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# ANTITHEATRICALITY AND IRRATIONALITY: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

Kent R. Lehnhof

Over the last three decades, antitheatrical authors like Stephen Gosson, Phillip Stubbes, and William Prynne have become increasingly visible in the literary and cultural studies of the early modern period. Even so, the tendency has been to treat these authors as ideological extremists: reactionary hacks whose opposition to stage plays originates in outrageous ideas of the self, impossible notions of right and wrong, and bizarre beliefs about humanity's susceptibility to external suggestion. This characterization can be traced back to several of the pioneering studies in the field, including Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1985) and Laura Levine's *Men in Women's Clothing* (1994), each of which takes the irrationality of the antitheatricalists as a starting point, as well as a structuring assumption. Both of these books have shaped our critical discourse: virtually everyone who has written about antitheatricalism in recent years has been influenced by and is indebted to the readings that these books present.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, I believe that these groundbreaking studies plowed the field in such a way as to distort some of its contours. In the present essay, I offer a careful response in hopes of giving us a better sense of the lay of the land.

While it might seem misguided or querulous of me to critique these works in close detail, it is not my intent to deny or disparage their important contributions to the discipline. Indeed, it is precisely because these books have been so influential that a response is worthwhile. My aim in reviewing their claims is to cast light on our collective tendency to misconstrue the antitheatricalists' meaning, which in turn keeps us from appreciating what early modern antitheatrical debates are all about. It is simply not the case that the antitheatricalists attack the stage because they have outlandish beliefs about the self, while the apologists defend it because they have well-considered ones. In point of fact, the conceptualization of human nature that informs the antitheatrical tracts is recognizably Protestant and culturally dominant in early modern England.

Nevertheless, we often ignore this orthodoxy to emphasize instead what seems illogical or eccentric. In doing so, we oversimplify a complex sociocultural situation and turn antitheatrical discourse into a cartoonish version of itself. In what follows, I seek to paint a more telling portrait by showing how this assumption of irrationality has colored our criticism, causing us to miss many of the qualifications, clarifications, and theorizations that make antitheatrical writings more compelling than we give them credit for being. The antitheatricalists are not as senseless as we have supposed, and their writings can give us real insight into the acute moral and ethical problems posed by playmaking in early modern England, as well as an ampler sense of the operation, influence, and significance of the professional stage.

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As one of the seminal studies in the field, Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* is remarkable in a number of ways. Its scope is impressive (ranging from antiquity to modernity), and its erudition is simply astounding. Nevertheless, the material that Barish chooses to present and the manner in which he does so leave little doubt that we are meant to see the antitheatricalists as incoherent and illogical. In the case of the early modern moment, this is done by paying disproportionate attention to William Prynne, the most ardent of all the English polemicists. Though Barish readily admits that Prynne is an exceptional figure—not so much an example of antitheatrical thought as a grotesque caricature of it—he nevertheless turns to Prynne again and again to represent the antitheatrical position. Indeed, the chapter in Barish's book that focuses on the early modern English controversy ("Puritans and Proteans") quotes Prynne four times as frequently as any other author.<sup>2</sup>

This quotational bias makes for interesting reading (since Prynne's tone and style are nothing if not striking), but it ultimately encourages us to think of the whole of antitheatrical ideology in terms of Prynne's particular intemperance, as if the extreme were the mean. This has the effect of undermining the enterprise—an effect that Barish only intensifies by making pseudoscientific claims about Prynne's mental condition. For even as Barish makes Prynne out to be the model of the antitheatrical movement, he labels the man a "megalomaniac" and describes his excursus against the stage as "a logorrhagic nightmare" and "an exercise in pathology."<sup>3</sup> According to Barish, no one would even consider writing a text like Prynne's *Histrion-mastix* (1632) unless he was trying to "to work

off a staggering load of resentment and anxiety.” *Histrion-mastix* is, Barish advises, the work of one who is “terrified, maddened, by the fear of total breakdown” (87). By placing Prynne’s writings within such a frame, Barish shifts the focus from antitheatricalism per se to the neuroses from which it is supposed to spring. By treating every statement as a symptom of some deeper disturbance, Barish renders Prynne’s actual objections irrelevant: the ravings of a troubled mind. Such an approach is patently prejudicial. One can only wonder how close we are coming to an accurate understanding of the antitheatrical movement when Barish is filtering all of it to us through the life and writings of one whom he alleges to be either insane or possessed: “goaded by a devil,” as Barish writes, “. . . to blacken the theater with lunatic exaggeration” (87).

When treating antitheatrical authors other than Prynne, Barish is not as heavy-handed, but he continues to suggest that they should not be taken seriously. After pointing out, for instance, that Stephen Gosson faults players for violating the Deuteronomic prohibition against men wearing women’s garments, Barish writes, “Like other antitheatricalists . . ., Gosson stubbornly overlooks the long tradition according to which a number of female saints, in apostolic days, dressed as men in order to escape their persecutors” (90). By claiming that Gosson “stubbornly overlooks” this tradition, Barish implies that Gosson argues in bad faith, willfully omitting important information. Yet Barish nowhere establishes that an early modern Protestant like Gosson would have known about or approved of these cross-dressed saints from the first century. Furthermore, Barish glosses over the fact that historical examples of women dressing as men does not exactly authorize men to dress as women—especially when they do so not to preserve their lives but to please their paying customers. Nevertheless, Barish’s insinuation here, as elsewhere, is that the antitheatricalists are untrustworthy. To argue as they do, one must either be either mentally imbalanced (like Prynne) or intellectually dishonest (like Gosson).

Of course, Barish is not exactly enamored of the early modern apologists, either. He describes Thomas Heywood as “spectacularly inept” and savages his *Apology for Actors* (1612) as an “extraordinarily thoughtless piece of polemic” (119, 118). Of this treatise, Barish claims, “It would be hard to imagine a more inept ‘apology.’ . . . Heywood’s bungling is such that he is constantly thrusting weapons into the hands of his adversaries” (119–20). However, it must be noted that the pejoratives applied to Heywood are of a different order than those applied to the antitheatricalists. Whereas Prynne was insane, Heywood was simply incompetent. And by portraying Heywood as ham-fisted rather than hysterical, Barish implies that the case to be made for the theater is perfectly reasonable and

coherent. The only reason Heywood cannot pull it off is because he is “slack,” “desultory,” “artless,” and “clumsy” (117, 118, 121).

Throughout *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, then, Barish treats antitheatricalism as precisely that—a prejudice. This assumption, however, does us no favors. When we tell ourselves the antitheatricalists are irrational, we tend to read them ungenerously, which causes us to misconstrue their meaning. We can see this happening throughout Levine’s *Men in Women’s Clothing*. When Levine, for instance, writes about the pamphlets of Stephen Gosson, she describes them as eliding all forms of human agency. According to Levine, Gosson’s pamphlets portray humanity as altogether lacking in will or volition—robots who have been programmed to respond automatically to external stimuli:

Gosson’s view of human behavior implies a kind of “domino theory” of the self. Human behavior is a chain of degenerative action in which each act leads automatically to the next—(“from pyping to playing, from play to pleasure, from pleasure to slouth, from slouth to sleepe, from sleepe to sinne, from sinne to death, from death to the Divel”). Each action mechanically triggers the next without will or volition. In fact it is as if the will has been permanently disarmed, rendered inoperative.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the individual will that Gosson is supposed to disregard is right there in the quoted passage. It’s just that Levine breaks it off before it has time to appear. If we read Gosson’s sentence all the way to the end, we see that he makes the whole process of “preferment” conditional upon our consent:

[Poetry] preferres you too Pyping, from Pyping to playing, from play to pleasure, from pleasure to slouth, from slouth too sleepe, from sleepe too sinne, from sinne to death, from death to the deuill, *if you take your learning apace, and passe through euery forme without reuolting.*<sup>5</sup>

Though Gosson envisions seduction as a slippery slope, he not only allows but also encourages us to resist or “revolt.” Contrary to the claim that agency is inoperative in his account, Gosson grants us power—at any point in the process—to dig in our heels and arrest our descent.

This might seem like a small thing, but it attests to our collective tendency to sensationalize antitheatrical discourse at the same time that it

illustrates how this tendency can take us off track. In *Men in Women's Clothing*, this inclination is pervasive, manifesting itself in the first paragraph of the first chapter. This paragraph (which also serves as the book's blurb) generates considerable energy and interest by alleging an escalation or intensification in antitheatrical discourse over time:

Sometime in 1579, in a pamphlet which was to establish the terms of attack and defense for another sixty years, Stephen Gosson made the curious remark that theater "effeminated" the mind. Four years later, in a pamphlet twice the size, Phillip Stubbes clarified this claim even as he heightened it by insisting that male actors who wore women's clothing could *literally* "adulterate" male gender. Fifty years later in a one-thousand-page tract which may have hastened the closing of the theatres, William Prynne described a man whom women's clothing had *literally* caused to "degenerate" into a woman. In the years of mounting pamphlet war about the stage, the vague sense that theater could somehow soften the responses of the audience had been replaced by the fear—expressed in virtually biological terms—that theatre could structurally transform men into women. (10, my emphasis)

What this escalation ostensibly reveals is the irrationality of the enterprise: the antitheatricalists allow their anxieties to spiral out of control until they are making incredible claims about the playhouse's power to transform men into women, quite literally turning penises into vaginas. This particular escalation, however, is more an effect of Levine's rhetoric than it is Gosson's or Stubbes's or Prynne's. As my italics aim to show, Levine creates a sense of intensification by placing the word "literally" before the word pulled from Stubbes and the word pulled from Prynne. Were it not for this adverb, there is little in the sequence *effeminate* → *adulterate* → *degenerate* that would point us in the direction of increasing literality. It only does so in Levine's text because she modifies the last two terms. When these terms are returned to context, however, we find that they do not really carry the weight of literality that Levine would have them bear.

The relevant passage in the Stubbes text, which glances at the practice of using boy actors to impersonate women, focuses on apparel, not anatomy. "Our Apparel," Stubbes writes, "was giuen vs as a signe distinctiue to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therefore [for] one to weare the Apparel

of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the verities of his owne kinde."<sup>6</sup> Since the thing that is said to be adulterated here—namely, “verity,” or truth—is so abstract, it is difficult to read this passage “in virtually biological terms.” Unless we agree that for Stubbes the “truth of mankind” is a penis, we are hard-pressed to interpret this statement anatomically, as an escalation of Gosson’s anxieties.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the degeneration discussed by Prynne does not lend itself to a literal reading. As with Stubbes, the term appears in a complaint about cross-dressing. It is evident, though, that Prynne’s attention is on the accoutrements of gender, not its genital structures. In the process of describing the degeneration of the misattired man, Prynne refers to clothing, footwear, gait, and voice—none of which comprises the anatomical transformation we have been led to expect:

Doth not that valiant man, that man of courage who is admirable in his armes, and formidable to his enemies degenerate into a woman with his veiled face? he lets his coate hange downe to his ankles, he twists a girdle about his breast, he puts on women’s shoes, and after the manner of women, he puts a cawle upon his head; moreover he carries about a distaffe with wooll, and drawes out a thred with his right hand, wherewith he hath formerly borne a trophie, and he extenuateth his spirit and voyce into a shriller and womanish sound.<sup>8</sup>

While it is true that Prynne sees the cross-dressed man as assuming the manners and mannerisms of a woman, this is not the same thing as becoming one in a biological or structural sense. Like Stubbes before him, Prynne is clearly anxious about effeminization, but Levine misrepresents these concerns when she makes them more literal (and therefore more outlandish) than they really are.

As an alternative to Levine’s literalistic approach, we would do well to consider a number of more recent studies showing that sexually coded language in early modern usage often has more to do with morality than with morphology. Gina Hausknecht, for instance, has demonstrated that even as John Milton uses gendered terms like “manly” and “masculine” in his prose writings to refer to those who are committed to Christian liberty and civic virtue, he does so without any especial regard for anatomy. Men can be insufficiently masculine, and women are not precluded from assuming “masculine” moral positions. Accordingly, Milton’s discourse of manliness should not be taken literally: it is “about the mind, and very

specifically not about the body.”<sup>9</sup> I propose that the same is generally true of authors like Gosson, Stubbes, and Prynne. Before we adopt an anatomistic interpretation of their fears of effeminization, we should remember that antitheatricalism is first and foremost an ethical discourse. As such, its primary frame of reference is not material but moral. Consequently, when antitheatrical authors use words like “effeminization,” “adulteration,” and “degeneration,” it is far more likely that they are referring to a process of spiritual corruption whereby virtue is turned to vice than they are a process of genital transformation in which penises are turned into vaginas. The latter process may be fantastical, but the former is not hard to imagine at all. One need not abandon logic to think that a lascivious interlude might induce an otherwise upright individual to slacken his (or her) “manly” temperance and slide into “womanish” lust. As soon as we entertain the idea that the antitheatricalists’ rhetoric of *manliness* and *effeminateness* refers to moral postures more than genital structures, much of their much-noted irrationality evaporates.

If we persist, however, in reading antitheatrical discourse pathologically, we cannot help but come to imperfect conclusions, as Levine does when she decides that the subjective model set forth in the antitheatrical tracts is profoundly contradictory. Levine reaches this verdict after observing that antitheatrical authors maintain—at one and the same time—that the self is

1. Fixed and stable
2. Pliant and susceptible
3. Inherently womanish
4. Inherently monstrous and beastly
5. Inherently empty

Taking these various alternatives to be mutually exclusive, Levine interprets their copresence in antitheatrical discourse as evidence of its underlying irrationality, yet this alleged incoherence is more illusory than actual, as becomes clear when we put pressure on points 1 and 2. Though Levine claims that the antitheatricalists contradict themselves by suggesting that the self is simultaneously stable and susceptible, these authors do not describe the self as being stable or fixed. They routinely affirm, as Prynne does in *Histrion-mastix*, that God has apportioned “a uniforme distinct and proper being” to every creature.<sup>10</sup> But “uniforme distinct and proper” is not the same as “fixed and stable.” Whereas the second set of terms implies that change is *impossible* (an ontological claim), the first set of terms implies only that change is *imprudent* (an ethical claim). Neither

Barish nor Levine is mindful of this difference, but it remains meaningful nonetheless.<sup>11</sup> Attending to it allows us to achieve a more precise understanding of antitheatrical discourse. Specifically, it enables us to see that when antitheatrical authors insist upon the propriety and distinctness of our divinely ordained identities, they are not claiming that we cannot change who we are but only that we cannot do so without risking condemnation (for who are we to second-guess God, trying to alter or improve upon his omniscient assignments?). Far from supposing the self to be immutable or inalterable, the antitheatricalists are well aware that it can be fashioned and refashioned. This is precisely why the dissimulative practices of the theaters are so dangerous. Such being the case, the antitheatricalists stress the importance of divinely ordained identities—not to say that these are fixed and stable but only to say that it would be good if they were.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the antitheatricalists do not necessarily contradict themselves when they imply that human beings are inherently womanish, monstrous, and beastly, all at the same time. To a modern reader, these categories might seem disparate or mutually exclusive—so much so that the antitheatricalists' failure to distinguish between them appears utterly nonsensical. To an early modern Englishman, though, those who are comprehended within these various categories are more or less alike in their collective incontinence. Lacking the self-restraint and integrity that are associated throughout the period with men and manliness, they are equivalently, even interchangeably, "unmanly." In other words, the antitheatricalists do not contradict themselves when they say that each of us is inherently womanish, monstrous, and beastly because each of these terms can indicate roughly the same thing—namely, a state of appetitive sensuality that is imagined to be the opposite of idealized manhood.<sup>13</sup>

But even if this is true, how can the self be inherently monstrous and womanish if it is also supposed to be inherently empty? For Levine, this is highly problematic. She contends that the subjective model put forward by the antitheatricalists is "profoundly contradictory, for, according to its logic, the self is both inherently monstrous and inherently nothing at all" (12). Levine's objection that selves cannot be something and nothing would seem to be axiomatic. Yet we might wonder whether the objection applies in this instance, inasmuch as the antitheatricalists tend not to regard "unmanly" conditions like effeminacy or monstrousness as positive states but as negative ones characterized by absence and lack (e.g., no phallus, no reason, no restraint, no virtue). This is a sexist construction, to be sure, but it does much to dissolve the dichotomy of something/nothing. When

manliness is equated with plenitude and presence, it stands to reason that anything and everything “unmanly” would tend toward nothingness. Contextualized in this manner, the antitheatrical claim that selves are inherently empty and inherently monstrous is not so much illogical as apposite, for monstrousness is itself a kind of emptiness: a condition of critical lack that is antithetical to the “manly” attributes of presence, prudence, and perfection.

This conceptualization is firmly grounded in early modern sexism but also has roots in early modern theology, particularly the Augustinian idea that sin has no ontological status of its own but is merely the absence of good. According to this formulation, sin is not a something but a nothing, which quite clearly impinges on the question at hand. If the antitheatricalists envision monstrousness as a state of sinful licentiousness and understand sinfulness to be a state of moral vacuity, then they need not embrace irrationality to imply that the self is simultaneously monstrous and empty. In both instances, what is being indicated is an absence of virtue and restraint. Were we to put it syllogistically, we might clarify the logic as follows:

To be monstrous = to be sinful  
                     To be sinful = to be empty  
 ∴ To be monstrous = to be empty

When considered alongside the theological notion that sin is a nothing or a negation, the antitheatrical allegation that audience members are both empty and monstrous begins to look a lot less contradictory.

The turn to theology can also ease another apparent contradiction in antitheatrical discourse—namely, the idea that stage plays can make audience members both too active and too passive, *all volition* and *no volition*, as Levine puts it. Though Levine contends that these two conditions are antithetical, they amount to much the same thing when one is of the orthodox opinion that the self is split between a carnal component and a spiritual component, each with a will of its own. To think along these lines is to see the will of the flesh perpetually warring against the will of the spirit, which is a conflict that produces the problem of too much and too little. If it is true that stage plays excite the carnal will and enfeeble the spiritual will, then those who attend plays would of course be rendered too active and too passive: too active in pursuing sinful pleasure and too passive in resisting it. These same audience members would also exhibit too much volition and too little volition: too much as concerns the depraved carnal will and too little as concerns the upright spiritual will.

Strictly speaking, such a construction might qualify as incoherent, but its incoherence springs from the metaphysical duality of the human subject, not the irrationality of the antitheatricalists. Although the antitheatricalists bounce back and forth between *all volition* and *no volition*, this is not because they are unthinking extremists but because they are committed Christian dualists.

Once we come to terms with the Christian dualism of the antitheatricalists, we become capable of seeing reason where others have seen unreason, as in Anthony Munday's paradoxical assertion that stage plays can bring men "to like euen those whome of them-selues they abhor."<sup>14</sup> For Levine, such a claim makes no sense. To believe that the theater can co-opt one's desires so completely, she contends, one must resort to "magical thinking" and regard the playhouse as a place of enchantment where patrons are transformed into "puppets" or "passive will-less robots" (12). However, the idea that one might be attracted to what one abhors is at least as much biblical as it is magical. The apostle Paul speaks of this very thing in his epistle to the Romans, remarking that "the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do," and "that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I."<sup>15</sup> Paul's point, however, is not that he is a passive, will-less robot but that he is a carnally minded man, "sold under sin."<sup>16</sup> Torn between the righteous desires of his mind and the wicked desires of his flesh, he is unable to walk a straight line: "[W]ith the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin."<sup>17</sup> Munday's susceptible spectators are in the same situation—which means that bewitchment is not the only way of accounting for the perversions of the playhouse. In order to get us to act against our own better judgment, playmakers do not need to strip away our will in some mysterious, supernatural fashion. They simply need to activate the illicit desires that are already inside us, causing these illicit desires to overpower our nobler impulses. Insofar as Munday portrays playmakers as doing just that, he does not ravel himself in magical thought so much as he rehearses a recognizably Protestant phenomenology of temptation.

Nevertheless, we must go further if we are to exonerate fully the antitheatricalists from the charge of "magical thinking," for Levine sees them as pointing to not one but two magical processes. In the first process, *watching* leads inevitably to *doing*, such that audience members compulsively imitate the actions they see on stage. In the second process, watching leads inevitably to *being*, such that audience members assume the identity of the actor before them, quite literally becoming another person. Calling this second process "the deeper belief in magic," Levine attempts to prove its prevalence in antitheatrical polemic by quoting a passage

from *Playes Confuted* (1582) wherein Gosson reproduces Xenophon's account of a production of *Bacchus and Ariadne*:

When *Bacchus* rose up, tenderly lifting *Ariadne* from her seate, no small store of curtesie passing betwene them, the beholders rose up, every man stooede on tippe toe, and seemed to hover over the playe, when they sware, the company sware, when they departed to bedde; the company presently was set on fire, they that were married posted home to their wives; they that were single, vowed very solemly, to be wedded.<sup>18</sup>

According to Levine, the formulaic repetitions in this passage (rising up, standing on tiptoe, swearing oaths) imply that the mind of the actor is impressed upon each onlooker in such a way that "the spectator quite literally takes on the identity of the actor" (13). "If we are to understand such anecdotes," Levine writes, "we shall have to account for the irrational idea that one person could be changed into another" (14).

In order to see this passage as asserting a magical transformation, however, we must follow Levine in equating affective state with identity, imagining that anyone who feels sexual stirrings similar to those being felt by some other person has literally become that other person. Such a belief is extreme, and I do not see the passage as endorsing it. Although the spectators here have clearly become aroused, there is little to support the claim that they have assumed new or different identities because each seeks to satisfy himself or herself in the manner most suited to his or her real-life situation, prior to and apart from the performance: those who are married go home to their spouses, and those who are single resolve to marry. Had any of these individuals actually become Bacchus, only Ariadne would have fit the bill—and heaven help the poor actor who would have been forced to fend off an entire audience, each member pursuing him in the name and person of Bacchus. Of course, things do not fall out this way. These onlookers have not become Bacchus; they have merely become as aroused as they suppose Bacchus to have been. Once again, Levine misrepresents the antitheatrical argument by making it more literal and more sensational than it actually is.

This is not to say that antitheatrical discourse should never be read literally. To be sure, there is more in it than metaphor. When Stephen Gosson, for instance, advises that "[t]he *Poetes* that write playes, and they that present them vpon the Stage, studie to make our affections ouerflow," the association he makes between emotions and fluidity is more than just

figurative.<sup>19</sup> This much is clear when Gosson's claims are situated within a humoral context. As Gail Kern Paster has shown, the humoral theories that prevailed in the early modern period posited the passions to be closely and functionally associated with the four bodily humors—so much so that the passions were not merely considered to be *analogous* to the liquid states and fluid forces of nature but were actually taken *to be* liquid forces of nature in their own right, operating within the body just as the forces of wind and waves operate in the natural world.<sup>20</sup> Seen from this angle, Gosson's propensity to talk about the playhouse as a place of dangerous fluidity acquires an unexpectedly literal dimension. He is not just waxing poetic when he warns that stage plays can carry us beyond our depth on deadly currents of passion and desire. Underlying all his references to unruly waves, overwhelming floods, and gaping gulfs is a material, humoral reality.<sup>21</sup> This, then, is one area in which a literalistic approach strikes me as both plausible and productive. If we really want to take the antitheatricalists at their word, I submit that we should focus less on the idea that stage plays can anatomically *effeminate* us and more on the claim that they can make us *overflow*.

Yet the humoral framework that Paster has painstakingly reconstructed can shed even more light on antitheatrical discourse inasmuch as it effectively normalizes the antitheatricalists' fears regarding the susceptibility of spectators subjected to the sights and sounds of the playhouses. As Paster's work helps us see, such fears are wholly consonant with a humoral conceptualization of the self. The humoral self is characterized by extreme corporeal porosity and openness, which in turn translates into a high degree of emotional volatility and instability. A post-Enlightenment enthusiasm for rational choice and self-restraint is entirely anachronistic to this model of the self, for the continual fluxes and flows experienced by the humoral subject were understood to be so strong and unceasing as to prevent the force of reason from encompassing or even adequately accounting for individual behavior. As Paster remarks, adherents of humoralism were bound to take psychophysiology seriously and to call for external social disciplines because this was part and parcel of "their governing paradigm for theorizing the bodily wellsprings of human behavior."<sup>22</sup> From a humoral perspective, the antitheatrical view that internal dispositions and outward actions are highly susceptible to—even determined by—one's situation and surroundings makes a great deal of sense.

These ideas are also congruent with the period's philosophies and physiologies of perception. As Stephanie Shirilan has observed, the openness and porosity of the early modern self is not only a humoral condition;

early modern faculty psychology also constructed the self as open and impressionable. Theorists of cognition often tied this susceptibility to the operation and influence of the imaginative faculties, which were thought capable of forging sympathetic identifications so strong as to collapse the distance between self and other. However, these sympathetic links were not without a material basis, as well, since all bodies were believed to be physically connected, communicating with one another through a common medium animated by spirit or pneuma. As a result of all this interconnectedness, interpersonal transference was almost inevitable, and writers ranging from Robert Burton to Francis Bacon marvel at the ease with which somatic experience is sympathetically and mimetically passed from one individual to another—as when one man yawns and another follows suit or when one man urinates and a second is provoked to do the same. According to Shirilan, early modern cognitive psychology clearly fosters the belief that performed bodily symptoms can “[infect] the perceiver with the impulse to reproduce the observed behaviour—regardless of the authenticity of this witnessed performance.”<sup>23</sup> Such a supposition, it must be acknowledged, is the antitheatrical argument in a nutshell. Consequently, it cannot be said that the antitheatricalists are alone in imagining that playacting might prove both contagious and corrupting. In the early modern period, the antitheatrical perspective on the power of performance, the malleability of the self, and the weakness of the will is consistent with current scientific models.

Of course, an early modern Englishman need not have specialized knowledge of faculty psychology, Galenic humoralism, or Paracelsian pneumatism to entertain the idea that one could be overtaken or corrupted by external influences, even when unwilling. During this time of plague and contagion, as Carla Mazzio observes, infection was a constant worry, with each new affliction or outbreak offering a frightening reminder of one’s own susceptibility. The all-too-easy transference of disease from one person to the next readily confirmed that one could be touched at a distance, fatally compromised by exposure to unwholesome sights, sounds, and smells.<sup>24</sup> This corporeal vulnerability, in turn, came to betoken spiritual and moral vulnerabilities of the same order. As Margaret Healy shows, early modern efforts to ascertain how syphilis and the plague were communicated led to analogous speculations about less tangible transferences. When malignant qualities of an airy or material nature were understood to be invisibly transmitted and insensibly incorporated, it stood to reason that the same would happen with moral, spiritual, and psychological qualities. Far from being figurative, these types of transferences were regarded as real phenomena. As Healy writes, “[P]sychic

and moral ‘touching’ was a particular preoccupation of the late sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century,” not only rendered plausible but also empirically sanctioned by the passage of plague contagion.<sup>25</sup> Such preoccupations, it should be apparent, both undergird and uphold the antitheatrical idea that entire assemblies can be infected by eloquent or affecting performances. In many ways, early modern antitheatricalism is a logical extension and application of early modern epidemiologies.

From this follows my contention that the antitheatricalists’ concerns about the corrupting influence of the theater are of a piece with prevailing early modern paradigms. Their ideas about the self and its susceptibilities are not so much paranoid as Protestant, not so much abnormal as empirical. Notwithstanding our tendency to portray the antitheatricalists as outliers, many of the distinctions we would draw between those who attack the stage and those who defend it are difficult to maintain. As Peter Lake perceptively notes, the antitheatricalists and the apologists not only invoke “the same moralizing and providential frameworks” but also share “core structuring assumptions” about such things as “order and disorder, providence, sin and the devil, social and gender hierarchy and subordination, vice, virtue and the good death.”<sup>26</sup>

With respect to this overlap, it is useful to set Sir Philip Sidney alongside Stephen Gosson, considering the foremost Elizabethan apologist in conjunction with one of the period’s most prominent antipoetic authors. The comparison is somewhat natural, since Sidney apparently intended his *Apology for Poetrie* (1595) as a refutation of Gosson’s *Schoole of Abuse* (1579),<sup>27</sup> yet one of the curiosities of Sidney’s treatise is the way it ends up endorsing many of the assumptions and arguments found in Gosson’s work. Like Gosson, Sidney declares the right use of poetry to be the inculcation of valor and courage. Like Gosson, Sidney asserts poetry’s power to make things memorable, immediate, and attractive. And, like Gosson, Sidney maintains that poetry appeals to the senses and passions so powerfully as to move us—almost irresistibly—to perform actions we would otherwise avoid. Taking all of this into account, it is hard to quarrel with Jacob Bronowski’s claim that “Sidney’s theory of poetry and Gosson’s are the same.”<sup>28</sup>

The common ground, however, extends beyond this, for Sidney expresses agreement not only with Gosson’s general theory of poetry but also with a number of his particular accusations. Speaking of the comedies currently performed in England, Sidney openly admits that “naughty playmakers and stagekeepers have justly made [them] odious.”<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, he allows that the tragedies and comedies presented on the professional stage are “not without cause cried out against.”<sup>30</sup> And in perhaps the most damning concession of all, Sidney says, “I yield that poesy

may not only be abused, but that being abused, by the reason of his sweet charming force, it can do more hurt than any other army of words.”<sup>31</sup> In the *Apology*, Sidney will attempt to finesse this point by insisting that poetry’s potential for good outweighs its potential for bad, but before long Sidney seems to have backed away from this optimistic appraisal. Although Sidney died about five years after finishing the *Apology*, even this short span appears to have been sufficient for him to think better of his apologetic enthusiasm. According to his early biographers, Sidney became so troubled by the immoral possibilities of his own writings that he eventually desired to destroy them. Thomas Moffet relates that, in his later years Sidney “[came] to fear . . . that his *Stella* [1591] and his *Arcadia* [1590] might render the souls of readers more yielding instead of better” and therefore wished to have them burned. Similarly, Fulke Greville reports that Sidney grew certain that the beauty of his prose romance, *The Arcadia*, “was more apt to allure men to evil than to frame any goodness in them” and consequently “bequeathed no other legacy but the fire to this unpolished embryo.”<sup>32</sup> This trajectory is not unlike Gosson’s, another poet who became increasingly uncomfortable with poetry’s allure and ultimately concluded it would be better to go without its pleasures than undergo its temptations. Though antitheatricalism is supposed to be the pathological position, it is worth noting that the preeminent apologist of the era appears to have moved in that direction as he matured.

This is not to say that Sidney and Gosson are indistinguishable. They clearly diverge in a number of ways.<sup>33</sup> But when it comes to overarching theories—about poetry, imagination, and the fallen will—they align more closely than we often admit. To recognize this is to begin to see that we cannot entirely account for early modern antitheatricalism by alleging that its proponents were paranoid. Yet, if this is the case, how can we explain the popularity of the professional stage? If most English men and women shared the core structuring assumptions of the antitheatrical authors, why did so many ignore their counsel? The answer, I believe, has more to do with risk assessment and risk tolerance than anything else. I submit that the majority of early moderns would have acknowledged the moral dangers of playgoing as readily as we moderns acknowledge the physical dangers of motorcycling or skydiving. In such pursuits, what separates the participant from the nonparticipant is not a set of differing ideologies so much as variable evaluations of the activity’s pleasures and benefits, relative to its risks. I do not think early modern playgoers imagined that they were safe from harm—only that the risks they were running were acceptable and/or manageable. In this sense, what sets the antitheatricalist apart is an abundance of caution, not an absence of reason.

If we continue to equate antitheatricalism with insanity, however, we obscure the acute moral problems playacting posed in Shakespeare's day. We also give short shrift to a rather rich set of texts. Men like Munday, Gosson, and Stubbes can tell us a great deal about the early modern stage, if only we take them seriously. To date, a handful of critics have endeavored to do this, and their analyses have been both rewarding and revelatory. Ágnes Matuska, for instance, has conscientiously considered why antitheatrical authors do not allow that one could be a chaste onlooker—that one could remain unaffected by a given act or performance by choosing not to participate in or approve it. Rather than dismiss the idea as absurd, Matuska uses it to think through early modern staging practices, particularly those that recruit or require audience involvement. What emerges from this analysis is a better understanding of the uniquely participatory nature of the early modern playhouse.<sup>34</sup> David Hawkes, for his part, has read the antitheatricalists alongside Marx, concluding that they are not cranks but insightful cultural critics, perceiving better than most the consequences of commercializing the theaters and commodifying their offerings. As Hawkes shows, the opponents of the stage offer “a coherent and sophisticated critique of the ideological and psychological effects of a commodity culture.”<sup>35</sup> Finally, Bryan Reynolds has seriously entertained the antitheatrical claims either disregarded or derided by critics like Stephen Greenblatt, Jean Howard, and Laura Levine—and has subsequently developed one of the most sophisticated and compelling accounts of the early modern theater. According to Reynolds, antitheatrical writers were right on many fronts, for the early modern playhouse really was an exceptional cultural apparatus, capable of cultivating a unique form of deviance that Reynolds calls “transversality.” Reynolds persuasively argues—in agreement with antitheatrical polemic—that the early modern stage was a supremely powerful sociopolitical conductor, radiating transversal power in such a way that “everyone exposed to the public theater's efflorescing reach, including its most fervent enemies, was infected with transversal thought.”<sup>36</sup>

As valuable as these “nonpathological” readings have proven to be, they remain relatively rare, overshadowed by the received notion that the antitheatricalists are irrational. In this essay, I have sought to contest this characterization by carefully parsing the antitheatricalists' claims and by showing that these claims are of a piece with humoral theory, faculty psychology, Protestant theology, and early modern lived experience. Assuredly, one need not fear magic, monsters, or

vanishing penises to worry about the effects of the stage: these worries were straightforwardly indicated by the prevailing worldview. To believe in original sin and the fallen will, to believe in the passions and the humors, to believe in the powers of sympathy and imagination—to believe in any or all of these early modern orthodoxies—is to know, at some level, that the antitheatricalists have reason, that playhouses can be perilous places, indeed.

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## NOTES

1. Google Scholar (accessed 4 November 2016, [scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com)) records no fewer than 1,196 citations of Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* and 292 citations of Laura Levine's *Men in Women's Clothing*. To put this latter figure in perspective, it is worth noting that out of all the single-authored literary critical studies of early modern England published in 1994 (when Levine's book appeared), only seven monographs are credited with 250 citations or more (Table 1).

*Table 1. 1994 monographs with more than 250 citations, per Google Scholar*

Author	Title	Citations
Richard Helgerson	<i>Forms of Nationhood</i>	1,035
Bruce Smith	<i>Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England</i>	510
John Gillies	<i>Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference</i>	375
Jean Howard	<i>The Stage and Social Struggle</i>	366
Frances Dolan	<i>Dangerous Familiars</i>	296
Laura Levine	<i>Men in Women's Clothing</i>	292
Philippa Berry	<i>Of Chastity and Power</i>	259

It is also worth noting that the opening chapter of Levine's book was initially published in the pages of *Criticism* (see Laura Levine, "Men in Women's Clothing: Antitheatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642," *Criticism* 28, no. 2 [1986]: 121–43), and that Google Scholar shows an additional 117 citations of this essay, increasing to 409 the number of citations of Levine's work on antitheatricalism

2. See Jonas Barish, "Puritans and Proteans," in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 80–131. Barish directly quotes William Prynne

sixteen times in the chapter. No other English moralist is directly quoted more than five times (Table 2).

Table 2. Authors' quotations of William Prynne

Author	Direct quotations
William Prynne	16
William Perkins	5
Stephen Gosson	4
Phillip Stubbes	4
Anthony Munday	2
Stephen Batman	1
Robert Burton	1
J. Cocke	1
John Northbrooke	1
William Rainolds	1
Richard Sibbes	1
Samuel Willard	1
George Wither	1

3. Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 84, 86, 87; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
4. Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization, 1579–1642*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
5. Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London: Thomas Woodcocke, 1579), sigs. A6v–A7r (my emphasis).
6. Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London: Richard Jones, 1583), sig. F5v.
7. It also bears mentioning that Stubbes lifts this sentence—“adulterate” included—from Gosson’s *Plays Confuted in Fiue Actions* (London: Thomas Gosson, 1582). When Stubbes talks about “adulteration,” then, he is not so much “heightening” Gosson’s claims as echoing them:

[G]arments are set downe for signes distinctiue betwene sexe & sexe, to take vnto vs those garments that are manifest signes of another sexe, is to falsifie, forge, and adulterate, contrarie to the expresse rule of the words of God. (Gosson, *Plays Confuted*, sig. E3v)

Our Apparell was giuen vs as a signe distinctiue to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therefore one to weare the Apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde. (Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses*, sig. F5v)

8. William Prynne, *Histrio-mastix: The Player's Scourge or Actor's Tragedy*, ed. Arthur Freeman (New York: Garland, 1974), 197; quoted in Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing*, 23.
9. See Gina Hausknecht, “The Gender of Civic Virtue,” in *Milton and Gender*, ed. Catherine Gimelli Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19–33,

- esp. 19. One hundred years after Milton and two hundred years after Gosson, gendered terms like “manly” are still being used to describe moral states, apart from anatomical ones. In a document no less central than the Declaration of Independence, the US founding fathers cite with approval the “manly firmness” with which the colonialists have opposed George III’s “invasions on the rights of the people” (see <http://www.constitution.org/usdeclar.htm>).
10. Prynne, *Histrio-mastix*, sig. X4r.
  11. Both Barish and Levine use the previously quoted passage from Prynne to prove that the antitheatricalists believe in “fixed and stable” selves, yet neither acknowledges the significant slippage between Prynne’s terms (“uniforme distinct and proper”) and their own (“fixed and stable”) (see Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 94; and Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing*, 10).
  12. Bryan Reynolds makes a similar point in response to claims by Jean Howard and Linda Woodbridge that early modern polemicists present social identity as “preordained and fixed” (Howard’s phrase). According to Reynolds, antitheatricalists who insist upon divinely ordained identities are not arguing for the *fixity* of identity but for the *fixing* of identity (see Bryan Reynolds, *Becoming Criminal: Transversal Performance and Cultural Dissidence in Early Modern England* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002], esp. 143–44).
  13. The interconnection of monstrousness and womanishness is still at play in eighteenth-century America. Toby L. Ditz shows that letters written by merchants in Philadelphia complain of the unmanly acts of deceitful business partners by comparing these partners to both women and monsters (“Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 [1994]: 51–80, esp. 60–61).
  14. Anthony Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters* (London: Henrie Denham, 1580), 101; quoted in Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing*, 12.
  15. Romans 7:19, 15.
  16. Romans 7:14.
  17. Romans 7:25.
  18. Gosson, *Playes Confuted*, sig. G5r; quoted in Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing*, 13.
  19. Gosson, *Playes Confuted*, sig. F1v.
  20. See Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. 4–6.
  21. For a lengthier consideration of Gosson and fluidity, see Kent R. Lehnhof, “Ships That Do Not Sail: Antinauticalism, Antitheatricalism, and Irrationality in Stephen Gosson,” *Renaissance Drama* 42, no. 1 (2014): 91–111.
  22. Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 20.
  23. Stephanie Shirilan, “Francis Bacon, Robert Burton, and the Thick Skin of the World: Sympathy, Transmission, and the Imaginary Early Modern Skin,” *English Studies in Canada* 34, no. 1 (2008): 59–83, quotation on 66.
  24. Carla Mazzio, “Acting with Tact: Touch and Theater in the Renaissance,” in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 159–86, esp. 182.

25. Margaret Healy, "Anxious and Fatal Contacts: Taming the Contagious Touch," in *Sensible Flesh*, 22–38, quotation on 26.
26. Peter Lake, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 483.
27. For an extensive list of critics affirming the connection between Philip Sidney's *Apology* and Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse*, see Arthur F. Kinney, "Parody and Its Implications in Sydney's *Defense of Poesie*," *SEL (Studies in English Literature)* 12, no. 1 (1972): 1–19, esp. 1n1. For the most comprehensive examination of this connection, see William Ringer, *Stephen Gosson: A Biographical and Critical Study*, Princeton Studies in English, vol. 25 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1942), esp. 117–24. For more recent work affirming the interrelation, see David Hawkes, "Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in the Antitheatrical Controversy," *SEL (Studies in English Literature)* 39, no. 2 (1999): 255–73, esp. 256; Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, vol. 37 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 60; and Peter C. Herman, ed., *Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" and "Astrophil and Stella": Texts and Contexts* (Glen Allen, VA: College, 2001), esp. 34.
28. Jacob Bronowski, *The Poet's Defence* (1939; repr., Cleveland, OH: World, 1966), 41.
29. Herman, *Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" and "Astrophil and Stella"*, 89.
30. Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, in *ibid.*, 113.
31. *Ibid.*, 100–101.
32. Quoted in Richard Helgerson's *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 151, 127.
33. For a discussion of Sidney's and Gosson's differing attitudes toward women, see Kent R. Lehnhof, "Profeminism in Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*," *SEL (Studies in English Literature)* 48, no. 1 (2008): 23–43.
34. See Ágnes Matuska, "'Masking Players, Painted Sepulchers and Double Dealing Ambidexters' on Duty: Anti-theatricalist Tracts on Audience Involvement and the Transformative Power of Plays," *SEDERI* 18 (2008): 45–59. Colin MacCabe also mentions audience involvement in connection with the antitheatrical tracts, warning that those who scoff at the antitheatricalists' fears of moral corruption underestimate the participatory and pornographic nature of the Renaissance playhouse. Although MacCabe stops short of saying that antitheatrical discourse is coherent, he maintains that its confusions are "a genuine response to the confusions of the Elizabethan theatre" and therefore should not be interpreted as evidence of intellectual weakness (Colin MacCabe, "Abusing Self and Others: Puritan Accounts of the Shakespearian Stage," *Critical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 [1988]: 3–17, esp. 4).
35. See Hawkes, "Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism," 255–73, esp. 258.
36. See Bryan Reynolds, "Antitheatrical Discourse, Transversal Theater, Criminal Intervention," in *Becoming Criminal* (see note 12), 125–55, esp. 128.