

Oaths and *Exuviae*: Echoes of Credit in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

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Abstract. Humans are constantly losing pieces of themselves to the world: hair, skin, teeth, breath. Social anthropologist Alfred Gell calls these lost pieces *exuviae* and contends they are evidence of humans' innately 'distributed personhood'. Although for Gell, *exuviae* are physical, I argue that certain types of language — particularly oaths and promises — are fundamentally linked to personhood and can attain exuvial status. These forms of language constitute what John Kerrigan calls 'binding language' and function as echoes of those who swear them. Such echoes were particularly important in the economy of early modern England, where exchange was conducted primarily through rhetorical cultivation of reputation and credit rather than hard coin. Oaths could be trusted precisely because of what they echoed: the honour and reputation of the individual who swears. In Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the line between physical and verbal *exuviae* is blurred in the highly rhetorical political economy of the play. The 'voices' of Rome, the plebeians, have the power to produce powerful binding language by echoing Coriolanus' actions as a soldier, putting their 'tongues into [his] wounds' to speak for them and commodify them. These echoes of the physical body conceptualize anxieties about dismemberment and dissembling generated by *exuviae*. When asked to expose his wounds to the people in exchange for their voices, Coriolanus risks allowing them to construct their own symbolic and economic understanding of his injuries and identity; in commodifying and trading in echoes of his body, he risks becoming signified and constructed by his wounds alone.

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Humans are constantly losing pieces of themselves to the world: hair, skin, teeth, breath. Some of these objects are lost or removed intentionally, others less so. Regardless of whether these objects are shed deliberately, in some sense they echo the person to whom they belong. In *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Alfred Gell calls these lost pieces *exuviae* — that which is stripped down, drawn, or taken off the body, but remain associated with the individual who lost them, an echo of that person.¹ The spread of these *exuviae* constitute

¹ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 97.

Gell's theory of 'distributed personhood': namely, that individuals are not contained exclusively within their physical form.² Gell suggests that *exuvia* are mimetic, and that having access to the image of someone is comparable to having access to a physical part of them.³ In a lecture on *exuviae* in the poetry of John Donne, Jason Scott-Warren draws on Donne's 'A Valediction of my Name, in the Window' as an example, a poem in which Donne scratches his name on the glass and imagines it to be a part of himself: '[m]y name engraved herein | Doth contribute my firmness to this glass [...] | As all-confessing, and through-shine as I'.⁴ Although for Gell, *exuviae* are physical objects, immaterial *exuviae* such as names, breath, and language can also function as a shadow of the being that created them. Language as expressed oaths and promises, which are innately tied to the person who swears them, has a particularly exuvial nature. As Caroline van Eck argues, the best forms of language manifest the physical, ultimately resulting in an illusion of life or imitation of the thing that language represents: '[i]f successful, speech appears to dissolve into what it describes'.⁵ Oaths and promises constitute what John Kerrigan calls 'binding language', language that is specifically tied to the individual and functions as echoes or remnants of those who swear them.⁶ Such echoes were particularly important in the economy of early modern England, where exchange was conducted primarily through rhetorical cultivation of reputation and credit rather than hard coin. Oaths could be trusted precisely because of what they echoed: the honour and reputation of the individual who swears.

Echoes & Economics

The economy of early modern England was built on echoes of personhood. Coins were one of the most powerful ways of distributing personhood in early modern England and embody the transactional nature of exchange both in the literal and metaphysical sense. During the first few years of the reign of Henry VIII, the King continued to mint coins with his father's image on them, trading on his father's rule and reputation to produce *exuvia* that acted as a guarantee of the value of the coins.⁷ However, as his reign continued, Henry VIII raised money by minting new coins that were made of base metals mixed with a little silver or gold, circulating them at the same face value as solid silver and gold coins.⁸ This debasing of England's coinage raised an enormous amount of

² Ibid., p. 104.

³ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴ Jason Scott-Warren, 'Exuviae: Distributing the Self in Images and Objects', at 'The Exuvial Renaissance' seminar, University of Cambridge, 12 April 2018; John Donne, *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, ed. by Theodore Redpath (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 185.

⁵ Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015), p. 19.

⁶ John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6.

⁷ Kenneth Pickthorn, *Early Tudor Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 389.

⁸ Kevin Butcher, *Debasement: Manipulation of Coin Standards in Pre-Modern Monetary Systems*

money for Henry VIII's military ventures, but had adverse long-term effects. Individuals began to hoard older coins with a higher content of precious metal, leaving only the debased currency in circulation.⁹ Abroad, foreign bankers and vendors refused to accept English coinage and insisted on payment in gold.¹⁰ Both practices created a gold shortage at home, making it harder to source gold for minting new coins and for making foreign transactions. This debasement of coinage continued under Edward VI and Elizabeth I. Despite the eventual reintroduction of trustworthy coin, as Craig Muldrew has argued, credit remained 'the central mediating factor [of the economy]'.¹¹

As such, many households and merchants began to conduct business primarily through elaborate networks of credit which were established through mutual trust and agreement.¹² "Credit", from the Latin *creditus*, was used colloquially to mean honesty, trust, and reliability, but by the end of the sixteenth century this term increasingly used synonymously with 'reputation' and 'borrowing power'.¹³ In business transactions as well as general exchange, credit was established through trust in the individual; a Sussex shopkeeper recorded in his diary in 1573, 'the greatest part of trade is trust'.¹⁴ Such trust was frequently established through verbal exchange, wherein credit was cultivated by the community's interactions with an individual and witnessing one's behaviour. This view of social interaction as part of the economy itself is intensified on stage, which is itself a series of exchanges between characters, actors, and the audience. Lars Engle has argued that Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote 'social interaction as [...] a diffuse network of discursive transactions which hang together according to humanly established (and thus mutable) patterns of exchange'.¹⁵

Just as the exchange of coins reflected trust in a monarch and a nation, the exchange of language in the credit economy was inextricably linked to the individual swearing of oaths and promises of trustworthiness. The physical body itself is echoed in the language of credit, especially as viewed through Karl Marx's economic ideologies:

In the credit system, man replaces metal or paper as the mediator of exchange. However, he does this not as a man but as the incarnation of capital and interest [...] Money has not been transcended in man within

(Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020), p. 44.

⁹ Christopher Edgar Challis, *The Tudor Coinage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 176.

¹⁰ Pickthorn, *Early Tudor Government*, p. 387.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹² Brian Sheerin, *Desires of Credit in Early Modern Theory and Drama* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

¹³ Sandra K. Fisher, *Econolingua: A Glossary of Coins and Economic Language in Renaissance Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), p. 62.

¹⁴ Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 129.

¹⁵ Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.

the credit system, but man is himself transformed into money, or, in other words, money is incarnate in him.¹⁶

There had to be some kind of guarantee of the credit of the borrower. The most obvious example of this is in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Antonio's bond with Shylock is based on the merchant's 'credit' but guaranteed by Antonio's physical body, with a pound of his flesh acting as the forfeit on the loan.¹⁷ Recent criticism of the play often reads Shylock's money-lending tactics as barbaric for its guarantee; Brian Sheerin notes the difference between 'good' and 'bad' moneylending: that bent on constructive interdependence and that bent on dismemberment.¹⁸ Shylock's usury is outdated and medievalist, Sheerin argues, because it shamelessly conflates the worth of metal with the worth of human bodies.¹⁹ However, it seems Shylock's moneylending might be more inappropriate for his usury rather than his misunderstanding of values. Marc Shell suggests that unlike Jewish jurisprudence, which specifically prohibits the sale of individuals for money, it is 'Christian jurisprudence' that makes 'life and money commensurable'.²⁰ Usury was seen to be an 'anti-social activity', one violating what was seen as a necessary and humanizing 'Christian charity and neighbourliness' required in a credit-based economy.²¹

Yet, if Shylock is barbaric for his dismembering of others, he is not alone. The fear of defaulting on one's debts at the turn of the seventeenth century was great; legal recourse could be taken against those who were unable or refused to repay their debts. Though the threat of being sued often frightened the debtor into timely repayment or the renegotiation of terms, those who were unable to repay their debts were often punished. The punishment was inflicted on the body of the debtor, as indicated by the pamphlet '[t]he imprisonment of mens bodys [sic] for debt'.²² Breaking trust was socially harmful, but if one was indebted beyond his means, that debt could result in physical harm as well.

In the credit economy, contracts and exchanges were sealed through the language of oaths and promises. A seventeenth-century treatise on oaths considers both the religious and legal connotations of swearing, claiming that one who swears 'an Oath of Conscience [...] binds before God vpon paine of periurie [sic]'.²³ The language of swearing invokes both the soul, which answers to God, and the physical body, which answers to human laws. As humans we are present 'not just in our singular bodies'; we are echoed in 'everything in

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, trans. by David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 1038.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Drakakis (London: Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, 2011), I. 1. 180.

¹⁸ Sheerin, *Desires of Credit*, p. 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Marc Shell, 'The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in "The Merchant of Venice"', *The Kenyon Review*, 1.4 (1979), 65–92 (p. 70).

²¹ Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, p. 113.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

²³ Christopher White, *Of Oathes: Their Obiect, Forme, and Bond* (London: By George Purslowe for Ralph Mab, 1627), p. 23.

our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes, and our agency'.²⁴ Of course, not all speech is necessarily exuvial. But swearing is speech that is specifically marked by agency, a promise to do something, whether it take the form of 'oaths, vows, promises, asseverations, legal bonds, gauges, [or] contracts'.²⁵ Though these terms have various legal and religious connotations, they are all bound by commitment to truth. As John Kerrigan summarily puts it, '[a]ll utterances sworn to or vowed involve a binding of the agent to the truth of what is said'.²⁶ These promises were meant to generate faith in the speaker; the implied result of a broken oath is that the man who swore it cannot be trusted. Muldrew argues that as Christians, the English saw themselves as the heirs of God's promise to Abraham.²⁷ Thus, promises sworn — especially those sworn 'by God' — were seen to echo this early covenant and foster 'interpersonal trust' that was critical to both morality and the functioning economy.²⁸ In swearing or promising something to another, one's honour is at stake — and in early modern England, that honour was bound to one's credit. That binding is as real as a physical bond, as in Bassanio's letter to Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*: '[h]ere is a letter, lady, | The paper as the body of my friend, | And every word in it a gaping wound, | Issuing life blood'.²⁹ The power and danger of binding language was undeniably clear; in 1606, an Act of Parliament was issued which made it a fineable offence 'in any Stage-play, Interlude, Shew, Maygame, or Pageant, iestingly, and prophanely [to] speake, or vse the holy Name of God' as an oath.³⁰

Coriolanus: The Body in Language

In Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1608), the primary conflict of the play is borne of the exuvial power of language. Although *Coriolanus* is set in Rome and often considered a political play rather than an economic one, the political system in the play is coded in economic terms, operating with a system of credit that reflects similar concerns of credit and value that developed in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In *Coriolanus*, the line between physical and verbal *exuviae* is blurred in the highly rhetorical political economy of the play where the physical body is represented verbally. Language in *Coriolanus* functions in a politically useful and economically utilitarian way, in which credit may be created and destroyed purely through binding language.

In Shakespeare's Rome, the plebeians of the city are defined by their ability

²⁴ Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 97.

²⁵ John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷ Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, p. 141.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *The Merchant of Venice*, III. 2. 272–74.

³⁰ Hugh Gazzard, 'An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606)', *Review of English Studies*, 61 (2010), 495–528 (p. 495).

to speak and thus exercise their political power. In *Coriolanus*, language plays a critical role in the political and economic landscape, as the power of the plebeians is ‘dependent on their ability to make themselves heard and understood’.³¹ The people’s physical bodies are echoed in this power, as they are referred to almost exclusively by their ‘voices’ which they use to demand ‘corn at their own rates’, and as a result are given five tribunes to represent their political and economic interests.³² These ‘tongues’ of Rome have the power to produce powerful binding language as their voices are required to elect Coriolanus to the position of consul.³³ In order to earn the people’s votes, Coriolanus is required to cultivate his credit and prove his worth, and like the people, echo his physical body in his speech; in this instance, by wearing a ‘gown of humility’ and earning the citizens ‘voices’ by showing his wounds and recounting his deeds in war.³⁴ His heroic actions are not sufficient on their own, however; the people must then echo Coriolanus’ actions as a soldier, putting their ‘tongues into [his] wounds’ to speak for them and commodify them:

[...] For if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them. So, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ungrateful were to make a monster of the multitude.³⁵

Even if soliciting the people’s voices is a matter of tradition, in which their rejection would be ‘ingrateful’ and all but impossible, the political economy of *Coriolanus* requires verbal exchange to establish credit and worth. Coriolanus’ wounds cannot speak for themselves, nor he for them entirely; the Roman citizens must interpret them and assign them an agreed value. The cultivation of credit is necessary for political power in Rome, where the meagre ‘price’ of the consulship is for Coriolanus to ‘ask it kindly’, offering the people his wounds and words as *exuvia*; in doing so, shall his ‘lungs | Coin words’.³⁶ He must request his power from the Roman people and confirm his credit in an economic exchange, but one that is explicitly verbal.

Coriolanus’ problem with the plebeians is that ‘their binding words do not bind’ — that is, the people change their minds and repeal the consulship they vigorously supported in the previous scene.³⁷ However, for the people, Coriolanus’ violation of trust means that the contract was built on a false understanding of credit. If language can be falsified, so can trust and credit, and Coriolanus acknowledges this counterfeit in his temporary acquiescence

³¹ Cathy Shrank, ‘Civility and the City in *Coriolanus*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54.4 (2003), 406–23 (p. 416).

³² *Coriolanus*, I. 1. 184.

³³ *Coriolanus*, II. 2. 29.

³⁴ *Coriolanus*, II. 3. 39.

³⁵ *Coriolanus*, II. 3. 6–13.

³⁶ *Coriolanus*, III. 1. 79–80.

³⁷ Kerrigan, *Shakespeare’s Binding Language*, p. 425.

to appeal to the people's voices: 'since the wisdom of their choice is | Rather to have my hat than my heart, I will practice | the insinuating nod and be off to them most | counterfeitly'.³⁸ Coriolanus is unable to proffer his heart in his language, as he does not believe such a thing can be done. For him, binding language is about promise and devotion to truth. In this sense he is an ideal candidate to trust, and theoretically a resource for a copious credit. But he is unwilling to make his words *exuviae* of himself; he cannot engage in exchange because he 'cannot imagine, or cannot accept, that there is a way to partake of one another, incorporate one another, that is necessary to the formation rather than extinction of a community'.³⁹ Words are something shared, given, traded in communication with others, but he fears the possibility of falsehood, the ease of which he demonstrates when asking the people's votes in the marketplace: Coriolanus adopts the voice of a 'harlot' or 'eunuch'; he can abandon himself and his natural disposition in favour of a 'beggar's tongue'.⁴⁰ In this sense, what he offers the people is not truly binding language, nor an *exuviae* of himself. The economy of credit is, in a sense, performative, as language established the sociability and negotiation required for credit and commerce. Even in being himself, Coriolanus can merely 'play | The man I am'.⁴¹ However, performing a role of dishonesty and impurity offers a false construction of untrustworthy credit.

The alternative to cultivating credit and productive *exuviae* is dismemberment. In the very opening lines of the play, Menenius' fable of the belly justifies the feeding of the body politic and the subordination of the citizens to the senators, but marks the city of Rome as a dismembered body. In this analogy, the senators are the belly and the citizens are the mutinous extremities — notably the toe. As Zvi Jagendorf remarks, everywhere within the play we encounter deeply physical language, 'legs, arms, tongues, scabs, scratches, wounds, mouths, teeth, voices, bellies, and toes together with such actions as eating, vomiting, starving, beating, scratching, wrestling, piercing, and undressing'.⁴² In fact, in the many echoes of the physical body in the play, it is usually in a state of dismemberment. Coriolanus threatens to 'pluck out | the multitudinous tongue' and 'shake [...] bones' from garments.⁴³ The body of the city of Rome is rebelling against itself; where it should be feeding and sustaining, it is divided, sick, and starving. The citizens are characterized obsessively by their 'voices' and 'tongues', which both elect Coriolanus consul and demand his banishment.⁴⁴ Even the people's elected tribunes are physically divided from the people they

³⁸ *Coriolanus*, II. 3. 101–04.

³⁹ Stanley Cavell, "Who Does the Wolf love?" Reading *Coriolanus*, *Representations*, 3.3 (1983), 1–20 (p. 19).

⁴⁰ *Coriolanus*, III. 3. 72.

⁴¹ *Coriolanus*, III. 2. 16–17.

⁴² Zvi Jagendorf, 'Body Politic and Private Parts', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41.4 (1990), 455–69 (p. 458).

⁴³ *Coriolanus*, III. 1. 158–59; 181–82.

⁴⁴ *Coriolanus*, II. 2. 138.

represent, as Coriolanus notes: ‘Must these have voices, that can yield them now | And straight disclaim their tongues? What are | Your offices? | You being their mouths, why rule you not their teeth?’⁴⁵ The city is divided into ‘tongues’, ‘toe’, and ‘belly’, and the rebellion of these parts against each other leads to a state of war when Coriolanus defects to the Volscis.⁴⁶ The body of Rome is dismembered and divided, and the political offices — the ‘mouth’ — cannot adequately control or represent the entire city. Without mutual feeding and nourishment, the body politic will starve.

This possibility of dissembling through language is echoed by the rhetorical dismembering of the protagonist as well as the city of Rome itself. For Coriolanus, credit culture introduces a sense of fragmentation; to him, *exuviae* are disconnected and incomplete. Coriolanus is discussed by others in terms of his individual physical features rather than a cohesive self. The protagonist’s value to others comes largely from his power and reputation as Rome’s greatest warrior, and his wounds are tallied and counted like trophies, echoes of the credit he earned fighting for Rome. Every character in the play is obsessed with Coriolanus’ body, particularly his wounds, and constantly attempts to lay claim to his physical form in some way. The metaphorical division of the body in *Coriolanus* is an example of Gell’s ‘doctrine of emanations’, in which the access to an image is comparable to access to the physical body of a person.⁴⁷ Coriolanus’ wounds, to him, denote his prowess and value as a soldier; his body is a practical thing, and his injuries are simply representative of the blows he received, demonstrative of his value as a weapon and his prowess as a soldier. When asked to expose his wounds to the people in exchange for their voices, Coriolanus risks allowing them to construct their own symbolic and economic understanding of his injuries and, he believes, his very identity. Such an exchange is intended only to create the appearance of honesty and trustworthiness. Yet, appearances cannot always be trusted; verbal exchange does not eliminate the possibility of deceit, but neither does it presuppose it. If the best speech dissolves into the thing it describes, Coriolanus’ fear is that others’ speech is not good enough. When Menenius says “the wounds become him”, ‘he refers to their enhancing value, but in the Roman symbolic economy, Coriolanus indeed seems on the verge of “becoming” his wounds’.⁴⁸ His value and marketability in the city has become enhanced as a result of his injuries, but: ‘[t]he wounds code the impossibility, and the destructiveness, of philosophy’s appeal to the body as an echo of truth: the symbolic truth of the wounds is their sliding signification, for they serve contradictorily as symbols of valour

⁴⁵ *Coriolanus*, III. 1. 43–46.

⁴⁶ *Coriolanus*, II. 2. 138; I. 1. 150; I. 1. 143.

⁴⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 105.

⁴⁸ Cynthia Marshall, ‘Wound-Man: Coriolanus, Gender, and the Theatrical Construction of Interiority’, in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Dympna Callaghan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 93–118 (p. 103).

and of vulnerability, and their meaning can be all too readily manipulated'.⁴⁹ Although his wounds provide him social currency and credit, in offering and bartering them for social currency, Coriolanus becomes both dismembered and constructed by his wounds alone.

Conclusion

Coriolanus finds himself in a double bind, where his effort to retain control over his *exuvaie* results in dismemberment. He might offer the people his hat but not his heart, but in doing so becomes constructed by his wounds alone. For Coriolanus, cohesion seems impossible. Engagement in society requires constant renegotiation and revaluing, a practice which Coriolanus resists. Being bound in a society is being bound in a 'circle of mutual partaking, of incorporating each other'.⁵⁰ This mutual incorporation, through verbal and economic transaction, is what allows for the feeding and sustaining of the body politic, but this means one is constantly losing parts of oneself in the world.⁵¹ This uncertainty of possession is reflective of the early modern economy, where the value of currency was not always consistent. In the seventeenth century, 'to coin' meant to produce or mint money, but alternatively, the same term could mean, 'to counterfeit, to plot, to invent'.⁵² The increasing reliance on credit as a form of currency meant that *exuvaie* could serve as valuable evidence to establish the truth of an individual's character. However, the early modern theatre routinely demonstrates the way in which these echoes can be distorted to ruin another's reputation, rather than construct it: Iago uses Desdemona's handkerchief and his own insidious narrative to falsely accuse her of infidelity in Shakespeare's *Othello*; the Duchess' brothers use waxworks and stage props to lead her to believe her husband has been murdered in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*; Beatrice manipulates the results of a virginity test by studying Alsemero's private journals in Middleton's *The Changeling*.⁵³ The shift towards credit meant that *exuvaie* became economic tools as well as echoes of an individual. In a way, they became less trustworthy, too; credit, as established and cultivated by interactions with others, is sensitive to manipulation and distortion. Although during the seventeenth century, ecclesiastical courts often assessed guilt and made their rulings based on 'public fame', credit could also be 'dangerously detachable from fact', and value 'might be conjured by nothing

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 110.

⁵⁰ Cavell, "Who Does the Wolf love?", p. 16.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Fisher, *Econolingua*, p. 57.

⁵³ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E.A.J. Honigmann (London: Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, 2004), III. 3; John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by Brian Gibbons (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), V. 1; Thomas Middleton, *The Changeling*, ed. by Michael Neill (London: A&C Black, 2006), IV. 1.

more than the collective belief in such value'.⁵⁴ Rather than improving upon a devalued coin economy, reliance on *exuviae* to cultivate credit seems to create a similar environment of mistrust and confusion of value.

⁵⁴ Katherine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 139; Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, p. 1.