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Transnational Theatergrams of Poverty in Early Modern English, Spanish, and Italian Theaters

This paper analyzes transnationally circulating theatergrams of poverty, hunger, and degradation in early modern English, Spanish, and Italian theaters as functions of the contradictions of early modern capitalism. The new institutional theaters of England, Spain, and Italy, whether centered on national capitals and fixed stages (England, Spain) or based on a system of diffused patronage and itinerancy (Italy) were largely made possible by new capitalist forms of accumulation, entrepreneurship, and marketing. Two kinds of contradictions may be identified in each of these theaters: those resulting from the incomplete and partial assimilation of capitalist structures (i.e., the lingering notion of the professional actor as a liveried servant to an aristocrat), and the contradictions of capitalism itself, beginning with the structural relationship between the creation of new wealth and the generation of a new class of the dispossessed. Structured by transnational economic homologues characteristic of early capitalism, these three theaters exhibit striking similarities in their representations of poverty, which generally tend to be *de-centered* in relationship to the rest of the scripted or performance text. The de-centering of poverty, however, whether by repression, marginalization, distortion, or exaggeration, does not make it any less important or powerful in these theaters, whether primarily viewed as drama (the scripted text) or in theatrical performance.