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Review of Theodore B. Leinwand, 'Theatre, finance and society in early modern England' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

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Theodore B. Leinwand
Theatre, Finance and Society in Early Modern England
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 199p.
£35.00 (Hardback)
ISBN 0-521-64031-8

In early modern drama and history debtors display little guilt, remorse, envy, disgust, fear, or grief, but other affects recur: embarrassment, bravado, humility, ease, tenacity, and outrage. These can have bodily correlates and it is disarming to learn that in Middleton's Michaelmas Term Richard Easy's name signifies that he is rich and doing his 'ease', or shitting away his inheritance. Leinwand starts with his least interesting material, the late sixteenth century credit crunch when everyone from monarch to labourer was borrowing, and anyone might seek to exploit another's credit rating, as Bassanio does in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. Leinwand's second chapter is about city debtors and how they got themselves into, and hopefully out of, debtors' prison. Surveying Chapman, Marston, and Jonson's Eastward Ho!, Middleton's Michaelmas Term and Cooke's Greene's Tu Quoque, Leinwand details the complex manoeuvring by which debtors evaded creditors and he also gives fascinating historical material on the prisons. The best comes last with Leinwand's final chapter readings of Jonson's The Alchemist and Shakespeare The Merchant of Venice. In Jonson's 'venture tripartite' and in the East India Company the strain of exertion lends moral weight to what would otherwise be mere extortion, and similarly the sadness of Shakespeare's Antonio is not mysterious: it "does the work of much-needed ballast, given the Venetian gallants' effervescence" (p. 115). In lesser books, New Historicism's paralleling of unlikely co-texts is beginning to hit the law of diminishing returns--the claimed homologies can be excessively tenuous--but Leinwand's book will persuade and excite all serious students of the period's drama.

Gabriel Egan