolute monarch hosting courtiers who competed in ostentation, to banquets which were indecent when contrasted with the privations of the poor. In Dekker’s play, various beggars and unfortunates, including Torrenti’s own brother, turn up at his banqueting-hall and are treated like dirt, but later received with compassion and succour at Gentili’s hospital.



Gentili is not a seditious regicide, because this play conforms to genre by having its hero meet and host the head of state, in this case the Duke of Florence, in its final scene. “I know both when to spend, and when to spare,” he says, and this gets the Duke’s approval. But Dekker casts further aspersions on the denizens of the Court by including a “foolish Gentle-man”, Asinius Buzardo. When asked by Gentili, “What Qualities are you furnished with?”, that is to say, what skills have you got? Asinius replies,

*My Education has been like a Gentle-man.*

Gen: Have you any skill in song, or Instrument?

*Asin: As a Gentleman shoo'd have, I know all, but play on none:*

*I am no Barber.*

Gen: Barber! No sir, I think it. (Asinius presumably has very long hair.) Are you a Linguist?

*Asin:* As a Gentleman ought to be, one tongue serves one head;

*I am no Pedler, to travell Countries.*

Gen: *What skill ha' you in horsemanship?*

Asin: *As other Gentlemen have, I ha' rid some beasts in my time.*

*(There's probably a bawdy innuendo there.)*

Gen: Can you write and read then?

*Asin: As most of you Gentle-men doe, my band has been taken  
with my marke at it ...*

A “band” was a bond, probably for borrowing money, in other words the only thing Asinius is good at is running up debts. In short, Asinius is the model of an upper-class twit. He has none of the know-how and sly acumen of Rowland Lacey: he would not dream of working or posing as a shoemaker, any more than as a barber or a pedlar. He is an utterly useless member of society. This play has been called a *Contention between Liberallitie and Prodigallitie*, yet it is also highly entertaining.

One other passage in this play invites, I think, an interesting comparison with the Heywood play, and brings us back to the subject of Sir Thomas Gresham. When Torrenti is showing his fantastic, gilded banqueting-hall to his guests, he imagines that he will receive, and enjoy there, all the most beautiful women in the world. It will be a banquet for all his senses; and he appreciates variety in women too, for he says:

*Tall, low, and middle size, the browne, and faire,*

*Ide give a Princes ransome now to kisse*

*Blacke Cleopatra's cheek; Onely to drinke*

*A richer perle, then that of Anthonyes.*

*That fame (where his name stands) might put downe mine.*

Now this story, which Torrenti has got a bit mixed up, was originally that Cleopatra drank a dissolved pearl in the company of Mark Antony to display the wealth of Egypt. That was surely the inspiration for the story, true or not, of Sir Thomas Gresham drinking a pearl to the health of Queen Elizabeth, which was dramatised by Heywood.

If the historical Gresham ever did perform, or even contemplate, such an act, he must surely have been reading his Plutarch.

What is worth observing is that, in the earlier play, it is Gresham the citizen hero who performs this act of conspicuous extravagance: the merchant prince out-does the courtiers in his magnificence. Yet he is also the philanthropist: magnificence does not exclude munificence, they are reconciled in a single person. But in the later play, *Wonder of A Kingdom*, they are sharply polarised. The golden myth of social cohesion has been replaced by a new consciousness of deep division and alienation. Of course, both are myths, but they are very potent myths.

Now, those who subscribe to a revisionist view of history may object to my tracing, in these plays, oppositional beliefs and feelings expressed, even in a discreet fashion, as early as the 1620s, let alone the 1600s. But the literary evidence, particularly the evidence from Dekker's own writings, does not fit in with a revisionist model of history: far from it. Dekker did not draw the line at satirising James I's banqueting-hall: he also satirised James himself in a play of 1623 entitled *Match Me In London* and in the following year he satirised the heir to the throne, the future Charles I, in a curious masque written with Ford, entitled *The Sun's Darling*. Dekker's unflattering image of Charles I has a strong resemblance to his Asinius Buzardo: the perfect gentleman, that is to say, the perfection of stupidity and uselessness. All this makes Dekker certainly one of the most daring and outspoken writers of his time.

So, to conclude, what answer do these plays provide to the questions we asked at the outset? Could great wealth be acquired completely innocently? Probably not, Dekker and Heywood are agreed. In *Wonder of A Kingdom* Gentili confesses that the uncle from whom he inherited his fortune had used base methods to amass it. Was it then better or worse than hereditary wealth? Well, that depended on what you did with it. And did the wealth of the merchants of the City pose a threat to the power of the Crown? Not an immediate threat, but in the long run, yes, without doubt. Why should a poor monarchy go on dictating to merchant princes forever? One thing that these plays do *not* provide is an uncritical panegyric of the emergent capitalist system. Far from it: we could say (to paraphrase E. M. Forster) that they give two cheers for capitalism. As for the monarchy, that gets one cheer, and there are no cheers at all for the remains of the feudal system. This is nothing like the cosy impression of a golden myth that some of the plays present on the surface: it is something much more complex, and much more significant.

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