Rethinking the Discourse of Colonialism in Economic Terms: Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Captain John Smith’s Virginia Narratives, and the English Response to Vagrancy

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The strategy of transition forms the essence of Shakespeare’s work.

—Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*

Recent criticism of *The Tempest* and early modern travel narratives has discussed the various ways in which these texts are implicated in a larger discourse of colonialism. Anticolonialist critics have sought to “demystify the national myths” of empire and to write an alternative history of the colonial encounter. Typically, in their desire to delegitimate colonalist self-representation and restore agency to a native countervoice, critics have drawn out moments of textual rupture and contradiction in early modern texts such as *The Tempest* and John Smith’s Virginia narratives. Undoubtedly, recent ideology critiques of early modern texts have done much to unmask Western incorporation of new world, peripheral cultures; however, while anticolonialist critics have paid much attention to the politics of the early modern English–Native American encounter, they have generally overlooked the extent to which some central early modern “colonialist” texts, including Smith’s writings and *The Tempest*, are primarily concerned with describing or allegorizing embattled economic relationships among the European colonists themselves. Much of Smith’s concerns in the Virginia narratives, for example, center on issues of English idleness, unproductive labor, and exploitation of the early Virginia
labor force by merchant capitalists, economic topics that have been largely passed over in the more sociopolitical, colonialist readings of early modern travel writing.4

Because so much effort has been devoted to exposing Western oppression of New World cultures, critics have also neglected to consider the forms of class division prevalent among the early Virginia settlers, particularly the ways in which the English response to vagrancy and “masterlessness” shaped the New World labor force in the short term and inadvertently halted the transition to distinctly capitalist forms of wage-labor in the long term. This neglect is itself the product of the mythologization of the figure of the masterless man by literary critics, who have connected masterlessness with misrule, “topsy-turveydom,” and any number of cultural anxieties, often abstracting masterlessness from its socioeconomic origins and connections with the dissolution of feudalism and the long and uninevitable path toward the proletarianization of labor.5

In the following pages, taking into account revisionist positions on early modern employment and the so-called doom-and-gloom school of British history, I raise a question that has been often asked, but not sufficiently answered: Why were masterless men subject to such widespread demonization in early modern England? What motivated the Tudor and Stuart regimes to pass the Statute of Artificers (1563) and the Act of Settlement (1662), paternalistic statutes that, in a later age, classical economists were to denounced as neofeudal, “parish serfdom”? The answer that I offer is that Tudor and Stuart orthodoxy reveal a horror of movement, broadly construed, that is projected onto the vagrant underclass: this in turn has a profound but unanticipated effect on the development of capitalism, to the extent that the free circulation of labor is immobilized until the Elizabethan poor laws are repealed on the eve of the industrial revolution.6

In the second section of my argument, I show how the English anxieties over unauthorized movement and vagabondage are reproduced in the New World, specifically how the Virginia Company attempts (but fails) to set England’s landless poor to productive labor in the Chesapeake. Not simply representations of the manner in which the European “metropole” encounters the native “periphery,” the Virginia texts show the extent to which England exports its own, domestic periphery to the colonies, superimposing a drawn-out confrontation between official power and vagabondage onto the European-Native encounter.7 We see in these texts principally three interacting cultures, an official metropolitan culture, a
culture of European vagabondage and poverty, and the native culture, all part of an historical conjuncture or "contact zone," in which the fears of unauthorized movement that halt colonial economic advancement are counterposed to the native culture's self-confident appropriation of the power of movement.

If English culture attempts to solve its masterless problem by exporting the poor to the New World, and the Virginia texts record the failure of that effort, *The Tempest*, I argue, reveals the consequences of a repression of masterlessness. *The Tempest* intervenes in the unproductive historical contradiction stemming from the confinement of vagabondage and consequential arresting of capitalist development; it offers an alternative or ideal history, one that obsessively denies the emergence and protraction of masterlessness and imagines a chronologically overlapping succession of precapitalist master-servant relations to the commercialization of labor. Rather than reveal its own textual ruptures that agitate historical and ideological illusions of continuity, *The Tempest* offers a continuous narrative to resolve historical contradictions. The play's utopianism lies in its idealization of diachronic process, not in its Gonzalo-like imaginings of a timeless, synchronic land of Cockaigne.

The larger aim of the paper is to suggest that typical "transitional" arguments of early modern texts have been under thrall to a too linear and symptomatic conception of the decline of feudalism and rise in capitalism. As I describe below, economic historians have recently argued that the historical passage from feudalism to capitalism is shaped more by historical accidents than purposive-rational choices of entrepreneurial forces during the early modern period. The tortuous and near-accidental transition to capitalism can be ascribed to a series of unintended effects operating at multiple levels of the early modern social formation. Recent scholarship has abandoned the use of organic metaphors that describe capitalism as embryonic in the womb of the feudal mode of production, and it has discredited not only Althusserian structuralism, but also the assumptions that either bourgeois revolutions or historical materialism act as natural, unilinear forces of social change.

Thus after suggesting that the complex interaction of the poor law regime and English response to masterlessness (in England and in the colonies) helps us understand why capitalist wage-labor did not advance in a unilinear way following the decline of medieval serfdom, I argue finally that *The Tempest*, in its reconstruction of
unilinear transformation—from feudal relations of coercion to early capitalist forms of labor (which historically precede so-called bourgeois individualism)—looks retrospectively at history and attempts to rejoin history at pregnant moments prior to systematic encroachments by social actors (the encroachments in this case being the ill-fated implementation of the Elizabethan poor-law regime and the confinement of a segment of England’s labor force). To the extent that *The Tempest* telescopes and rewrites history, representing unobstructed and productive change, recrafting a sense of history *foregone* or as it *might have happened*, it in many ways offers a philosophy of history. The pre-Enlightenment period did indeed have an evolved sense of progress in spite of its preoccupation with decay and cyclical change, but one finds it in the narratives of process unfolding in dramatic texts like *The Tempest* more so than in historical writing proper, for instance in Raleigh’s *History of the World*.

### English Paternalism and the Threat of Masterless Migration

Throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, contemporaries offered principally two arguments to explain the rise of unprecedented vagabondage. The argument of the Puritan divines (and of the poor laws for the most part) employ what Richard Halpern has called a “discourse of capacities”: vagabondage is often equated with the neglect of a productive calling and a predisposition among the poor toward idleness and sloth.¹⁶ In *A Description of England*, William Harrison offers the usual charge against vagrants: “[vagrants] are thieves, robbers, despisers of all laws, and enemies to the commonwealth and welfare of the land. What notable robberies, pilferies, murders, rapes, and stealings of young children . . . I need not to rehearse; but for their idle roguing about the country the law ordaineth this manner of correction.”¹¹ The alternative argument, not voiced until the mid-seventeenth century in any sustained way (with the exception of Thomas More’s *Utopia*), was a humanitarian one, which attributed rising vagrancy to enclosures, unemployment, inflation, and a population explosion.¹² During the Commonwealth years, for instance, Samuel Hartlib and Peter Chamberlen went so far as to blame poverty and vagabondage on inefficient bureaucratic planning, envisaging labor exchanges similar to modern unemployment offices where “employers, la-
bourers, servants, and apprentices might converge to supply each other's needs."

The argument for unemployment rather than idleness to explain the rise of vagabondage makes more sense to modern ears, and until recently, historians have linked the rise of masterlessness to economic upheaval and unemployment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By most traditional accounts, dispossessed peasants, casualties of the disintegration of feudalism and the dissolution of the charitable monasteries, were forced into vagabondage because unemployment prevented their reabsorption into the economy as wage laborers or petty producers. One study claims that "chronic unemployment obliged many urban poor to roam from place to place in search of subsistence." Beier, discussing the state of vagrancy during the civil war period, writes, "This period was the grand finale of a disastrous century marked by rising population, rents and food prices, and declining real wages. . . . The result for the poor was a deepening crisis; it is no coincidence that parish poor relief was first widely enforced, and that large-scale emigration overseas began then."

Recently, revisionist history has provided new arguments that question the extent of unemployment and economic recession in early modern England. Historians have forced us to rethink the so-called doom-and-gloom tradition of early modern economic history—a tradition headed by R. H. Tawney and W. G. Hoskins—according to which England suffered a century-long economic retrogression attributed to, among other things, a "little ice age," continental religious wars, and civil wars appearing on the eve of absolutism. Steve Rappaport writes, "That the Elizabethan decades were to some degree years of economic hardship in London seems undeniable, but the case for economic decline should not be overstated. . . . It is likely . . . that during the reign of Elizabeth employment expanded considerably." Ian Archer writes of the late sixteenth century, "We have no way of telling, for example, whether the number of productive niches expanded at the same rate as the city's population, and therefore we have no measure of the extent of unemployment or underemployment." With respect to the oft-noted sloth and criminality of the vagrant underclass, Archer has also shown that vagrant delinquency and subversion has been inflated by historians, who have often collapsed stylized literary representations of a criminal fraternity with historical reality: "there was a criminal underworld in the sense of people for whom criminal activity was regular, but it is arguable that its rapidly shift-
ing allegiances made it somewhat easier for the authorities to penetrate it.” And against Beier’s claim that London faced “large scale juvenile delinquency,” Rappaport tells us that even five hundred vagrants appearing in Bridewell in 1600 represented a tiny portion of the population and should not have been as threatening as contemporaries had supposed.

In the same vein, although less concerned with vagrancy specifically, D. M. Pallister has argued that early modern England was not overpopulated, nor subject to Malthusian positive checks, falling wages, and harvest failures, as has been traditionally assumed. Robert Brenner has claimed that England managed to escape the economic hardship of the general crisis of the seventeenth century: “agricultural demand made possible the emergence of a growing home market, not only for industrial goods and products for general consumption, but also for agricultural means for production . . . which provided the indispensable basis for the development of the English economy through the period of the general crisis of the seventeenth century, when elsewhere industry was contracting.”

Undoubtedly many vagrants were a wayward, threatening presence during the period, some of whom were delinquent, nonproductive, and “congenitally” idle (rogues by birth, Timon suggests in Timon of Athens), but when we no longer make the too easy assumptions that unemployment created vagrancy, that vagrants were part of an insidious criminal underworld, or that masses of landless peasants took to vagabondage because of refractory delinquency, we can no longer easily explain the establishment of the Elizabethan poor laws, or at least the many persecutory vagrancy acts that were an integral part of poor law legislation. We should be wary, I think, of accepting Marx’s famous analyses of vagrancy in Capital and elsewhere, where he suggests that the newly free labor force was forced into vagabondage and crime because it could not be reabsorbed into the economy as fast as it had been created. Nor should we uncritically accept (at least as it relates to England), Foucault’s assertion in Madness and Civilization that the repressive confinement of vagrants and the impotent poor followed from an “economic crisis that affected the entire Western world: reduction of wages, unemployment, scarcity of coin.” If revisionist history suggests that the fugitive poor were not necessarily criminal, and if it were possible that a good number, given freedom to migrate, could have found employment, we should perhaps reconsider why the Elizabethans were preoccupied with restricting their poor from freedom to move outside parish boundaries, and what consequences these measures had in the long term.
Drawing on official documentation, humanist polemic, and Protestant theology, historians have traditionally argued that vagrancy threatened to subvert the entire fabric of society. A. L. Beier writes, “Vagrants were not ordinary criminals; they were actually menaces to society. They posed this threat because they were corrupt and social outcasts.” Derek Hirst writes, “The ‘masterless man’... threatened society’s image of itself as an organic whole, an interdependent family, and was denounced as the source of all disorder, whether criminal or political.”

David Underdown notes, “The vagrant was the extreme case of that much-feared menace, the ‘masterless’ man or woman. Poverty, vagrancy, masterlessness, landlessness: all seemed to strike at the very foundations of order.” And C. B. Macpherson remarks, “The sturdy vagrant beggars were commonly thought to have put themselves outside society by their refusal to labour usefully... they were masterless men, and Puritan society had no place for them.”

What remains unstated, but what can supplement and unite all of the above accounts of masterless demonization, is the pervasive fear of unauthorized travel and movement that English culture expresses when it describes the problem of masterlessness. Masterless men not only show up in Puritan sermons or the Elizabethan poor laws, but also in some unexpected places, in Hobbes’s Leviathan, for example, where Hobbes, after outlining his Democritean-atomistic theory of self-moving objects and bodies, determines that “corporations of beggars, Theeves and Gipsies,” constitute “Private Bodies, Regular, but Unlawful, who unite themselves into one Representative without any publique authority at all.” A few pages earlier Hobbes describes the masterless man as the embodiment of the state of war within civil society: “amongst masterlesse men, there is perpetual war, of every man against his neighbor... no propriety of goods, or Lands, no security; but a full absolute Libertie in every particular man.” According to Hobbesian materialism, a “private body” enjoying absolute liberty is like an unconstrained, wayward atom, which wanders uncontrollably toward its own self-preservation.

The related concepts of “absolute liberty” and masterlessness also dovetail nicely, if implicitly, in Thomas Carew’s well-received mask, Coelum Britannicum. After Mercury purges the heavens of the vices, which have been exiled there as a result of Jove’s penance for adultery, Momus worries, “in my judgement it is not safe that these infectious persons should wander here to the hazard of this island, they threatened less danger when they were nay’ld to the...
Firmament: I should . . . send them to New England, which hath purg’d more virulent humors from the politique body.” Carew expresses the familiar fear of wandering from a fixed point of origin, connecting the loosening of cosmological fixity with a subsequent pernicious aimlessness on Earth. While he does not attach the term masterless or vagrant to these unfixed spirits, he does suggest that they should be sent to the new world. And we know of course (and will have occasion to discuss later) that the most common remedy for masterlessness throughout the seventeenth century and beyond was exile or voluntary emigration to the colonies.

A brief look at the Elizabethan poor laws shows that the statutes themselves repeatedly express a fear of unauthorized movement. The most comprehensive vagrancy acts and proclamations, the 1598 and 1601 Poor Laws, the 1607 Stuart Proclamation, and the Act of Settlement (1660), comprise what Karl Polanyi called a fate­ful “code of labor,” one that controlled economic expansion for more than two centuries. The hallmark of these acts was not their specificity of crimes or punishment thereof, nor their establishment of charitable doles and work-projects, although these features were integral. While placing the burden of relief squarely on decentralized parish authorities, these acts were above all concerned to restrict any unlicensed movement and migration outside parish boundaries or the individual’s birthplace. The Statute of Artificers (1563), not concerned with vagrants specifically, set the tone for the restrictive hysteria against unauthorized mobility that became the centerpiece of most of the later acts and proclamations. The statute stipulated forced labor, seven-year apprenticeships, and wage assessments by public overseers, and it placed burdens on masters and overseers to monitor any travel of their apprentices or laborers.

In 1598 an Elizabethan statute declared that “any rogue, vagabond or sturdy beggar who shall be taken begging, wandering or misordering themselves . . . should be openly whipped and sent from parish to parish . . . the next straight way to the parish where he was born . . . and if the same not be known, then to the parish where he or she had last dwelt by the space of a whole year . . . or if it be not known where he or she was born or last dwelt, then to the parish through which he or she last passed without punishment.” One notes in this act an obsessive desire to locate a place of origin and to fix movement. Jacobean politics reinforced the Elizabethan constraint on unauthorized wandering. A 1606 Proclamation demanded that all “idle persons and masterless men depart and avoid themselves from the city of London . . . and from thence
to repair to the Counties and places where they were borne, and there to tary and abide in some lawfull worke." This concern to hinder unsupervised movement is concisely expressed in Shakespeare's Coriolanus, when the first citizen complains that the patri­cians "repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor."

The preoccupation with restrictions on unlicensed travel be­comes more pronounced under the Commonwealth. In 1656 the Master-General appointed a committee to revise existing laws on vagabondage. The committee recommended that all individuals found wandering outside a ten-mile radius from their residences should be classified as fugitives. One member of the committee ob­jected to the overly general nature of the mandate, claiming, "if you leave it in the power of the justices to judge who shall be a wan­derer, for aught I know I myself may be whipped, if I be found but ten miles from my house. . . . In this statute . . . any man may be adjudged by the justice to be a vagrant." A number of years later the Act of Settlement (1662) also expressed a fear of unauthorized travel: "by reason of some defects in the law, poor people are not restrained from going from one parish to another . . . and then to another parish, and at last become rogues and vagabonds."

While we can speculate as to the particular causes of the early modern fear of unlicensed and unauthorized movement—Deleuze and Guattari argue, for example, that "it is a vital concern of every state not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations and, more generally, to establish a zone of rights over an entire 'exterior,' over all the flows traversing the ecumenon"—I am more inter­ested in the consequences rather than the origins of masterless con­finement. In terms of the consequences, the historical conjuncture becomes more complicated. The restrictions on vagrant mobility and migration had profound, although unintended, long-term ef­fects on the rise of capitalism. The Enlighteners inveighed against the entire English poor law apparatus on the grounds that it immo­bilized the free circulation of labor. Adam Smith remarked, "The very unequal price of labor which we frequently find in England in places at no great distance from one another, is probably owing to the obstruction which the law of settlements gives to a poor man who would carry his industry from parish to parish without a cer­tificate." Malthus recommended the "total abolition of all the present parish-laws," in order that the poor "would be able to settle without interruption . . . [and] the market of labour would then be
free.” Not just the classical economists, but also modern historians railed against the English poor law system. Paul Mantoux wrote of the Act of Settlement: “The law safeguarded the interests of the parishes. But at what a cost! The whole working class found itself deprived of one its most valuable rights: the right to move about freely.” Karl Polanyi, impassioned defender of liberalism and the free market, writes, “The two great Elizabethan statutes of The Act of Settlement together were a charter of liberty to the common people as well as a seal of their disabilities.” Another economist, not as stridently liberal as Polanyi, writes simply, “In short, the effect of the Law of Settlement was to keep people where they were and to restrict greatly the opportunities for employment available to the man who was out of a job.”

There is some evidence that the Enlightenment critique of the restrictive nature of the settlement laws had been anticipated in the mid-seventeenth century. In _The Office of Addresses and Encounters_ (1650), Henry Robinson realizes that the conditions of poverty are not simply created by idleness and sturdy beggary, but that the idle poor remain unemployed because they have no access to potential employers and thus cannot offer their labor where it is in demand: “poore people are not acquainted with other peoples wants, besides their own; they have hitherto had no meanes to come to the speedy knowledge of such persons as stand as much in need of poore man’s labours, as the poor people doe of rich mens moneyes . . . but when the rich, as well as the poore men’s occasions, and necessities, are equally known to one another, the poor will be able to treat with more reputation, and get more indifferent and advantageous prices.” Robinson goes on not to recommend the free circulation of labor, but, in keeping with the still-paternalist nature of early modern culture, the establishment of a registry and centralized employment agency that would facilitate communication between the poor and prospective employers. But the implication is that compulsory poor rates and the confinement of the poor in workhouses are inefficient antipoverty measures, given Robinson’s belief that a simple improvement in open communication between employer and laborer could provide gainful employment for the available labor force.

We see a series of ungovernable events, then, neither sequentially unfolding nor anticipated by individual agents or the conscious efforts or prejudices of ascending or descending ruling power, in which vagabondage, the poor law system, and the rise of capitalism are all deeply and contradictorily interwoven. Clearly this provides
evidence against old-fashioned historical materialism, since imma-
nently expanding productive-economic forces or relations are not
primary catalysts in the rise, protraction, and dissolution of master-
lessness. What I have been trying to bring out in the above argu-
ment is the unforeseen and unplanned nature of the consequences
that the limitations on vagabondage and establishment of poor laws
had on capitalist development. The unintentional aspect of these
developments is consistent with recent arguments on the transition
between feudalism and capitalism, which a brief detour into one of
the more influential of these arguments will bear out.

Robert Brenner has argued that most of the theories of the transi-
tion—from Wallerstein’s and Frank’s world-systems theory and
market-model approach, to Maurice Dobb’s earlier productive
forces model—all resemble in basic outline Adam Smith’s explana-
tion of economic development, which emphasized a rise in trade,
division of labor, and the underlying belief in the importance of
homo economicus in guiding capitalism toward a naturally unfold-
ing end. As Brenner notes, the neo-Smithians believe that capital-
ism was caused by the instrumental rationality of individual profit-
maximizers. Brenner’s argument cannot be summarized in brief
compass, but he has argued that relatively autonomous class struc-
tures and class conflicts determined the different ways that ruling
classes were forced to carry out practices of surplus extraction fol-
lowing the decline of serfdom. A relatively mobile and free peas-
antry in England, coupled with scarcity of land available to the
lower orders, led to accumulation, innovation in agriculture, and
the establishment of what Marx described as the classic triadic
structure of agrarian capitalism (landowner, tenant-farmer, and la-
borer).

The important point in Brenner’s argument for our purposes is
the following: “the methods applied by the ruling class . . . are thus
incomprehensible simply as their own choice. These were given as
it were by the class structure; by the system of surplus extraction
relations with the direct producers in which the ruling class found
itself.” The ruling classes “were not free to choose the manner in
which they exploited the direct producers.” According to such an
argument, capitalism was an unintended effect of structural con-

...
Brenner's argument for ruling class unintentionalism is mostly concerned with explaining the onset of capitalism following the decline of the feudal mode of production. The argument I have been making with respect to masterlessness and the poor laws shows how the same logic applies but in the opposite direction: just as we find little ruling-class choice in propelling capitalism forward, so we see no ruling-class agency in obstructing that movement once underway. This argument for the indeterminate nature of capitalist development and for the limitations on ruling class agency to influence that development impacts literary criticism concerned with representations of economic change in Tudor and Stuart literature. Because we can no longer argue for capitalist inevitability, bourgeois revolutions, and market forces willfully speeding capitalist advancement to a preordained end (what Conrad Russell and English civil war historians have been arguing for some time now), we should be wary of offering, as some recent criticism has, symptomatic or anticipatory readings of early modern texts, according to which bourgeois writers and an official culture inscribe their own voluntarist capitalist ethic in advance of the realization of entrenched capitalist relations.47

The following pages will show how the contradictions inherent in the Tudor and Stuart reaction toward masterlessness are reproduced (and the consequences of that contradiction realized) in colonial Virginia. Following this exposition is a discussion of the repression of masterlessness in the Tempest, and the attempt in the play to undo the contradictions revealed in the poor law history (those which are made more manifest in the Virginia texts). Needless to say, in neither John Smith’s texts nor The Tempest do dominant cultural forces (seigneurial or bourgeois) intentionally or unidirectionally shape the representation of economic advancement in The Tempest or economic retrogression in Virginia.

New World Vagrants, Old World Anxieties

Seventeenth-century reformers and propagandists frequently argued that the New World could absorb England’s postfeudal landless population. A 1603 proclamation called for the banishment “beyond the seas” of any “incorrigible or dangerous Rogues.”48 Hakluyt thought the colonies could provide a haven for “condemned English men and women, in whom there may be founde hope of amendment,”49 and the author of Nova Britannium recom-
mended exportation to the new colonies on the grounds that it would be “most profitable for the state to rid our multitudes of such as lie at home, pestering the land with pestilence and penury, and infecting one another with vice and villanie, worse than the plague itself.”50 Similarly, the author of The Reformed Virginian Silkworm wrote that emigration to the colonies would “disburthen this nation of many indigent persons, who having formerly perhaps enjoyed a fulnesse of abused or forfeited plenty . . . are prompted by their owne and other mens ruine by making the highways . . . an ambuscado of innocent Travellers.”51 Captain John Smith argued that the establishment of a colony in Virginia would “so employ and encourage a great part of our idlers . . . that could they but once taste the sweet fruites of their owne labours, doubtesse many thousands would be advised by good discipline, to take more pleasure in honest industrie, then in their humours of dissolute idlenesse.”52 One modern historian has concisely summed up the propaganda campaign: “practically everyone who had anything to say on the subject of colonial development recommended that beggars, delinquents, ‘all such as lie on the parishes,’ all ‘lewed and lazy fellowes,’ be forthwith collected and sent off.”53 After repeated failure to establish a stable and productive colony throughout the first decades of the seventeenth century, and after a withdrawal of investments in the colonial venture, the same propaganda that championed the emigration of delinquency to the new world took an about-face, and blamed the failures of the colony on the preponderance of an idle and delinquent labor pool. William Strachey describes the early colonial laborers as unskilled and unhallowed “scum of men,” and importunes England to send over “men of rank and quality,” “carpenters and workmen, and skillful vigneron.”54 The author of a New Life in Virginia recommends emigration for those “of honest minds and better sort,” instead of those who “cannot live at home, nor lay their bones to labor.”55 The arguments against the immigration of delinquents run throughout all of John Smith’s writings. In the Proceedings Smith (and his collaborators) note that their men are “little better than atheist,”56 “whose mischiefs” daily spring from their ignorant (yet ambitious spirits)” (207); they are variously described as “mutinous prisoners” (271); “untoward gallants” harboring “childish fears” (226–78). At one point, threatening coercive measures and forced labor, Smith warns his men, “and thinke not that either my pains, or the adventurers purses, will ever maintaine you in idleennesse and sloth” (259). Smith compares the planters of Virginia to
those in England who “lie under windows and starve in Cheapside, rot in Gaoles, doe in the street, high-waies, or any where, and use a thousand devices to maintaine themselves in those miseries, rather than take any paines, to live as they may be honest labour.”

In response to King James’s question how misery in Virginia can be mitigated, Smith writes “with sufficient workmen and meanes to maintain them, not such delinquents as here cannot be ruled by all the lawes in England . . . to rectify a Commonwealth with debauched people is impossible” (Generall Historie, 330).

We see in these passages more than the casual recognition of a failed endeavor to establish Virginia as an outpost for England’s idle or criminal fringes. Smith’s and the other’s recriminations against the Virginia laborers are excessive and borderline-paranoid. If we set a more or less monological or unified official culture against an alien native culture we fail to register the internal divisions within the European culture itself, and the extent to which the English attitudes toward their own are part of the bad faith endemic to the colonial experience generally. The about-face the official culture makes, and the inflated rhetoric of their explanations for colonial hardship, should perhaps make us as wary of accepting colonial representations of idle (English) labor as we are of accepting the European representations of the inferiority of the native culture. In the following pages, resisting thecolonist’s ascription of colonial failure to masterless unproductivity, I will show how the New World English laborer is the most available scapegoat for economic ruin. I will also argue that such ruin is itself caused by a number of economic and ideological contradictions stemming from the reproduction in Virginia of an unresolved poverty problem that had originated in England.

Historians have traditionally described Virginia as a haven for economic individualism and free competition. One historian writes of the Virginia company: “The self-interest of the company was to be assured by giving a free rein to the economic self-interest of individual colonists and groups of colonists.” Another historian writes that the headright system “was supposed to involve the free play of economic opportunity within the context of an industrious society.” Recently, Jack Greene has argued that Virginia’s entrepreneurialism was coextensive with the secularized market values prevalent in England. Greene describes seventeenth-century England, and by implication early Virginia, as “dynamic, loose, open, individualistic, competitive, conflicted, acquisitive, highly stratified, and market-based...”
How can we reconcile this oft-noted bourgeois and opportunistic outlook of the early colonial leaders with the backlash against that free-market ethos running throughout John Smith's writings? Such a backlash is evident in, for example, the Virginia Company's concern to reoccupy the private land; their pejorative comments regarding the self-interest of the planters; their claim that individualism sacrifices the "common benefit"; the retention of traditional economic relations and belief systems, particularly, classical republicanism, indentured servitude and coerced labor among the governors; and the overall persistence of feudal values within an assumed capitalist setting. It can perhaps be argued that all these elements are consistent with the company's opportunism, that faced with the threat of declining profits and self-interested investors, it was merely strategic and not backward-looking for the company to reinstate the old world value system it did; or that the company merely paid lip-service to classical republican arguments and georgic ideals. But against these views one could argue that a commitment to a capitalist ethos might have compelled the adventurers to ignore the privateering, once-indentured producers or to fit them into a market framework that saw utility in most private endeavors.

Rather than take sides in a debate that sets self-interest on the one hand against traditional, communitarian values on the other, I suggest an alternative argument. We may begin with the premise that the structure of the relationships between the governors and their (white) laborers bears a striking resemblance to that which in­hered between English culture and their destitute poor, in which a philanthropic temper is interwoven with a fear of dispersal and migration. In Smith's writings the problematic of movement be­comes more complex, since the power of movement that is denied to the Euro-American poor is acknowledged in the text to be a pri­mary support of power of the native culture. Simply put, power and authority in these texts resides in the ability either to migrate or to prevent the migration of another.

When Smith and the governors adopt the authoritarian tone we have noted above, it is usually directed at the economic opportu­nism of those laborers who, after their indenture had been fulfilled, dispersed from the central plantation and sought a life outside the ambit of the common stock and company settlement. Wesley Cra­ven writes of the governor's reaction against the felt break-up of the company's plantation into individual holdings, "The first step toward the decline of the company's plantation, or 'publique' as it
was known, had come in 1614. The seven-year term of service of the oldest inhabitants expired in that year, and there were present for the first time in that colony free laborers." Sandys, the governor of the colony at the time, reacted to the disperson, warning "as the Private Plantation began thus to increase so contrary wise the estate of the Publique . . . grew into utter consumption." Eventually, Sandys, in an effort to force colonists to grow diverse food crops and to thwart the reliance on tobacco as a single cash crop, convinced the Virginia Company to reoccupy much of the once-common land and to strictly control the granting of patents to individual, semi-independent plantations. A need for more labor forced Sandys to promote large-scale immigration, doubling the population of the colony, but in the process only making conditions worse than prior to 1618, because the colony could not absorb the rapid influx of laborers.

Sandys suggests that disperson among the colonists threatens the well-being of the colony as a whole. This in itself sits oddly with any notion of the "free play of economic opportunity," but eventually another seemingly more plausible argument was made by the colonial leaders against colonial dispersion, namely that the colonists became susceptible to native attack when settlements were separated one from another. When Smith was asked by the "Majesties Commission" to explain the cause of the massacre in 1622, in which more than three hundred colonists had been killed, he explained: "the cause of the Massacre was the want of marshall discipline, and because they would have all the English had by destroying those they found so carelessly secure, that they were not provided to defend themselves against any enemy, being so dispersed as they were" (Generall Historie, 328).

For our purposes, it is important to note that interspersed throughout the passages in which Smith narrates the events leading up to the massacre, he invokes masterlessness and vagrancy, as if it were somehow connected with the colonial susceptibility to attack in the first place. After Smith offers his explanation for the massacre, a commission organized by James I asks Smith how the problems in the colony could be rectified. Smith uncharacteristically argues that part of the problem is that many of the adventurers exploit and abuse their laborers because, "God forbid . . . that masters there [Virginia] should not have the same privilege over their servants as here" (330). This is an important line in the Historie and shows how Smith occupies two positions throughout his writings. On the one hand, he speaks as the mouthpiece for the Virginia
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Company; on the other hand, he champions the laboring poor. Rather than suggest that vagrancy created the conditions that enabled the massacre, Smith pushes the argument back a step further and locates the causes of vagrant dispersion and idleness in the harsh treatment the laborers received under the authoritarian adventurers, those who, we have seen, oscillate wildly between solicitude and outright oppression. Thus, if on the manifest level, dispersion leaves the plantations open to native attack, dispersion is perhaps more latently dangerous, Smith implies, because it undermines master-servant bonds and creates disunity and a threat to synoptic order at Jamestown. Not surprisingly, the one native tribe well-respected among the colonists is the Pawtuxunt, “who inhabit together, and not so dispersed as the rest. These of all others were found the most civill to give entertainment.” And if one good thing came out of the massacre, Smith adds (reverting back to his usual campaign against idleness) it forced the company to replace those vagabonds who contributed to the massacre with more responsible, upstanding citizens: “since I came form thence, the honorable Company have bin humble suiters to his Majestie to get vagabonds and condemned men to go thither . . . yet for all the worst of . . . this lamentable massacre, there is more honest men now suiters to go, then ever hath been constrained knaves.”

We can see in these developments the same double bind that we saw earlier in the response to masterlessness in England. If dispersion of the undesirable second-generation vagrants Smith describes (those who became free of seven-year indentures beginning around 1614) had made them susceptible to native invasion, Sandys and others might have let self-interested migration run its course and burn itself out. If native invasion had not been a threat to scattered private plantations, then Sandys still should have left individual initiative to its own devices, in keeping with the colonist’s vaunted free-enterprise outlook. But because the company held fast to a paternalistic conception of its laboring force which was conditioned no doubt from stubborn fears of masterlessness and vagabondage originating in England, the company’s leaders attempted to force unity and prohibit unauthorized planting outside the perimeter of the main settlement. The very concern that masterlessness and migration obstructed order and productivity only ended up forestalling productivity; without uninhibited expansion and free enterprise, the company and colony could not support each new wave of immigration, a principal cause of its dissolution of 1624.

One of the ironies in Smith’s texts is that the very power of a no-
nomadic lifestyle that is denied to the planters in the Virginia Company is the defining feature of the power the natives hold over the colonists. On a number of occasions Powhatan warns Smith that the natives can migrate to another culture without much readjustment, an act that would devastate the colonists. Powhatan warns that if the Europeans attempt to destroy the native culture, they "will have worse by our absence; for we can plant anywhere, though with more labour, and we know you cannot live if you want our harvest... if you proceed in revenge we will abandon the country" (Generall Historie, 210). In another exchange, recorded in The Proceedings, Powhatan repeats the similar threat: "what can you get by war, when we hide our provision and flie to the woodes, whereby you must famish by wronging us your friends" (247). Smith advises his men against unnecessary antagonism of the natives because, "If we should each kill our man and so proceede with al in this house; the rest will all fly, then shall we get no more, then the bodies that are slaine, and then starve for victuall" (Proceedings, 251–52). And Smith recognizes the advantages the natives enjoy because of migration and a nomadic lifestyle: "by their continuall ranging, and travell, they know all the advantages and places most frequented with Deer, Beasts, Fish, Foule, Roots, and Berries" (Generall Historie, 118).

One encounter between the Natives and Smith that brings out the importance of the power of movement occurs when Smith is captured by the Natives and offers his compass as barter for his liberation:

He [Smith] demanding for their Captaine, they shewed him Opechankanough, King of Paumankee, to whom he gave a round ivory double compass Dyall. Much they marvailed at the playing of the Fly and Needle, which they could see so plainly, and yet not touch it, because of the glasse that covered them. But when he demonstrated by that Globe-like Jewell, the roundnesse of the earth, and skies, the sphare of the Sunne, Moone, and Starres, and how the Sunne did chase the night round about the world continually; the greatnesse of the Land and Sea, the diversitie of Nations, varietie of complexions, and how we were to them Antipodes, and many other such like matters, they all stood as amazed with admiration. (Generall Historie, 147)

While Smith describes the compass as a signifier for so much by the way of analogy, specifically its spherical resemblance to the sun and "roundness" of the earth, the compass is for the most part separated from its most important function; its power to provide direc-
tion when traveling. Since the freedom of movement is severely constricted for the colonists, the compass as compass becomes alien to or no longer functional for Smith and the Europeans. It is as if the transference of the compass to the natives represents Smith’s acknowledgment that in the New World the natives hold the power associated with migration and travel, and therefore should rightfully possess the greatest symbol of that power. Opechankanough merely needs to hold up the compass, letting it represent itself, and by extension the natives’ natural claim over it; he does not need to recode or reinvent the compass as a symbol for so many things over and above its principal use value. If in England, and during the passage to the New World, the European adventurers could claim a symbolic attachment to the instrument, once in the New World the power of the compass belongs to the natives.

The Tempest and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism

We have seen thus far that English culture exported its anxieties over masterlessness to the New World. Such a phenomenon provides a partial explanation for the failure of the colonists to set up a prosperous colony in Virginia during the first half of the seventeenth century. If the rise of masterlessness explains why history only fitfully develops, and history itself cannot conceal the obstacle of masterlessness to diachronic process, then The Tempest works to obscure and suppress that unsettling reality. Obsessively reimagining and reinforcing master-servant relations, the play does not tolerate any unsubordinated relationship. But The Tempest is not static, and if not within history, then within the play world does a dialectic motor itself toward a higher unity. Straddling both feudalism and capitalism, The Tempest performs a bypass on diseased history, clearing from its path any masterless impediment that might halt seamless economic transformation.

We can begin with a discussion of the many forms of mastery and servitude one finds in the early scenes, particularly in the exchanges among Ferdinand, Prospero, and Miranda. Ferdinand, “released” from a prior condition of subordination to his father, invents himself as the newly installed King of Naples upon meeting Prospero: “single thing, as I am now, that wonders / To hear thee speak of Naples. . . . Myself am Naples.” Prospero intervenes almost immediately, compelled to reimpose mastery over Ferdinand:
"The Duke of Milan / And his more braver daughter could control thee" (1.2.439–41), and later, "I'll manacle thy neck and feet together" (1.2.463). Prospero at this point has not imagined an alliance between Ferdinand and Miranda; he is motivated, it seems, by his own will to punish Ferdinand for the latter's audacity in claiming any sense of "freedom." Prospero then promises Ariel his freedom in exchange for the newly enslaved or enserfed Ferdinand: "Delicate Ariel, / I'll set thee free for this" (1.2.443–44). Prospero's means of compensation to Ariel for Ariel's labor of enslaving Ferdinand is an avowal of Ariel's liberty. Not only all isolated relations between individuals, but also the entire system of exchange is founded on a tightly supervised economy of lordship and domination. These relationships—indentured servitude, outright slavery, reciprocal gift-exchange and barter—represent precapitalist relations with a vengeance. The value of Ariel's service is measured more by canons of proper obedience and deference to a capricious master than it is by productivity. Ariel reminds Prospero, "I have done thee worthy service, / Told thee no lies, made thee no mistakings, serv'd / Without or grudge or grumblings" (1.2.246–48). And we should note just what kind of power Prospero wields over Ariel and everyone else: the power to immobilize, to "stow" the Mariners under "hatches" (1.2.230), to "rend an oak and peg in his [Ariel's] knotty entrails" (1.2.294–95), to "sty" Caliban in the "hard rock" (1.2.344–45), to maintain the spirits in "their confines" (4.1.121), and to tie Ferdinand's arms in a "sad knot" (1.2.223). In his obsession with practices of ritual bondage and immobilization, Prospero is figured as a vigilant overlord, as if in a neofeudal repetition-compulsion he unceasingly suppresses a flight from serfdom among his unfree dependents. Of the immobilizing tendencies of the feudal state, Michael Postan tells us that the "miscellaneous rights or 'freedoms' which a free man could claim as his own—the right to move away . . . could not be exercised by the lord's dependant tenants except with his permission."67 Erik Olin Wright notes that feudal culture described these flights as "moments in which the peasant was stealing part of the labor power owned by the lord."68 In a seventeenth-century extension of these feudal practices of migratory constraint, Prospero's magic stands in for the legislative power of the poor laws to hinder movement; the difference, of course, is that while the poor laws restrict freedom to labor, Prospero's magic overcompensates, sending Ferdinand, for example, into potentially interminable hard labor.

Once under Prospero's mastership, Ferdinand, like Caliban, is
forced to gather logs. Ferdinand labors in a rite of passage in order to gain the affection of Miranda and the support of Prospero, who finally informs him “All thy vexations were but my trials of thy love, and thou / Hast strangely stood the test” (4.1.7–10). We recall also that Caliban is forced to work under Prospero’s dominion in atonement for his earlier advances upon Miranda. It goes without saying that this is unproductive work, without a division of labor and any sense of a social order based on rationalization, efficiency, or productivity. When Prospero tells Miranda that Caliban “serves in offices that profit” (1.2.314–15), “profit” denotes subsistence, not accumulation. It is even unclear whether all this work is required for anyone’s livelihood. (Just how many thousands of logs does Prospero need to maintain himself and Miranda?) Prospero is an inversion of Weber’s precapitalist charismatic magus, whose near-demonic power relies on unmitigated will, persuasion, and coercion operating in the absence of any legitimating norms, values, or institutions. He is quite unlike King Lear’s Edmund for instance, whose argument for self-interest and rationalization is of a piece with his comprehension of a new world order and a rift between man and nature.

Yet The Tempest does not honor Prospero’s magic, and one of the most striking aspects of the play is the way in which the precapitalist relations of unmasked coercion and servitude seem to silently pass over into naturalized relations of capital and commodity worship. The moments of textual rupture occur when the play extends its own diffuse but unsourced magic over Prospero’s charismatic precapitalist magic. We can see this occur in the various metamorphoses Miranda undergoes in her development from primitive barter object to commodity fetish. Initially, Prospero offers her as a “gift” to Ferdinand: “Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition / Worthily purchased, take my daughter” (4.1.13). Miranda is doubly inscribed here, at once Prospero’s gift, as if she is an exchange-object in a primitive potlatch, in which the countergift offered to Prospero will be his restoration and liaison with Alonso. But on the other hand, she is an item “purchased” by Ferdinand, no longer a gift or reward freely tendered, but a compensatory object.

Later in the play, the double-coding of Miranda is displaced by coding of a new order: in response to Alonso’s question, “What is this maid with whom thou wast at play?” Ferdinand responds, “Sir, she is mortal; / But by immortal providence she’s mine. / I chose her when I could not ask my father / for his advice . . .” (5.1.189–91). Miranda’s status has changed from a gift given by
Prospero to Ferdinand, to a purchase of Ferdinand’s, to a providential windfall, to finally an object-choice of Ferdinand’s. But Miranda is not merely overdetermined; her status as an object in a natural economy is transformed into an object of exchange circulating among allegorically described market-type relations. Ferdinand recognizes that he labors for Miranda as her “patient log-man.” Yet Ferdinand’s laboring past is soon forgotten, rendered invisible, and he begins to acknowledge only the mystified presence of Miranda, divorced from the labor undergone in her “acquisition,” and now granted to him by “immortal providence.” Ferdinand mistakes the result of hard labor for a natural endowment, and Prospero as overseer recedes in the background, displaced by a higher power. “Immortal Providence,” then, need not simply mean divine providence here; it suggests the power of a secularized providential materialism, in which Miranda comes to represent, among other things, the detached and congealed labor of Ferdinand. When Alonso mistakes Miranda for a goddess, he is bowing to a new capitalist-type goddess, not a sacred one.

The silent, unobstructed passage from precapitalist values to capitalist relations is brought out more clearly in the relationship between Caliban and the Europeans. Caliban learns not one, but two languages in the play (or he learns one prior to the beginning of the play and another as the play unfolds): the language taught to him by Miranda is the language of a natural economy and precapitalist values; the language he internalizes by the end of the play (one that he teaches himself) approximates the language of instrumental labor and capital. Early in the play he worries that Prospero could “make a vassal” of his God Setebos (1.2.375). Unlike the commodities Harriot and colonial propagandists held up to colonialist investors, Caliban is not initially described as a valuable commodity transferable to England. Instead he is merely a spectacle, one not to be bought and sold, but more of a display item, like an artifact or ornament. Stephano describes him as a potentially valuable “present for any Emperor that ever trod on neat’s leather” (2.2.69–72). And Caliban, of course, is no free laborer for much of the play; he works under coercion as Prospero’s “slave.”

Yet the crucial moment in Caliban’s transformation comes when he supplants Prospero as master with, not simply Stephano, but the “celestial liquor.” He does so by promising that in return for the bottle, he will show the “best springs” to Stephano and Trinculo, and “dig pignuts,” and reveal to them a “jay’s nest,” and “snare the nimble marmoset” (2.2.168–69). After contracting himself to Ste-
phano and Trinculo by swearing upon the bottle, Caliban announces he will be their "true subject, for the liquor is not earthly" (2.2.126–27). Self-fashioned as an altered, "true" subject, putting his labor-capacity to a self-interested end, Caliban has not merely substituted one master (Prospero) for another (Stephano). He has replaced both masters with the more amorphous master that is capital, effecting the substitution by exchanging his own alienable energies for the phantasmagoric, unearthly "bottle." If under Prospero he was enslaved or enserfed, under Stephano and Trinculo he has attained at least a precarious and ironic degree of freedom. He has discovered, or rather stumbled upon, the perverse logic of possessive individualism. He has become, as Antonio asserts, a "plain fish and no doubt marketable" (5.1.265).

Of course, what I am describing as the scene of Caliban's self-alienation, one might describe as the simple pursuit of base desires among low characters in a comic mode. But the scene is remarkable, I think, because, like Miranda's shifting status and the recoding of Ferdinand's labor form, Caliban's relations with Stephano and Trinculo are so essentially different from his prior relations with Prospero. Caliban is not simply, as George Lamming suggests, "the excluded, that which is eternally below possibility . . . an occasion which can be appropriated and exploited to the purposes of another's own development." Of course, what I am describing as the scene of Caliban's self-alienation, one might describe as the simple pursuit of base desires among low characters in a comic mode. But the scene is remarkable, I think, because, like Miranda's shifting status and the recoding of Ferdinand's labor form, Caliban's relations with Stephano and Trinculo are so essentially different from his prior relations with Prospero. Caliban is not simply, as George Lamming suggests, "the excluded, that which is eternally below possibility . . . an occasion which can be appropriated and exploited to the purposes of another's own development." Under no compulsion by an overlord, freely discoursing in a new version of the language he had hitherto cursed, Caliban sets the terms of the bargain, instrumentalizing his labor capacity in order to attain a desired end. When Caliban says "Caliban Has a new master" (2.2.192–93), the meaning is not entirely clear. If Stephano is Caliban's new master (the most likely signification), then mastery does not imply refeudalization, since Prospero-like compulsion is not readily apparent: in place of Prospero's spirit-induced bodily persecution of Caliban, Trinculo's method of persecution is verbal taunting and "mocking," an affront, Stephano self-righteously declares, to Caliban's "dignity" (3.2.28–35). "Master" could equally refer either to the bottle, suggesting reification, or Caliban himself, suggesting a newly conceived, if momentary, form of alienable self-mastery.

Not only is Caliban a different servant to Stephano than he is to Prospero, but Stephano is also a different master to Caliban than is Prospero. Stephano boasts that he has made the bottle "with his own hands" (2.2.124) after escaping from the shipwreck "upon a butt of sack" (2.2.122), and he assures Caliban that he has a household supply of the celestial liquor in a cellar "in a rock by the sea-
side, where my wine is hid” (2.2.134–135). Whereas Prospero possesses an overflow of subsistence goods (surplus logs) but only one desirable and exchangeable commodity (Miranda), the surprisingly resourceful Stephano harbors a commodity surplus, potentially exchangeable, in this comically inverted world, for more worthwhile commodities proper, including not simply the knowledge of Prospero’s whereabouts and elusive books (which only Caliban’s specialized labor can provide) but the valuable rarities Caliban will furnish as recompense for the bottle. Caliban exclaims, “I with my long nails will dig thee pignuts; / . . . bring thee . . . clustering filberts, and sometimes I’ll get thee / Young scamels from the rock” (2.2.168–72). Unlike the labor he ungainfully performs for Prospero’s subsistence—“fetch in firing” (2.2.181), “scrape trenchering” (2.2.183), and log-gathering—Caliban offers Stephano the sorts of commodities that would have stirred the imagination (and purses) of colonialist merchants and investors: “clustering filberts,” “young scamels,” and “nimble marmosets.” In William Strachey’s *True Repertory of the Wracke*, as Frank Kermode notes, “scamels,” or “seamels,” are described as exotic commodities and delicacies.70 While Stephano and Trinculo enlist Caliban’s talents with a manifest view to conquest and consumption, the items Caliban invokes are potentially convertible to further commodity and gain; indeed part of the irony in the scene lies in the fact that Stephano, the depraved and “poor drunkard,” would hardly have cultivated the refined palate and tastes required to appreciate the nonpareils Caliban is offering, and the use or exchange to which Stephano would put these commodities if ever furnished is an open question. The important point is not that these relations are so firmly, if allegorically capitalist, but that inasmuch as Marxist critics such as Walter Cohen principally focus on Prospero (who I have suggested acts like a customary, paternal overlord) as the exemplar in the play of postfeudal, “perhaps bourgeois,”71 individualism, they fail to consider the more materialist forms of flexible, uncoerced self-interest and forms of labor distributed among these low characters in this allegorically rich comic mode.

Critics have labored over Prospero’s disturbance when he realizes he has momentarily forgotten the subplot and Caliban’s conspiracy. Hulme and Barker have seen this disturbance as a “textual excess,” one that almost shakes Prospero’s power, but because Shakespeare relegates the subplot to the comic mode, “in the end his version of history remains authoritative, the larger play acceding as it were to the containment of the conspirators in the safely
comic mode." Hulme and Barker fail to note that the moment of "slippage" in the text—the moment when Prospero's power is deauthorized—occurs during the all-important allegorical metamorphosis of Caliban into a possessive individualist, managed by his own impulses and outside the jurisdiction of Prospero's magic. This is the more remote or long-term consequence of Prospero's neglecting to monitor closely events in the subplot. If *The Tempest* aims to represent the historical change from feudal forms of labor to early capitalist forms of labor (and I am assuming it makes that attempt, given its extended discussion and transformation of different forms of labor and servitude), and the beginnings of that transformation occurred the way revisionist history has suggested (and I am assuming this is the most compelling argument available), then Prospero's influence or agency in realizing that transformation needs to be negated, and the onset of postfeudal labor forms need to be allegorized in the absence of any ruling power underwriting that transformation. Prospero's history is not authoritative, as Hulme and Barker would have it, but rather subordinate to the play's insistence on duplicating the formal logic or structure of economic transformation that had earlier begun (but then was saddled by authoritarian antivagrancy measures) in historical reality.

But how can we reconcile the crucial negation of Prospero's power with the emphasis the play places on the prodigiousness of his power to control all forms of labor, movement, mastery, and servitude? We can explain these strands if we see that Prospero has a twofold responsibility or role in the play. His project (the play's project) is, on the one hand, to repress any notion of masterlessness if the play is to represent an undisturbed transformation from precapitalist to capitalist relations; yet after having done so, he needs to recede or relinquish his power at the very moment of that transformation, to vanish as a ruling force or influence if the play is to be consistent with the logic of actual history (history as told by Brenner, Wood, et al.) that was momentarily submerged with the advent of masterlessness. In other words, the play relies on Prospero's ruling agency to undo a historical contradiction (masterlessness) but then negates that agency in order to recapture the history that masterlessness had subsequently precluded, to represent the continuation of capitalism divested of any ruling coordination or planning. In semiotic terms, following from Fredric Jameson's appropriation of Propp and Greimas, Prospero serves as an actant or donor, a mediator or catalyst bridging two "semes," a feudal labor form and its uncoerced but still exploitative successor form.
But this in itself seems to beg the question of how, if at all, the play deals with the question of masterlessness; that is, Prospero’s obsession with mastery doesn’t necessarily entail an obsession against masterlessness or the repression thereof. We can understand the curious nonrepresentation of masterlessness in the play through a discussion of Prospero’s compulsion to repeat the events that led up to his exile. Of the series of repetitions in Prospero’s play—the restaging of the storm, the planned conspiracies, Prospero’s comments to Alonso on the loss of his daughter—Hulme writes, “Prospero stages a fantasized version of the original conspiracy with the difference that, this time, he will defeat it. . . . His pastoral romance is a dream of wish-fulfillment, a fantasy of dreams come true.”

Hulme refers to Erik Erikson’s account of repetition, in which an individual “constructs a model of his past experiences which will allow him to ‘play at’ doing something that was in reality done to him.” While it is commonsensical enough to assume that Prospero’s compulsion to repeat is attached to a desire for revenge and wish fulfillment, Hulme for the most part elides the importance of repression in the repetition-compulsion. For Freud the compulsion to repeat is the manifestation of the power of the unconscious repressed. Repetition expresses a partial return of the repressed, in which the subject repeats distortions of events rather than directly reencountering them.

If we believe that repetition stems from repression, how can we reconcile Prospero’s repetition of the events of his exile with his tendency to explain and reexplain those very events at opportune moments throughout the play? If the aim of repetition is to prevent the emergence of past displeasure that would accompany the return of the repressed, why would Prospero repeat and restage events if those events are so patently unrepressed, if they are such a manifest part of his conscious explanatory power and identity? Narrative repetition (Prospero’s narration of past events to Miranda, Ariel, and Alonso) would perhaps obviate the functional importance of repetitive action. The reasons motivating Prospero’s compulsion to repeat should therefore be latent throughout the text, and we can only understand the root causes of Prospero’s neurotic symptoms if we look beyond the manifest level of the events in the subplot or the play itself.

Given the disjuncture between on the one hand the all-pervading threat of masterlessness in early modern England, and on the other hand the play’s near-miraculous displacement of servitude built upon personal relations to an allegory of servitude structured
around the phenomenology of the commodity, we can suggest that what Prospero mostly represses is masterlessness itself and its contradictory influence on historical development. *The Tempest* rewrites undisturbed history by imagining history without masterlessness, or it allows masterlessness to emerge only momentarily, only insofar as masterlessness can effectively transmute into post-feudal labor forms. The play achieves this end by offering discrete moments of *transformation* without offering an extended space of *transition*, and in the process it omits the entire historical record of "subversive" masterlessness and the constraining poor law countermeasures. In order to fuse the two ends of the transitional period, the play offers history with an excluded middle.

The argument I have been making above runs counter to Paul Brown’s claim that the play relies on masterlessness as an archetype for subversion. Brown argues, in a paradigmatic new historicist essay, that the official culture represented in the play relies on the subversive power of masterlessness to reinvent or bolster its own sense of mastery over disrupting forces. *The Tempest* aims to produce masterless subversion in order to (re)confirm courtly authority, but this "orientalist" project partially fails because it inadvertently reveals internal contradictions and "produces the possibility of resistance."76

One problem here is that Brown never offers a precise definition of the masterlessness he claims to have found in the play. He makes reference to Stephano and Trinculo’s "masterless aping of the aristocrats" during which they steal clothes off a line, an action that "draws attention to their bestiality."77 Later he notes that Ireland and the island are "peopled with a strange admixture of the savage and masterless other, those who are fully controlling and malcontentedly lapsed civil subjects."78 For Brown, masterlessness includes within its wide horizon the Irish, malcontentedness, and bestiality; in other words, anything that hegemony or orthodoxy deems alien, subversive, criminal, and so on. This catch-all definition divorces masterlessness from the specificity of the connections among vagrancy, poverty, and labor. As a term describing subversion generally, Brown’s use of "masterlessness" is reasonable, but if we define the masterless man as the landless vagabond who for various reasons does not labor and is subject to restrictions on movement and severe poor law penalties, we will not find that figure allegorized in *The Tempest* (although we will in *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear*, and *The Winter’s Tale*). On the contrary, we will find an intensification of nonmasterlessness as a counterpoint to historical reality.
I should perhaps note the larger strategy underlying Brown’s argument, and the point at which my argument differs not only from his, but also from new historicist arguments generally. Brown implicitly argues that a kind of abortive contract exists among history, colonialism, and *The Tempest*, in which the text sets out to rescue history from its internal contradictions with the goal of legitimizing ruling class power. He shows how the text fails to deliver on that promise and instead points up “problems which it works to efface or overcome.” Accordingly, since *The Tempest* ultimately cannot “harmonise disjunction” and “transcend irreconcilable differences,” it thus exposes a moment of “historical crisis.” But we have seen in the earlier discussion of masterlessness and the poor laws that historical events and reigning ideologies point up their own arbitrariness and noncausal sequencing of events. The history of masterlessness shows its own contradictions with or without *The Tempest* revealing those contradictions. *The Tempest* is history after the fact (to invert a coinage of Myra Jehlen’s), or history against the fact, history as an alternative or corrective to the discordant poor law history with which it is engaged. The important point is that Prospero’s magic is not enlisted in the service of any ruling power passing itself off as eternal, nor is his power even antagonistic to vagabondage and the threat of “courty disorder.” Rather, Prospero and the entire play is antagonistic to the effect the intersection of a number of discourses—masterlessness, the new science, Puritanism, poor law legislation—has had on the course of historical development. That effect is simply the slowing down of the development of capitalism. History has already revealed the danger of direct confrontation or containment of masterlessness. As I have already suggested, Prospero’s task is to repress the consequences of that confrontation, to reimagine a history of which masterlessness was never a part.

The argument I have been making, that *The Tempest* represses the inadvertent consequences of ruling class confinement of masterlessness in order to re-instate the already begun development of capitalism (without in itself acting on the behalf of any particular cultural or political dominant) implies that *The Tempest* is curiously nonideological in assisting the advance of capitalism; this need not sound contradictory if we assume that the rise of capitalism itself was not the product of any rational human propensity toward progress, but rather that it forced itself upon England (producers and owners alike) following the decline of medieval serfdom. In this sense, *The Tempest* works for capitalism and for no
class in particular, or it works against masterlessness (and the ruling class interference thereof) for history in general. Masterlessness becomes a mutation and a threat to the development of English society only after it is contained by those who had mistaken it for a threat in the first place.

I have not fully explained why The Tempest sets out to reconstruct potential historical immanence (to use a structural modification of Lucien Goldmann’s belief in the stirring of “potential class consciousness” by the artistic work), or why an early modern text would elevate a depersonalized historical consciousness above (on the level of intention but not effect) the forces of rational human agency. A provisional answer would be that, while we do not need to fully endorse Robert Nisbet’s or J. B. Bury’s one-sided view that the early modern period could not sustain a belief in uncyclical, nondegenerative progress, the period could not easily reconcile an enthusiasm for social development with its antidevelopmental ideological commitments, including classical exemplarity, common law immemorialism, golden-age sentimentalization, the still-prevalent fetishization of Fortuna, and versions of irrationalism in its partial retention of magical and supernatural ritual forms. Certain early modern texts like The Tempest perhaps function to omit or self-consciously negate these constraining ideological commitments. As such, the developmental logic they imagine follows from a more primary-order imagining: that once stripped away of widely held belief systems as schematized above, history would resume a steady, unimpeded march forward. This is the sense in which I have described The Tempest’s overall project as nonideological: its progressive vision seems to be more of a discovery than a prescription, one constructed negatively and without a partisan objective, in a sense the inadvertent consequence of the text’s negation of its own historical horizons.

I have discussed in this paper the impact of two historical class struggles on textual representations of early modern economic development. The first, foundational struggle, one I have assumed in advance, occurs between a feudal peasantry and a surplus-extracting landowning class, out of which is produced the structure of agrarian capitalist relations and a newly dispossessed masterless underclass. The second struggle occurs between that masterless underclass and Tudor orthodoxy, out of which arose the historic Elizabethan poor laws. The Virginia texts show the effects of the second struggle, the consequences of a wildly unresolved poverty problem and anxiety over masterlessness after it is exported to the New
World. *The Tempest*, on the other hand, tries to represent the effects of the first class struggle, that effect being simply nascent capitalism *prior* to the impact of the second struggle, and even in the absence of the conditions of masterlessness that were an unforeseen consequence of that first struggle.

Thus, if the Virginia texts represents masterlessness without capitalism, *The Tempest* represents capitalism without masterlessness. *The Tempest* is a curious oddity: a relatively autonomous literary artifact that allegorically figures as a mode of production. The Virginia texts and colonial venture, by contrast, seem to primarily represent economic relations, but we have seen that colonial relations are partially determined by deep cultural anxieties about vagabondage. In a sense, we have ended up with an economic understanding of a literary text (*The Tempest*) but a literary understanding of a group of arguably economic texts (Smith's writings). Finally, if struggles between power and subversion have at all factored into my argument, they do not describe relations between dominant interests and potentially subversive others, as new historicism would have it. Literary texts like *The Tempest* can record or allegorically undermine the *effects* of prior class struggles, the in-betweeness of determinative conflicts or ruling interests, without having to record those actual struggles.

**Notes**


4. In addition to Myra Jehlen's essay mentioned above, some recent essays on Smith's writings and the discourse of colonialism include: Hulme's *Colonial En-


6. The rise of masterlessness also complicates an already counterintuitive post-structural understanding of historical process without a subject. Outside the parameters of any discursive understanding of what would constitute a Renaissance subject, but yet also deeply connected with the vicissitudes of history, the masterless man is in one sense the perfect metaphor for antihumanist history; yet on the other hand he is also a very real, very oppressed historical presence during the early modern period. He is, paradoxically, the embodiment of history without a subject.


8. Pratt uses the term “contact zone” “to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctions, and whose trajectories now intersect.” See Imperial Eyes, 7.


14. Marx was inclined toward this view, although his opinions on vagabondage seemed to have changed throughout his writings. In The German Ideology Marx writes, “These vagabonds, who were so numerous that, for instance, Henry VII of England had 72,000 of them hanged, were only prevailed upon to work with the greatest difficulty and through the most extreme necessity. The rapid rise of manufactures, particularly in England, absorbed them gradually.” Karl Marx, The German Ideology, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 74. It is difficult to tell in this passage whether Marx believes vagabonds were reluctant to work, or whether Tudor culture was reluctant (or able) to employ them. In Pre-capitalist Economic Formations, Marx writes of the newly dispossessed peasants: “such a mass would be reduced either to the sale of its labour power or to beggary, vagabondage or robbery as its only source of income. History records the fact that it first tried beggary, vagabondage and crime, but was herded off this road on to the narrow path which led to the labour market by means of gallows, pillory and whip.” Karl Marx, Pre-capitalist Economic Formations, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm (New
York: International, 1989), 111. Marx seems to be invoking history or an immanent, materialist dialectic as an agent here, rather than idleness of the vagabonds themselves. In *Capital* Marx writes of the new proletariat: "these men, suddenly dragged from their wonted mode of life, could not as suddenly adapt themselves to the discipline of their new condition. They were turned en masse into beggars, robbers, vagabonds, partly from inclination, in most cases from stress of circumstances." Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Frederick Engels (New York: International, 1967), 686. Marx offers here a compromise: on the one hand, the feudal peasantry was not immediately convertible into a wage-laboring proletariat; on the other hand, "stress of circumstances" (unemployment?) created the conditions of vagabondage.

20. The revisionist economic history suggests that W. K. Jordan's classic description of vagrancy was dogmatic, to say the least. Jordan writes, "There is no doubt whatever that vagabondage was widespread, that it was organized, and that it imposed on rural village communities burdens and dangers with which they could not cope. The evidence is abundantly clear that this class was feared by all elements in the society and that the incredibly harsh penalties against it were to a large degree justified." See W. K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England: 1480–1660* (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd.), 78.
29. Ibid., 266.
43. Henry Robinson, *The Office of Addresses and Encounters* (1650), *Short Title Catalogue*.
45. Ibid., 78.
47. This is Halpern’s argument in *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 13: “My project in this book is to locate those regions within English Renaissance culture where the elements of a specifically capitalist culture began to emerge in nascent or anticipatory forms from within the context of a late feudal society. Their emergence in advance of capital itself is made possible by the relative autonomy of culture.”
48. **Stuart Royal Proclamations**, 53.
53. Ibid., 138.
62. Ibid., 38.
67. See Michael Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London: Pelican, 1975), 82. Feudal exploitation traditionally aimed to restrict peasant movement across the land, particularly during the High Middle Ages, when rents in kind were commuted to money rents. Faced with increasingly coercive feudal tenures, discontented serfs attempted to flee manorial life in search of independence in the expanding towns. The earliest “masterless” movement was thus the well-known flight of the serfs.
72. See Hulme and Barker, “Nymphs and reapers heavily vanish,” 203.
74. Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 122.
75. Ibid., 296, n. 65.
77. Ibid., 55.
78. Ibid., 57.
79. Ibid., 49.
81. When Walter Cohen suggests that Prospero shares with Hamlet “his contact with the audience, his humanism, and perhaps even his bourgeois traits,” or that the utopianism of the play hints “at the antithesis of capitalism and the abolition of class society, at the formation of a post-bourgeois world,” the assumption is that the play focalizes a series of class antagonisms, much the way Brown suggests the play tests the bearings of a dominant ideology. But I have suggested that the play is belated, in the sense that the play works through and offers a reversal of the unintended effects of prior class antagonisms and social conduct. See Cohen, *Drama of A Nation*, 401–2.
82. In a recent essay Slavoj Zizek describes the transformation of the precapitalist master-servant relationship (in which the determination “being-a-king” is naturalized, and relations between a king and subject are founded upon fetishistic misrecognition) to the capitalist commodity fetish which is built upon relations between things: “it is as if the retreat of the Master in capitalism was only a displacement: as if the de-fetishization in the ‘relations between men’ was paid for by the emergence of fetishism in the relations between things—by the commodity fetish” (See Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989),
25–26. For Zizek, one fetish immediately succeeds another, the interpersonal relations of feudal fetishism are repressed, and the persistence of domination and servitude emerges under capitalism as a “symptom which subverts the ideological appearance of equality, freedom and so on” (Zizek, 26). What Zizek fails to consider is the long transitional period between the two forms of fetishism, and the wrenching apart by masterlessness of the otherwise continuous but displaced fetishistic relations of mastery and servitude. The commodity fetish is not the displacement or repressed symptom of the fetishization of feudal relations between men: it is the historical displacement of the masterless man, the symbol of the defetishization of those relations. What Zizek describes is not early modern reality but history as imagined by The Tempest: a simple displacement between two forms of relations of mastery without a defetishized masterless intermission.

83. Lucien Goldmann, Cultural Creation in Modern Society, trans. by Bart Grahl (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1976), 76–78.