Intro: Carl Levin and Goldman Sachs

In April 2010, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Investigations Subcommittee held an inquiry into the role of investment banks in the financial crisis of 2008. In the hearing, Senator Carl Levin asked David Viniar, Executive Vice President of Goldman Sachs, about the way his investment bank treated its clients. Goldman Sachs sold products that its own employees in internal emails described as crappy and as junk, and at the same time bet against those products on the short side. In the fragment you are about to see, Senator Levin cannot get the executive banker to agree with him that this kind of behaviour constitutes a conflict of interests. He then tries a different approach and asks after the banker’s emotions:

Senator LEVIN. And when you heard that your employees in these emails and looking at these deals said, “God, what a shi**y deal,” “God, what a piece of crap,” when you hear your own employees or read about those in emails, do you feel anything?
Mr. VINIAR. I think that is very unfortunate to have on email. [Laughter].
Senator LEVIN. [Are you emb...] On email?
Mr. VINIAR. Please don’t take that the wrong way.
Senator LEVIN. How about feeling that way?
Mr. VINIAR. I think it is very unfortunate for anyone to have said that in any form.
Senator LEVIN. How about to believe that and sell it?
Mr. VINIAR. I think that is unfortunate, as well.
Senator LEVIN. No, that is what you should have started with.
Mr. VINIAR. You are correct. It is.
“Do you feel anything?” In a final attempt to make Viniar admit that Goldman Sachs was acting unethically, Levin begins to ask the banker if he is not embarrassed. He then registers that Viniar’s answer is not what he hoped for: the executive only thinks it unfortunate that his employees’ feelings about their products have been registered on e-mail. The senator’s appeal to the emotions has failed to bring the banker to a moral insight into the role of investment banks in the crisis on Wall Street.

As Goldman Sachs executive director Greg Smith put it in his resignation letter in the New York Times one day after the papers for this session were circulated last month: “To put the problem in the simplest terms, the interests of the client continue to be sidelined in the way the firm operates and thinks about making money.” The banking system operates on its own logic, and comes with its own structures of feeling.

Greed and capitalism

In his book The Passions and the Interests, Albert Hirschman has shown how the emotion of greed changed in the seventeenth century from an emotion that was condemned from a moral and religious perspective, to an emotion that was thought to be capable of structuring society in such a way as to profit all its members. As he describes, the idea that capitalism should be curbed by a strong authority was abandoned in the course of the seventeenth century. Philosophers increasingly turned to the expansion of commerce as a way to discipline and constrain both rulers and ruled (129). He describes how in this period it was more and more thought that “one set of passions, hitherto known variously as greed, avarice, or love of lucre, could be usefully employed to oppose and bridle such other passions as ambition, lust for power, or sexual lust” (41).

My paper looks at the work of the playwright Philip Massinger to see how his plays explore the problems of early capitalism, ethics and the emotions in the first half of the seventeenth century, a period often characterized as proto-capitalist or early capitalist. I am not proposing a teleological line of development from seventeenth-century theatre to Gordon Gekko’s motto that “greed is good”, but I do find it interesting that writers in the seventeenth century already asked questions and probed problems that are similar to the problems and questions highlighted by the banking crisis of today. How can we control greed in the
capitalist system, what is the role of authorities, and what could be the role of emotions and culture in curbing the excesses of self-interest? Massinger lived and worked in this period of transition in thinking about the emotions and ethics: whereas greed was seen as a moral sin in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it came to be viewed as a positive social force in the eighteenth century.

In the paper I circulated, I contrasted the video fragment from the inquiry with a fragment from one of Massinger’s comedies, called *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. In the play, the aristocrat Lord Lovell confronts Sir Giles Overreach, a rich man whose corrupt money-lending practices have ruined many of the characters in the play. The passage shows a similar concern with the ways in which to safeguard ethics in capitalism:

\[\text{Lord LOVELL:}\]
\[\begin{align*}
\text{Are you not frighte[ne]d with the imprecaions} \\
\text{And curses of whole families made wretched} \\
\text{By your sinister practices?}
\end{align*}\]

\[\text{Sir Giles OVERREACH:}\]
\[\begin{align*}
\text{Yes, as rocks are} \\
\text{When foamy billows split themselves against} \\
\text{Their flinty ribs; or as the moon is moved} \\
\text{When wolves with hunger pined howl at her brightness.}
\end{align*}\]

(Philip Massinger, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, 4.1.111-16)

Like Senator Levin, Lord Lovell appeals to the money-lender’s feelings as a last resort, and asks him if he is not afraid of the curses of the families whose lives he has ruined through his greed. Like David Viniar, Sir Giles Overreach is insensitive to such an appeal to his emotions. What’s more, he even explicitly comments on the fact that he is not to be moved by the wretchedness of these families, their curses, or Lord Lovell’s appeal to his feelings. Using an image from Stoic philosophy, he emphasizes that he is as unmoved as a rock is by the waves.

Philip Massinger wrote plays that were performed in London’s private theatres - the more expensive, indoor theatres that were frequented both by the
aristocracy and the richer middle classes: the merchants and investors of early capitalist London. His satiric city comedies ask questions about the rise of capitalism, risk and profit, practices of lending money at an interest, and about the changes this brought about in the fabric of society.

Structures of feeling and the early modern theatre
Traditionally, Massinger was considered a conservative playwright who catered to the tastes of the nobility in London’s private theatres. The City Madam, a satiric city comedy, was read as a conservative “rearguard action on behalf of a decaying or collapsing culture,” defending the values of the aristocracy against the rising middle classes. I argue that Massinger’s play should not be read as a critique of the middle classes, but rather as an examination of the structures of feeling generated by early capitalism, and especially the practice of usury, of lending money at an interest. As David Hawkes has stressed, usury was “too amorphous a force to be definitely blamed on a single class or group of individuals. The macrocosmic social changes it brought about were generally imagined as the results of a general, internal shift of psychological perspective” (104). The play in my view is not a class critique, but an exploration of this new psychological perspective generated by usury, and that is why it is interesting to us today.

I look at theatre, because it was one of the popular media of the time that shaped the ideas and feelings of a large number of people in London. With an average weekly audience of about 21,000 people, the commercial theatres were visited by one in eight Londoners each week. The play texts that have survived from the time both record emotional structures as they took shape in the seventeenth century, but also actively shaped these emotions by means of their performances. Raymond Williams in his concept of “structures of feeling” accords a special role to literature and other forms of art. His term refers to experiences that may seem personal and incidental, but which are in fact a more structural, social experience. He refers to it as “a kind of feeling and thinking in an embryonic phase.” Williams sees literature and art as among the very first indications that a new structure is forming. I will follow Williams’s suggestion and look at ‘structures of feeling’ in Philip Massinger’s The City Madam, to
identify the feelings that were generated by early capitalism in the first half of the seventeenth century.

In *The Culture of Usury in Renaissance England* (2010), David Hawkes argues that usury has too long been understood as an exclusively economic phenomenon, but we can in fact distinguish an early modern “culture” of usury: “the usury debate helped to mold and shape the minds that spent so much time engaged in it, so that its terms and implications influenced discourses that may appear far removed from what the modern world conceives as the ‘economic’ sphere” (1). Massinger’s *City Madam* documents such a culture of usury: the play can be read as a snapshot of the changing structures of feeling shaped by the emergence of usury. But the comedy is not merely a kind of emotional archive: a theatrical performance itself triggers and shapes the emotions of the audience, and Massinger’s metatheatrical play is well aware of this more active, shaping role of drama in structures of feeling. I will show that the play is concerned with the question what the theatre itself can do in these changing structures of feeling – through metatheatrical scenes, the play asks after the role of compassion and shame triggered by theatrical performances in the new capitalist context.

*The City Madam* (1632)  
Let me briefly introduce the main characters in Massinger’s comedy *The City Madam* to you. **Sir John Frugal** is a merchant who owes his fortune to his own industry, trades with the Indies and America, and has acquired both a knighthood and such a substantial fortune that he lends money to the aristocracy and to other citizens. **His brother Luke** is a kind of prodigal son: although the younger brother, he was his father’s favourite and inherited his money. He lived like a gallant and spent it all. Luke appeared to regret his wasteful past and speaks religiously of the importance of charity and compassion. Sir John announces that he will retire to a monastery in Louvain and leaves his brother Luke in charge of his household and possessions. Once Frugal has left the scene, Luke discovers how rich he is, and how much more money he can make through raising interest. He no longer speaks of compassion and charity, but becomes the stereotypical greedy usurer.
Usury and structures of feeling in *The City Madam*
Luke’s soliloquy just after he has first inspected the counting house shows how the concept of usury has taken possession of his thinking and feeling:

> I saw and felt it. Yet what I beheld
> And handl'd oft, did so transcend belief
> (My wonder and astonishment pass'ed o'er)
> I faintly could give credit to my senses.
> [...]
> Here lay
> A manor bound fast in skin of parchment,
> The wax continuing hard, the acres melting.
> [...] There being scarce one shire
> In Wales or England where my moneys are not
> Lent out at usury, the certain hook
> To draw in more. I am sublim’d! Gross earth
> Supports me not. I walk on air. (3.3.1-8 and 35-44)

The possession of money in this soliloquy is a sensual experience: Luke remembers the sight and touch of the various kinds of riches that he encountered in the counting house. It is not money’s capacity to buy material goods that Luke celebrates. Whereas he spent his former fortune living like a gallant, here he does not have any plans with the money: he enjoys it for its own sake. What is more, he revels in the prospect of increasing his store of money by lending it out at an interest - “the certain hook to draw in more.” His only ambition, as he puts it later, is *increase of wealth*, and that ambition shall know no bounds. His remark that he is sublim’d and walks on air can be read in this context: he no longer relies on material produce, but thrives by making money reproduce *itself*. This longing to increase his wealth is coupled in the play with a shift in his emotions and ethics: instead of compassion, Luke now pursues revenge.

I propose that the play is aimed at warning against the structures of feeling generated by early capitalism. Luke’s greed is in accordance with the early modern view of the usurer. It is not merely a stereotypical association, such as that of the Dutchman’s drunkenness. The desire to generate more money out of
money is a structural characteristic of usury, and the early modern period was well aware of the dangers of that concept. In the pamphlet *The Ruinate Fall of the Pope Vsurv*, the following definition is provided:

\(\text{Flesh: I pray you, what is Usury?}\)

\(\text{The spirit: Usury, is when a man having gotten by his labour sufficient to maintain him and his family, doth notwithstanding, devise how to become more wealthy or rich in this world.}\)

The very definition of usury, then, is a desire to acquire more money by means of lending money. Since in the case of Luke, his desire for money for its own sake first makes its appearance after his inspection of the counting house, the practice of usury is here represented as the cause of greed. Even though he has seen more money than he could spend in the counting house, he still wants to increase his store: he fetishizes the sign of money, rather than the things he can buy with it. In this interpretation of the play, it is not merely concerned with the merchant ethics of the middle classes, but with a phenomenon that also underlies the finances of the aristocracy. It is not only the rich citizens who are involved in usury: even Lord Lacy has pawned his ancestral manor for a loan with Sir John Frugal.

\(\text{The theatre, emotions and ethics in early capitalism}\)

Massinger’s *The City Madam*, then, worries about the emotional effects generated by early capitalism, and specifically the practice of lending money at an interest. At the same time, it also asks searching questions about the role of the theatre in restoring a sense of compassion and fellow-feeling in the face of self-interest and greed. If we read the play as a comment on the structures of feeling generated by the practice of usury, then the final scene can be seen to struggle with the question what the role of the theatre can be in this.

In that final scene, Sir John Frugal has returned to the city and infiltrated his household disguised like an Indian. He has promised to treat Luke to a banquet with entertainment, and now turns to the Orpheus myth in an attempt to move his brother to feel compassion for his victims.
SIR JOHN FRUGAL
And you shall hear the strength and power
Of it, the spirit of Orpheus rais’d to make it good,
And in those ravishing strains with which he mov’d
Charon and Cerberus to give him way
To fetch from hell his lost Eurydice.

[The short stage direction here in fact describes an elaborate dumb show in which the story of Orpheus and Euridice is performed]

Luke: 'Tis wondrous strange.
Frugal: Does not the object and the accent take you?
Luke: A pretty fable. But that music should
Alter in fiends their nature is to me
Impossible, since in myself I find
What I have once decreed shall know no change.

Orpheus in the Renaissance was the symbol of poetry’s capacity to move its audience to compassion. With Luke’s dismissal of the myth as a “pretty fable” that will not alter him, the play suggests that theatre does not have a weapon against the structures of feeling generated by usury. Frugal does not give up, however, and now conjures up spirits who represent the servants and debtors who suffer from Luke’s greed. They kneel to him and heave up their hands for mercy - but Luke answers this will move him “not a mote”:

Luke: Ha, ha, ha!
This move me to compassion? Or raise
One sign of seeming pity in my face?
You are deceiv’d. It rather renders me
More flinty and obdurate. A south wind
Shall sooner soften marble, and the rain
That slides down gently from his flaggy wings
O’erflow the Alps, than knees or tears or groans
Shall wrest compunction from me. (5.3.60-68)
Like Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, Luke is aware of the emotional reaction that the staging of his debtors as victims is meant to elicit, but he consciously resists that response. Similarly, Senator Carl Levin reads David Viniar the mails of his employees – he stages the emotions of Goldman Sachs bankers who are disgusted at the products they are selling to their customers. But he fails to bring Viniar to a sense of compunction, let alone compassion. Massinger’s city comedies probe the role of emotions in a capitalist society and foresee some of the problems that we are still struggling with today, in an era when the banks are supposed to regulate their own behaviour.

Although Massinger’s play shows no confidence in the power of tragical scenes to move its audience to compassion, Massinger did write a play about the social effects of usury, and must have had some faith in the effect of his play on the audience. Indeed, Massinger did not choose to write a tragedy on the subject: instead, *The City Madam* is a satirical comedy. In early modern literary theory, the genre of satirical comedy was not intended to move the audience to compassion. Rather, as Sir Philip Sidney writes in his *Defence of Poesy* (1595), the ‘bitter but wholesome iambic’ of satire and comedy produce painful emotions of shame and self-contempt in their audiences as ways of altering their actions. The experience of shame is more effective if evil actions are witnessed rather than only reported, and this is where the power of satirical comedy lies.

Senator Levin’s appeal to the emotions in the Wall Street hearing can be read in this light: in the absence of legal instruments to ascribe the blame for the financial crisis, the Senator attempts to make David Viniar admit to a sense of embarrassment over the shady deals of his investment bank. He reads out the employees’ e-mails in the public hearing to produce a painful emotion of shame, but Viniar fails to respond to this performance in the desired manner. It is in fact the satirical laughter of the audience present at the hearing that finally brings him to some sense of awareness of society’s view of the ethics of Wall Street finance and makes him briefly play the part of the contrite banker.