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Antitheatricalism and the Movement of Sexual Difference

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I am a fourth-year student, completing a major in English and minors in French and Philosophy. My interest in Renaissance literature developed during a year abroad at Lancaster University, and I have been able to continue working on this subject with the help of Dr. Jenn Lewin, who mentored an independent study course and a handful of other projects with me. One of these projects began as a question of what contemporaries of Shakespeare thought when his works were first played. Simply, I wanted to determine what opinions of the theater were circulating in early modern England and then perform an archaeological study of those texts to uncover the ideological concerns moving through them. This became a summer research project that I carried out at the Newberry Library in Chicago, the findings of which developed into my undergraduate thesis with the Gaines Center for the Humanities. This paper is an excerpt from that work.



Mentor:
Jennifer Lewin, Ph.D.
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The argument of this original and thoughtful paper is that the circumstances surrounding the creation of the financially independent early modern playhouses led to myriad controversies about the meaning of theater, waged in the period's antitheatricalist treatises, and that those controversies, more crucially, led to the ever-shifting meanings of theatrical spectacles. Mr. Bozio carefully reviews the evidence for these claims in the primary and secondary literature on his topic, noticing, for instance, that: "With the playhouse, then, performance became an independent form of discourse, not only in an economic sense of being partially liberated from royal and aristocratic patronage, but socially as well, in that the playgoers now commanded the spectacles set before them." He is particularly concerned to demonstrate the importance of anti-feminist and religious language in the work of Northbrooke, Gosson, and Stubbes, and to show how subjectivity, an important topic in contemporary studies of early modern literature and culture, emerges through such language.

Antitheatricalism and the Movement of Sexual Difference

Excerpt from Gaines Thesis

Introduction

When the first London playhouse was constructed in 1567, the meaning of the theater as a social institution was anything but fixed. Not only was the *Red Lion* amphitheater shortly replaced by the *Theatre* in 1576 and the *Curtain* in 1577, but these two successors faced a new type of playhouse in the private hall of Paul's Choir School, built in 1575 to host a boy's company rather than professional players. The first type of performance venue was modeled on bear-baiting pits while the other looked to the banquet hall for inspiration; this difference meant that the immense space of the public playhouse opened performance to thousands of playgoers each afternoon, whereas the size of the hall restricted its audiences to a few hundred people, suggesting that drama was something of an elite pastime (Gurr, 1996, 13-23).

The architectural difference between the public and the private playhouses demonstrates that, at its inception, the early modern theater was gesturing toward two contexts for performance. Here, the physical space of performance can be taken as a manifestation of the ideological architecture surrounding the texts of the plays themselves, in which the construction of the playhouses reflects two interpretations of the meaning of drama; the public playhouse treats performance as popular entertainment, akin to bear-baiting, whereas the hall presents drama as a class ritual, anticipating the masques of the Jacobean court. As Gurr (1996, 13) notes, the differences between the two houses "indicate more about the social antecedents of each type

than any difference in their commercial function.” The fact of this duality, in which playing negotiated itself as entertainment and as ritual, suggests that a profound ambiguity governed the identity of the early modern theater at the moment of its birth.

Indeed, as the theater eschewed its medieval origins in church pageantry in order to establish social and economic independence, the playhouses became the symbol for a new type of performance that was emerging in the late sixteenth century. Drama was no longer limited to being “either religious, and sponsored by local churches, or presented by traveling actors at inns and great houses throughout England,” as had been the case in the medieval period (Pollard, 2004, xi). Rather, as Agnew (1986, 17-56) argues, the playhouse converted performance into a form of market exchange, decreasing its status as religious ritual while simultaneously giving the playgoers a means of shaping the stage through their patronage. This power is reflected in the changing repertoire of the playing companies, constantly amended in order to keep the playgoers interested.

According to Gurr (1996, 119), “Henslowe’s *Diary* ... was above all an account of how intimate the interaction was between what the playgoers enjoyed and what the impresarios bought for them.” With the playhouse, then, performance became an independent form of discourse, not only in an economic sense of being partially liberated from royal and aristocratic patronage, but socially as well, in that the playgoers now commanded the spectacles set before them. Made by the market in this way, the theater developed a Protean quality as it moved from the church to the public and private playhouses, as its identity emerged from this movement of social and economic differences.

Given this instability with regard to the identity of the playhouse, it is not surprising that the theater became the subject of a fierce ideological campaign, waged by the independent factions of preachers, former playwrights, and city officials, who took up the pen in order to protest the disorder associated with performance. These antitheatricalists, as they have been termed, wrote in fear “of the collapse of identity within a new symbolic space, itself located in the incomprehensible new economic and social conditions of developing London.” (MacCabe, 1998, 13) Responding to the ambiguities discussed above — the instability regarding the meaning of performance, caused by the emergence of the playhouse — critics published a series of treatises in which the theater is depicted as the devil’s tool for drawing the audience into idleness and sensuality, as a pageantry of lies that undermine the distinction between reality and representation. In this way, the antitheatricalists attempted to fix the meaning of the playhouse through description and rhetoric. Seeking to limit what they considered to be the subversive potential of the theater, they wrote commentary on the playhouse in order to construct and thereby control its meaning in early modern England.

Considering the antitheatricalist campaign, one must wonder how its treatises were constructed, not in the corporeal sense in which one investigates how the author penned and printed a manuscript, but in terms of the internal, ideological construction through which the text produces meaning. How the text writes itself as an argument, how it structures its claims through juxtaposition, how it employs concepts such as “idleness” and “sensuality” to construct a meaning for the theater — these must be examined in order to understand what the antitheatricalist treatises were attempting to do with regard to the theater and

the social milieu in which it functioned.

The first printed attack on the stage, John Northbrooke’s *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Daucing, Vaine plaies or Enterludes with other idle past, &c, commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reprovved, by the authoritie of the worde of God and auncient Writers*, formulated many of the claims that would determine the antitheatricalist campaign. Although it is instructive to consider the development of these concepts in later treatises, such as Stephen Gosson’s *The Schoole of Abuse*, one can simply note this movement through a reading of Gosson’s later text, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, and thereby condense the argument for the sake of space.

At the same time that Gosson’s treatise contains echoes of these other texts, it extends antitheatricalist discourse to the point that its ideological underpinning, the concern for the position of women in early modern society, is made manifest. The following analysis demonstrates the validity of this thesis by tracing the movement of antitheatricalism through *Plays Confuted*, beginning with an ontological argument taken from Northbrooke’s treatise and concluding with the development of this ontology into a patriarchal concern.



Analysis of Gosson’s Treatise

As noted above, Gosson’s *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* writes itself through to the claims of earlier antitheatricalist treatises, notably John Northbrooke’s *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Daucing, Vaine plaies or Enterludes with other idle past, &c, commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reprovved, by the authoritie of the worde of God and auncient Writers*. In that text, Northbrooke constructs an understanding of human existence that would become indispensable to later critics of the stage. He makes church-going a necessary fulfillment of one’s soul in being; that is: “the ende that we were created and redeemed for, that is, to learne to know God, to honour him, worship him, glorifie him, to feare him, love him, and obeye him.” (Northbrooke, 1579, C2r-v)

By the fact of one’s existence, a person is obligated to serve the Lord, a claim that the treatise pushes further to suggest that without this fulfillment of purpose that comes from worshipping God, one simply does not exist. Humans suffer as a result of “our owne infirmities, for that we are nothing, we knowe nothing, nor can perceive anie thing, as of our selves, without the helpe of Gods spirit, and the word of his promise.” (Northbrooke, 1579, C2v) Essentially, this is an

ontological argument, positing that humans exist and have knowledge to the degree that they serve God.

Taking this ontology as its foundation, Northbrooke's treatise proceeds to explain how a person's daily life should be structured in order to fulfill this divine purpose. Regarding the world, the text explains that while everything is inherently good, being created by God, these good things turn into sinful temptations when they turn away from their own good nature: "All which things of them selves, and by themselves, are good and lawfull. But when these things are occasions to hinder us, and drawe us backe from our obedience unto our God in his word, then are they turned into sinnes." (Northbrooke, 1579, D2v). In other words, sin is that which distracts a person from the worship of God, and one is required to direct all personal actions to the fulfillment of this purpose, as the text explains in quoting Dionysus: "Thou livest not to eate, but eate as thou mayest live: For there must bee a government to use it for thy health, and not to incontinence." (Northbrooke, 1579, D2r) Because all actions must return one to the holy purpose of living, it is necessary to avoid those pastimes that, being marked by a fundamental idleness, draw one into a sinful laziness. Thus one "forbid[s] (by Paules words) evil and unprofitable artes, as of Enterludes, Stage plaies, Juglings, (& false sleights, witchcrafts, Speculations, Divinations, or fortune tellings, and all other vaine and naughtie curious kinde of arts." (Northbrooke, 1579, F1r) These various activities are comparable in that each one constitutes a distraction that draws the individual away from the proper worship of God and into an idyll of sin. According to the assumptions of Northbrooke's treatise, each one entails the risk of returning the sinner to a state of nothingness, outside the meaning that comes with God's creation.

Gosson's *Plays Confuted* reproduces this ontology in articulating a distinction between carnal delight and spiritual pleasure. While the latter concerns one's purpose in existence, the former draws one into the nothingness of sin: "Carnall delight is the rest of sensuall appetite in the thing desired when it is felt," which suggests that performance provokes the body into desiring the spectacles it sees before it, both on-stage and among the bodies of other playgoers (Gosson, 1582, F3v). In distinction to carnal delight, one finds that spiritual pleasure is simply "the operation of vertue consisting in a meditation of the life to come purchased to us by the bloode of Christ, & reveiled for our comforte in the word of God." (Gosson, 1582, F3v) Spiritual pleasure can only be experienced in a life devoted to God, meaning that the theater, in stimulating the senses, offers a carnal delight that

distracts playgoers from devotion. The Fourth Action makes this argument more explicit: "Tragedies and Comedies stirre up affections, and affections are naturally planted in that part of minde that is common to us with brute beastes." (Gosson, 1582, F1r) Repeating the claim that playing encourages sensuality and thereby brings about a corruption of human nature, the treatise makes the assertion that the theater turns God's noble creatures into beasts.

As *Plays Confuted* develops this argument, it articulates the spiritual repercussions of playgoing, further drawing on the ontology of Northbrooke's treatise to do so. Because the theater emphasizes carnal delight at the expense of spiritual pleasure, it distracts the playgoers from their existence as spiritual entities, as beings created by God for the purpose of serving His divinity. Thus, the text states: "Our life is not his, excepte wee crucifie the flesh, with the affections and concupiscences of the same, we crucifie not the affections of our flesh, when we resorte unto plays to stirre them upp, therefore running to playes we live to ourselves, and not to Christ." (Gosson, 1582, F8r) Thus the carnal delight that comes from playing has the effect of turning the playgoer away from God. Living for their own desires rather than according to their divine purpose, the playgoers repeat the sins that Christ redeemed in the Passion, effectively demanding that the Savior be crucified a second time rather than reform their ways. The text thereby implies that people exist solely for the purpose of worshipping the divine, so that it repeats the ontology of Northbrooke's treatise in critiquing the pleasures of playing.

Plays Confuted uses the First Action to develop these assertions into a cosmological argument, in which the world is depicted as a battleground for the forces of good and evil. As the treatise states to the reader, "this life of ours is a continuall warrefare, a pitchte field, wherein, as the lickerous toungue of our mother Eve hath justly provoked the Lorde, to set the devill and us at deadly feude." (Gosson, 1582, B5r) Drawing from the distinction between carnal delight and spiritual pleasure, the passage implies that human life consists in navigating between these two experiences. The text in turn reinforces this divide, as it associates the fall of humanity with the "tongue of our mother Eve," which, as the fleshy instrument by which the soul expresses itself, represents the intersection of the body and the spirit. In this context, the line suggests that as the literal embodiment of human frailty, the flesh is what condemns the soul to continual warfare on earth.

According to Gosson's treatise, Satan preys on the weakness of the flesh as a means of corrupting the soul. The reader is therefore warned: "he hath sett up many trappes, shott many nettes, bayted many hookes, to take us, to tangle us, to thrattle us. Which is enough to make us suspecte everie pleasure that hee profereth." (Gosson, 1582, B5v) The hunting imagery of this passage suggests that the Devil, using pleasure as a lure, captures people by depriving them of their human qualities, by turning them into the brute beasts that the treatise describes as populating the playhouse. As "the Prince of this world" rather than a king in any incorporeal realm, the Devil commands the flesh with carnal delight, the very means by which he draws individuals away from their spiritual obligation to God (Gosson, 1582, B5r-v).

Because the theater also entices people with idle pleasures and distracts them from their spiritual life, the treatise describes it as an instrument of the Devil. At a time when plague was rampant, the Devil

devised playing as a means of corrupting the pagan Romans: he “taught the Romanes by the oracles of Sibilla to set forth plaies to appease the anger of the Gods, that the pestilence ceasing after this solemnising of their plaies, might nusstle them in idolatrie and wantonnesse ever after.” (Gosson, 1582, C1v) Thus, the Devil conceived of plays as a means of teaching vice and concealed this function in convincing the Romans that theater could save them from the plague. The illusion that playing benefits a community merely disguises the theater’s function as a satanic device.

Having defined the theater in this way, the treatise interprets the struggle between the church and the playhouse as evidence of a cosmological war between God and the Devil. At the same time that God manifests Himself in the church and leads his followers to spiritual pleasure, the Devil occupies the playhouse in order to command his minions, which the treatise explains in an extended comparison:

Because that as in the Church singing and praying the Lorde together as hee him selfe hath instructed us in his worde, is a sign by whiche the true God is assured that we sacrifice our hearts unto him with the Calves of our lips: so the Divell, perceiving us to advaunce the offeringes or sacrifices of the Gentiles, after the same manner of houses, of apparell, of Stages, of Plaies, that he instructed the Gentiles by his Oracles, hath greate cause to bee merrie, and to holde him selfe honoured thereby. (Gosson, 1582, C2v)

The Devil, in addition to inventing performance as a tool for corrupting souls, has converted the playhouse into his chapel, using the space to enjoy the same worship that God is shown in church. Because playing is a stimulation of the senses, and therefore a means of drawing the playgoer out of a state of pious devotion, the theater is thoroughly the Devil’s institution.

With this religious foundation, *Plays Confuted* devotes its Second Action to an analysis of performance, seeking to demonstrate that the pedagogical theater advocated in Thomas Lodge’s *In Defence of Poetry, Music, and Stage-Plays* is impossible given the nature of theatrical representation. Although the “Yonge Master Lodge” asserts that “a Play is the School-mistresse of life; the lookinge glasse of manners; and the image of trueth,” the treatise counters these definitions by stating that plays represent an assortment of vices and virtues (Gosson, 1582, C4r). As such, they do not function as a moral guide but merely reproduce the confusion of everyday life: “The best play you can picke out, is but a mixture of good and evill, how can it be then the Schoolemistres of life?” (Gosson, 1582, C5v)

In making this assertion, Gosson’s treatise reveals its preference for a didactic theater, one that does not expect the playgoers to make judgments for themselves but rather gives them explicit moral instructions, much like a sermon. Here, the antitheatricalist interest in the church is coupled with a fear that people do not have the authority to judge moral dilemmas on their own. As the treatise explains:

At Stage Plays it is ridiculous, for the parties accused to replye, no indifferency of judgement can be had, beecause the worste sorte of people have the hearing of it, which in respecte of

there ignorance, of there ficklenes, and of there furie, are not to bee admitted in place of judgement. (Gosson, 1582, C8v)

Because individuals lack the ability to make good judgments, to interpret morality in the way that Gosson’s treatise demands, it argues that the mixture of vice and virtue in playing will always lead the playgoers astray. In merely representing the continual warfare that defines the playgoers’ time on earth, performance does not help them to resist the temptations of the flesh but merely plunges them back into confusion.

Having critiqued the plays on the basis of this ambiguity, *Plays Confuted* enters into a discussion of the nature of playing itself and, in doing so, develops the first sustained analysis of representation in the antitheatricalist campaign. The treatise begins by stating: “The perfectest Image is that, which maketh the thing to seeme, neither greater nor lesse, then indeede it is.” (Gosson, 1582, D5r) Because this definition does not distinguish between empirical and allegorical truth, it would seem that a symbol could be a perfect image in representing an abstract reality. The text, however, immediately negates this possibility by objecting to the fictions represented onstage: “those things are fained, that never were, as Cupid and Psyche played at Paules.” (Gosson, 1582, D5r) Accordingly, one finds that allegorical representations, such as those of Love and Mind, are objectionable because the symbols themselves never existed. Even in dealing with historical subjects, plays misrepresent their referents and thereby fail to appear as perfect images: “if a true Historie be taken in hand, ... the Poets drive it most commonly unto such pointes, as may best showe the maiestie of their pen, in Tragically Speeches; ... or wring in a shewe, to furnish the Stage, when it is to bare.” (Gosson, 1582, D5r) According to the text, then, plays are incapable of offering a true representation, either as a result of their content or the means by which this content is rendered onstage.

From these observations, Gosson’s treatise critiques the theater according to the nature of its representations, using an epistemological argument that implicates playing in the same manner as its effects on the playgoers. Borrowing a definition from Aquinas, the text begins this argument by defining a lie as:

an acte executed where it ought not. This acte is discerned by outward signes, every man must show him selfe outwardly to be such as indeed he is. Outward signes

consist either in words or gestures, to declare our selves by wordes or by gestures to be otherwise than we are, is an act executed where it should not, therefore a lie. (Gosson, 1582, E5r)

In equating an action with outward signs, this passage argues a lie to be more than a deception of words. Rather, a lie is the act of misrepresenting, the work of introducing a gap between truth and the signs that declare it. Not only does performance constitute a lie, therefore, but this description points to the epistemological disorder caused by playing as well. Because the players use words and gestures to persuade an audience that they are not what they are, they undermine the distinction between reality and representation.

Plays Confuted mixes this argument on the relationship of lies to playing with the same patriarchal concern. The cross-dressing boy, in putting the signifiers of sexual identity into play, undermines the distinction between the sexes that makes patriarchy possible. The treatise states this concern as follows:

The law of God very straightly forbids men to put on women's garments. Garments are set down for signs distinctive between sex and sex: to take unto us those garments that are manifest signs of another sex is to falsify, forge, and adulterate, contrary to the word of God. (Gosson, 1582, E3v)

The anxiety of this passage emphasizes that the outward signs of garments are necessary for distinguishing one sex from another, which suggests that the reality of any physical difference can be completely undermined by the misrepresentation that is cross-dressing. Indeed, Greenblatt (1989, 80-1) notes that, in early modern studies of the body, the biological difference between men and women was profoundly mutable. The vagina and the penis were understood to be the same organ, situated inside or outside the body according to its temperature, as Galen explains in his medical treatise *On the usefulness of the parts of the body*:

the female was made cold, and the immediate consequence of this is the imperfection of the parts, which cannot emerge on the outside on account of the defect in the heat... [R]emaining within, that which would have become the scrotum if it had emerged on the outside, was made into the substance of the uteri. (Aughterson, 1995, p. 48)

Although temperature refers to the heat of the body as it is formed in the uterus, and seems to suggest that once one's sex is determined, it cannot change, the rest of the passage implies that sexual identity, being determined by the position of a single organ, may metamorphose if given the right conditions. Greenblatt (1988, p. 81) cites an example of a French peasant girl who transformed into a boy while running through the fields; "Marie in midpursuit leaped over a ditch, 'at the very moment the genitalia and male rod came to be developed,'" a change ostensibly caused by having stretched her legs "too wide."

If such an act can cause the vagina to fall outside of the body and thereby transform into the penis, then cross-dressing also has the ability to cause this organ to change its position. Altering the heat of the body with different attire, one could effectively become the sex that one was pretending to be. Not only does cross-dressing play with the signs required for telling the sexes apart, but it also points to the moment in which representation can turn into reality, in which the transvestite becomes the impersonated sex.

In Phillip Stubbes' *The Anatomy of Abuse* (1583), the relationship between cross-dressing and the metamorphosis of sexual identity is succinctly articulated, demonstrating that this concern was circulating in the discourse of the antitheatricalism. Describing female transvestites who roam the streets of London, the treatise states: "these women maie not improperly bee called Hermaphroditi, that is, Monsters of bothe kindes, halfe women, halfe men," since "to weare the apparell of an other sexe, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde." (Stubbes, 1583, F8r) The antitheatricalist campaign against cross-dressing, then, is an attempt to control clothing as a sign that determines, rather than reflects, sexual identity. Thus Targoff (1997, 52) states of the antitheatricalists, "Behind their arguments against theatrical hypocrisy lies a far more profound concern: that what began as a purely hypocritical performance would have become a transformative experience." This section of *Plays Confuted* attempts to stop a play of sexual identity, literally with regard to the placement of the vagina/penis and symbolically according to the position of gender in patriarchal society.

In advancing this critique of the theater, *Plays Confuted* develops the concepts circulating in antitheatricalist discourse in order to write a comprehensive attack that would end the English stage forever. Taking the ontology of Northbrooke's treatise as its foundation, the text articulates a distinction between carnal delight and spiritual pleasure, adding that the former draws one away from a necessary devotion to God. Insofar as the critique of sensuality is an attempt to preserve the sanctity of human reason, *Plays Confuted* develops this argument in stating that theater confuses the playgoers by representing a mixture of vice and virtue. Because playing is nothing more than seeming to be what one is not, the theater is a pageantry of lies, an affront to reason in its corruption of distinction between reality and representation. Its argument on the immorality of cross-dressing, when interpreted in light of early modern theories of the body, reveals an antitheatricalist attempt to fix sexual identity by controlling the signs of its construction.



Summary

When the first playhouses removed performance from the religious context that had controlled it throughout the medieval period, the theater became associated with the marketplace, offering plays as a commodity that could be purchased with a penny. For the antitheatricalists, this transformation led the self away from God, literally in taking playgoers out of the church and symbolically in corrupting the soul through sensual pleasure. As Hawkes (1999, 262) asserts, “The antitheatricalists argue that the idolatrous commodification of the theater produces a fleshy, carnal mode of perception — a thoroughgoing *objectification* of consciousness.” The concern that develops in Northbrooke’s treatise, that playing celebrates corporeality and, thereby, turns a playgoer into a nothingness of sin, has its corollary in this perception of the theater, that it reifies consciousness and, like a marketplace of the soul, puts this thing into circulation. *Plays Confuted* offers the most explicit evidence of this antitheatricalist concern, because its critique of playing is expressed as the fear that this inherently deceitful art plays with the signs that determine identity.

Because costume has the power to rewrite sexual identity, the cross-dresser is a literal embodiment of this threat. His body functions as a site of ambiguity, determined according to representation, as Sedigner notes in the following passage:

the crossdresser is not a visible object but rather a structure enacting the failure of a dominant epistemology, in which knowledge is equated with visibility. This epistemology subtends an early modern sexual politics that sought to inscribe gender on the individual body not as representation but as ontology. (1997, 64)

Cross-dressing suggests that the self, like sexual identity, is not stable but rather constructed through the signs by which it represents itself. Determining identity as a function of discourse, playing represents selfhood as the exchange of signifiers, a circulation that mirrors the transactions of the emerging market. Considering this pseudo-commodification of the self to be an adulteration of the soul, antitheatricalists “were trying to stop the visible transformations of the self encouraged by the theater and the marketplace,” as Howard (1994, 35) states, “by championing the view that one’s place was in the hierarchical social order determined by God and was, properly speaking, immutable.” Constructing the theater as a haven for sensual pleasure, as a space in which lies may become truth, antitheatricalism responds to the emergence of the playhouse by attempting to write the self as unchanging. Taking “playing” as its object, this discourse aimed to construct the playhouse through language and thereby finalize the meaning of this institution by making it a signifier of sin.

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