

David Hawkes. *Idols of the Marketplace: Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in English Literature, 1580-1680*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. xii + 294 pp. \$55.00. Review by WENDY HYMAN, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

In *La Société du Spectacle*, the French theoretician Guy Debord defines the late stage of capital as one in which workers are not merely alienated from their labor, but in which representation is reified over actual life (think “reality TV”). “Spectacular” society, he argues, mystifies objects to the detriment of subjects, makes us all observers rather than participants in our very lives. Walter Benjamin, likewise, condemned bourgeois culture’s investment of certain objects (original works of art, in particular) with a quasi-religious “aura”—a propensity he associated not merely with capitalism, but with fascism. Yet one need not be a post-Marxist critic to recognize that our culture fetishizes commodities, and is dazzled by bread and circuses. Indeed, argues David Hawkes in *Idols of the Marketplace*, a heated intellectual discourse about “objectification” and commodity fetishism was already well underway by the seventeenth century, albeit conducted via somewhat different terminology. What we recognize as commodity fetishism, that is, is just idolatry by another name.

If this equivalence sounds spurious, Hawkes argues, that is only because of our historical amnesia about the true scope of the term “idolatry.” Iconoclasts were often religiously motivated, to be sure. But they shared with twentieth-century leftist theoreticians a comprehensive sense of the interrelations between market, ideology, and culture; and the conviction that economic infrastructure largely determines the shape of spiritual, social, and political life. As such, the Early Modern critique of “idolatry” comprises more diverse realms than intellectual historians have heretofore recognized: “When, in 1583, Phillip Stubbes looked at the London playhouses, he saw ‘idolatry.’ When, in 1643, John Milton considered the divorce laws, he found ‘idolatry.’ When, in 1680, John Bunyan examined the workings of retail trade, he discovered ‘idolatry’” (5). Either Early Modernists were using “idolatry” as the loosest

of metaphors, or they meant the term to point beyond the misguided veneration of images towards a more fundamental, ubiquitous problem. *Idols of the Marketplace* makes the case that Early Modern authors from Shakespeare to Bunyan thought of religious idolatry as a symptom of a culturally endemic error: the transposition of *nomos* and *phusis*, of appearance and essence, of signifier and signified. More controversially, Hawkes argues that these authors placed the blame for this reversal squarely at the feet of exchange-value economics. The transition from a bullionist to a market economy was akin to a postlapsarian falling away from Presence, as market forces began to occupy the cultural space of “pure signification” once held exclusively by God.

An argument with this range, ambition, and confessed ideological agenda might well have been fumbled in less adept hands, but Hawkes’ treatment is nuanced, apt, and almost always convincing. He ranges widely and gracefully over historical, literary, and theoretical texts; draws as fluently from Luther and Paul as from Marx; and undertook considerable primary research in economic, theological, and popular documents, making the volume well at home in Palgrave’s interdisciplinary Early Modern Cultural Series. Some of *Idols’* nine short chapters offer genuinely original readings; all are scrupulously researched and smart.

Among the volume’s real successes, fittingly, are analyses not limited by an economic take on [anti-] idolatry, but which exemplify the larger scope of that term as introduced by Hawkes early on. For example, one chapter discusses Milton’s divorce tracts, wherein he condemns as idolatrous those who permit divorce only in cases of adultery—as if carnal union were the most important element of the marital contract (177). They thereby idolatrously promote one of marriage’s pleasures and signifiers with its true purpose. A chapter on Herbert, likewise, shows the poet’s ideological opposition to Baconian empiricism as “among such archetypally carnal temptations as ambition and sensuality” (137). Empiricism is classed among idolatrous errors, that is, because its proponents take as Truth the input of their fallen senses, and argue for a division between subject and object that Herbert’s poetics try to

unify. Hawkes' treatment of Donne, meanwhile, offers a fascinating account of alchemical teleology (gold was pursued not for its monetary value, but because of its ontological supremacy) via a new reading of the Anniversary poems, among others. If at times the intellectual history crowds the literary analysis, one gets the sense that it is only because Hawkes' fascinating readings are bursting at the seams: he would have nimbly consumed a book of twice this length.

One of the most exciting and complex chapters in the volume is "Sodomy, Usury, and the Narrative of Shakespeare's Sonnets." Hawkes pleases and surprises by using the Sonnets, rather than *The Merchant of Venice*, to treat these issues. He begins by historicizing Elizabethan sexual politics and the curious (to us) equivalence that culture drew between sodomy and usury—which were seen as "mirror images": "Sodomy is sinful because it makes what is properly generative sterile," Hawkes explains, "while usury is sinful because it makes what is properly sterile generative" (99). But Shakespeare, Hawkes suggests, upends the culture's Aristotelian teleology on its own terms by emphasizing the generative and therefore (here's the twist) *usurious* nature of heterosexuality. The poet thereby vindicates homoerotic or sodomitical desire, and redefines the "natural" (106-7). Again, this material takes us some distance from traditional readings of idolatry per se, but it is very much in keeping with the more capacious aims of *Idols*. The chapters on Bunyan and Trahearne are perhaps the most successful. They work through the issues of divine versus market value, and do so through authors who self-consciously embroiled themselves in both the economic and religious vocabulary of their day, thereby allowing Hawkes an argument which hugs his primary terms more closely.

At times the argument is somewhat counterintuitive. "Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in the Antitheatrical Controversy" offers the surprising thesis that a concern over commercialism is the real cause of some Puritans' antitheatrical attacks. Theater stages "art designed with the primary end of making money. But making money is not the natural *telos* of art. Therefore, according

to Aristotelian teleology, the commercial theater is bad art. This, it seems to me, is the philosophical heritage of Renaissance antitheatricalism" (86). Hawkes' primary documents support this reading—and as historians of prostitution and petty theft know, the commercial nature of the theater contributed in more ways than one to its "immorality". But *Idols* does not explain what, in this context, is so particular about the *public* as a new source of funding for art. Why would producing art for a patron not likewise upend art's natural *telos*? Is patronage somehow less sullyng than the marketplace? It would have been an interesting question to have taken up.

Idols of the Marketplace does a fantastic job locating the Early Modern critique of capitalism within contemporary debates about "idolatry," drastically expanding our sense of the cultural work that term was brought in to do, and thereby training us to hear a conversation in places we might otherwise not have been listening. Conversely, at times Hawkes' argument verges towards a positivistic identification of idolatry and exchange-value economics, without accounting for the fact that pre-market societies were hardly free from idolatry or objectification themselves. Feudal England, after all, was a breeding-ground for just the kind of fetishistic idolatry that Protestant reformers attacked. And the alienation produced by a market economy, however real, is not likely to be ameliorated by a return to feudalism. But Hawkes' lucid, provocative account deftly locates the Early Modern critique of commodity fetishism and aptly diagnoses no small component of the economic pathology of this last half millennium. If we fail to see all its ramifications or to imagine a preferable system, that rather impugns the totality of capitalism than the ethical critique of its opponents—who cannot "be fairly asked to abide by the decision of a tribunal" (in the words of Francis Bacon) "which is itself on trial."