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# Ships That Do Not Sail: Antinauticalism, Antitheatricalism, and Irrationality in Stephen Gosson

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# Ships That Do Not Sail: Antinauticalism, Antitheatricalism, and Irrationality in Stephen Gosson

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We see ships in the river; but all their use is gone, if they go not to sea.  
—John Donne<sup>1</sup>

In his 1579 pamphlet, *The Schoole of Abuse*, Stephen Gosson criticizes stage plays for provoking passionate responses in their audiences. Expressing his Platonic mistrust of emotion in an euphuistic series of analogies, Gosson commends affective restraint: “I cannot lyken our affection better than to an Arrowe, which, getting lybertie, with winges is carryed beyonde our reach; kepte in the Quiuer it is still at commaundement: Or to a Dogge; let him slippe, he is straight out of sight, holde him in the Lease, hee neuer stirres: Or to a Colte, giue him the bridle, he flinges aboute; raine him hard, & you may rule him: Or to a ship, hoyst the sayles, it runnes on head; let fall the Ancour, all is well.”<sup>2</sup> Gosson’s similes consistently value stasis over motion, which I take to be expressive of his desire to slow down cultural change and stop social mobility. But what I find particularly intriguing about the idealization of immobility in

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1. John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–59), 2:246.

2. Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London: Imprinted for Thomas Woodcokke, 1579), sigs. D2v–D3r. All subsequent references, hereafter identified as SA and cited parenthetically, come from this edition.

this passage is the way it ends up depriving each agent or object of the action or movement that would seem to be definitive of its identity or essential to its being. Is a leashed dog that “neuer stirres” the best kind of hunting dog, or has it ceased to be a hunting dog altogether in its inability to chase after and secure prey? Is a quivered arrow that never flies the best kind of arrow, or has it ceased to be an arrow altogether in its incapacity to travel through the air and injure from a distance? Though Gosson’s metaphors purport to offer us a better way of being, they imply that we become our best selves by giving up the very qualities or activities that define us.

Such a position sounds perverse, even nonsensical. As such, it appears to lend credence to the idea that antitheatrical ideology is intrinsically illogical. This supposition—which has informed our scholarship for the past thirty years or so—can be traced back to several of the pioneering studies in the field, including such works as Jonas Barish’s *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. As one of the first scholars to explore antitheatricalism in detail, Barish did much to map out the terrain. Yet Barish’s important survey repeatedly implies that antitheatrical discourse is irrational. In the chapter “Puritans and Proteans,” for instance, Barish presents William Prynne as the paradigmatic antitheatricalist—even as he professes Prynne to be a megalomaniac.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Barish announces that mental illness is the only possible explanation for a text like Prynne’s *Histriomastix*: “There is something shameless and compulsive about Prynne’s tirades. It is as though he were himself goaded by a devil, driven to blacken the theater with lunatic exaggeration and without allowing it the faintest spark of decency or humanity. . . . Why should anyone ever wish to write such a book? The only possible answer can be to work off a staggering load of resentment and anxiety.”<sup>4</sup> Demonic possession, deep-seated neuroses, and lunacy: as Barish would have it, these are the underpinnings of antitheatricalism. Accordingly, Barish suggests that those who take up an antitheatrical text like *Histriomastix* would do well to approach it as “an exercise in pathology” rather than a set of rational arguments.<sup>5</sup>

Barish’s analysis/diagnosis of Prynne is fascinating, and it would be difficult to deny that there *isn’t* something shameless and compulsive about Prynne’s tirades. Nevertheless, in the present essay I would like to push back a bit against the critical tendency (evident in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* and elsewhere) to characterize the antitheatricalists as unreasoning extremists: reactionary hacks whose opposition to the stage originates in irrational beliefs about the

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3. Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 84.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

5. *Ibid.*

self and its susceptibility to outside influences. Though such an approach is commonplace, it oversimplifies a complex sociocultural situation and leads us into error, both minor and major. When we assume that antitheatrical discourse is illogical, we are liable to read it less carefully than we ought. Important distinctions get overlooked, and significant qualifications go unnoticed.

Such is the case in Laura Levine's influential monograph, *Men in Women's Clothing*. Though there is much to commend Levine's book, its tendency to sensationalize and exaggerate often proves misleading. In the first chapter, for instance, Levine alleges that Stephen Gosson sees the self as altogether lacking in will or volition. According to Levine, "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 Diuel'). 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>6</sup> However, the will that Gosson is supposed to have disregarded is right there, in the passage quoted parenthetically. It's just that Levine breaks off the sentence before it has a chance to appear. If we read Gosson's thought all the way through, we realize that he makes this entire process of "preferment" conditional upon our consent: "[Poetry] prefers you to piping, from piping to playing, from play to pleasure, from pleasure to sloth, from sloth to sleep, from sleep too sin, from sin to death, from death to the devil, *if you take your learning apace, and pass through every form without revolting*" (SA sigs. A6v-A7r; my emphasis). While it is true that Gosson figures seduction as a slippery slope, he does not make our will inoperative. Indeed, Gosson not only allows but also exhorts us to resist or "revolt." Contrary to the claim that he sees our agency as permanently disarmed, Gosson apports each of us the power—at any point in the process—to dig in our heels and arrest our descent.

Because Levine misses this important qualification, she arrives at some imperfect conclusions, ultimately deciding that antitheatrical ideas of the self are profoundly contradictory and can only be entertained if one ceases to think rationally and subscribes instead to a species of "magical thinking" wherein identity is so unstable that any person can be changed into any other at the drop of a hat (or the start of a play). And herein lies the problem. When we proceed under the impression that antitheatrical discourse is inherently illogical, we often misconstrue its meaning, which in turn prevents us from appreci-

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6. Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization, 1579–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15.

ating what the antitheatrical debates in early modern England are really about. These debates are not, primarily, a conflict between reason and unreason, or sanity and insanity. It is simply not the case that the antitheatricalists attack the stage because they have bizarre and irrational beliefs about the self and the world, while the apologists defend it because they have intelligent and rational ones. In point of fact, the conceptualization of human nature that informs the antitheatrical tracts is recognizably Protestant and culturally dominant in post-Reformation England. Nevertheless, we often look past this orthodoxy, emphasizing instead what seems illogical and outlandish.

As a contravention, then, to this collective tendency, I would like to explore in the present essay one of the more bizarre elements of Gosson's expression—but with the aim of showing that it has an internal logic of its own and is coherent with a whole host of early modern beliefs and practices. By establishing that there is a method to Gosson's madness, I hope to improve our opinion of the intellectual and literary quality of antitheatrical discourse. The particular figure on which I will focus is the last one to appear in the long string of similes with which I began: namely, the one in which Gosson likens our affections to a ship that must be securely anchored lest it "[runne] on head." Gosson's praise for the anchored ship certainly evinces a sense of safety and well-being, but his reluctance to let the ship set sail is especially perplexing, inasmuch as a ship that does not sail is not really a ship at all. (It's a dock.) Notwithstanding this apparent contradiction, Gosson repeatedly uses the immobile ship to emblemize prudence and self-control, while using the seafaring ship to symbolize recklessness and folly. For reasons that remain to be seen, there is a way in which Gosson's antitheatrical writings are resolutely *antinautical* as well.

This antinautical outlook is on display throughout Gosson's writings. In the prefatory material to *Playes Confuted in Fiue Actions*, for instance, we encounter a dedicatory letter to Sir Francis Walsingham in which Gosson approvingly cites the example of a ship that seldom leaves the harbor. To assure Walsingham of the esteem in which he is held, Gosson writes: "I make as much accounte of your honour, as the *Atheniens* did of *Paralus* their holye shippe, that was neuer lanchted but vpon high, & great affaires."<sup>7</sup> As he commends the Athenians for keeping their holy ship off of the waters, Gosson strikes an antinautical note that will echo throughout his tracts. It sounds again in *Playes Confuted* when Gosson compares the pagan inventors of popular theater to a fleet of foolish

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7. Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Fiue Actions* (London: Imprinted for Thomas Gosson, 1582), sigs. Arr–Arv. Subsequent references, identified as *PC* and cited parenthetically, come from this edition.

sailors, lured out onto the open water. According to Gosson, Satan deliberately promoted pagan practices (like theatrical festivals) among the ancients so as to draw them into danger. “By this meanes the Deuill driuing them from the worship of the true God, as ships from the harbour where they should ryde, helde them in greater peril of death then if they had worshipped no God at all” (*PC*, sig. C2r). In both the positive and negative formulations, Gosson’s similes imply that ships should not ride on the ocean but in the harbor. The proper vessel is one that does not venture.

When sailing men and ships at sea do show up in Gosson’s works, they typically serve as emblems of folly and licentiousness. Thus, the dedicatory epistle to *The Schoole of Abuse* rehearses the example of “frantike” Caligula, who—instead of properly governing his armies in the heart of France—removed them to the seashore to watch on while he whimsically shipped himself in a small boat and “played . . . in the Sea, wafting too and fro, at his pleasure” (*SA*, i–ii). However, the foolish sailor mentioned most often in Gosson’s writings is Gosson himself. The author repeatedly presents himself as an unfortunate seaman, as in the prefatory material to *The Schoole of Abuse*, where he introduces himself as one who has “roaued long on the Seas of wantonnesse” and has come ashore to “[print] a carde of euerie daunger,” hoping thereby to keep others from exposing themselves to the same perils (*SA*, iv). Later in the tract, Gosson again resorts to nautical imagery in a self-referential moment. Confessing that he has written stage plays in the past, Gosson characterizes his dramatic career as a shipwreck from which he has not yet recovered even now: “I gaue my self to that exercise in hope to thriue but I burnt one candle to seek another, and lost bothe my time and my trauell, when I had doone. Thus sith I haue in my voyage suffred wrack with *Vlisses*, and wringing-wet scrambled with life to the shore, stand from mee *Nausicaä* with all thy traine, till I wipe the blot from my forehead, and with sweet springs wash away the salt froath that cleaues too my soule” (*SA*, sig. C7v). When dealing with his shameful involvement with the Renaissance stage, Gosson habitually turns to maritime metaphors. Their appearance in these moments meaningfully attests to the significance—and menace—that the sea holds for Gosson. In his eyes, those who entrust themselves to the seas are sure to be lost, either blown off course or drowned in the depths.

As we try to make sense of this antinauticalism, perhaps the first thing to note is its classical pedigree. Both Horace and Hesiod held that the happy life is one that need never go to sea.<sup>8</sup> Plato, for his part, was careful to situate his

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8. Of Horace, E. M. Blaiklock writes: “The sea is seldom gentle in his poetry, but always a thing of fear and treachery, greedy, ship-shattering, angry, where those who venture are fearful,

ideal city at least ten miles from the corrupting influence of the seaport.<sup>9</sup> And Aristotle expressed an antinautical bent by making land the basis for moral and political agency. According to these Aristotelian models (which were still current in Gosson's day), property is not only the precondition for personhood but also a prerequisite for ethical living. Within such a framework, individuals must be grounded if they are to be good.<sup>10</sup> Thus, even if Gosson's antinauticalism leads him into paradox, the least we can say is that it comes with impeccable humanist credentials.<sup>11</sup>

However, if Gosson's antinauticalism points in the direction of classical humanism, it also points in the direction of social conservatism, for the Elizabethan sea trade was sending shocks and tremors through England's social system. As Jean Howard has noted, maritime commerce greatly increased the availability of consumer goods in England, which in turn destabilized traditional social distinctions by enabling a great many to engage in modes of con-

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trembling, over-bold" (E. M. Blaiklock, "The Dying Storm: A Study in the Imagery of Horace," *Greece and Rome*, 2nd ser., 6, no. 2 [October 1959]: 205–10, 205). Hesiod also emphasizes the perils of the sea, implying that the only reason to risk such hazards is to save one's self from poverty. See Anthony T. Edwards, *Hesiod's Ascræ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), esp. 50–62.

9. Plato's Magnesia is located ten miles inland. As Chris Bobonich explains, Plato sees this distance as a distinct advantage because it discourages maritime commerce (which would corrupt the Magnesians by fostering a love of moneymaking) and it minimizes contact with foreigners (who, lacking the benefit of the Magnesians' ethical upbringing, would introduce unwanted ideas, innovations, and practices). See Chris Bobonich, "Plato on Utopia," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/plato-utopia/>, accessed June 18, 2012. For additional insight on Plato's antinauticalism, see Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Athènes et l'Atlantide: Structure et signification d'un mythe platonicien," *Revue des Études Grecques* 77 (1964): 420–44; Christopher Gill, "The Genre of the Atlantis Story," *Classical Philology* 72, no. 4 (October 1977): 287–304, esp. 297; and Jean Luccioni, "Platon et la mer," *Revue des Études Anciennes* 61 (1959): 15–47, esp. 43–46.

10. See J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 103. A commensurate land-as-virtue mentality might underlie Gosson's unexpected exoneration in *The Schoole of Abuse* of land-owning actors. Even as he inveighs against players who "iet vnder Gentlemens noses in sutes of silke," Gosson suddenly exempts from his complaint those who happen to possess property: "I speake not this, as though euerye [player] that professeth the qualitie so abused him selfe, for it is well known, that some of them are sober, discreete, properly learned honest housholders and Citizens well thought on amonge their neighbours at home" (SA, sigs. C6r–C6v). By excusing householding actors, Gosson suggests that land is the difference between modesty and immodesty. Whereas unpropertied actors are heaped with blame, actors who have a permanent address are said to be inoffensive. In this way, Gosson seems to see real estate as morally redemptive, capable of transforming idle and lascivious actors into sober citizens and honorable householders.

11. I am grateful to an anonymous reader at *Renaissance Drama* for guiding me to Horace, Hesiod, and Plato.

sumption and display that had heretofore been exclusive to the elite.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, overseas trade seemed to offer unprecedented opportunities for personal enrichment and social advancement. Whereas the land-based economies that had prevailed in England prior to this time were relatively stable and predictable, the ocean-based economies in which England was increasingly participating were quite volatile. Early modern seafaring was a high risk, high reward affair. If and when one's ship came in, returns could be astronomical, and virtually everyone was familiar with the careers of people like Simon Eyre, Richard Whittington, and Jack of Newbury: men who rose precipitously through the ranks as a result of the sea trade.<sup>13</sup> Stories such as these fired the popular imagination, but they understandably alarmed those who felt fortune should be a function of birth and nobility, not luck and moxie. Of course, these rags-to-riches stories were not the only sea tales that would unsettle the essentialist. Besides these accounts of the low being elevated, there were also stories of the high being humbled—as in Francis Drake's circumnavigation of 1577–80, where the noblemen were compelled to “haul and draw” with the common sailors.<sup>14</sup> In addition, there were stories of insubordination and mutiny—like the time Henry Hudson was set adrift by his crew (never to be seen again) after a conflict over victuals.<sup>15</sup> Early modern monarchs and magistrates were virtually powerless to curb the misdeeds of their subjects at sea, and the liberties these took turned them into symbols of self-will. “Mariners,” Sir Richard Hawkins writes, “are like to a stiffe necked Horse, which taking the bridle betwixt his teeth,

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12. Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 32.

13. Richard Grassby gives a list of additional (albeit less familiar) figures who struck it rich through the sea trade. Grassby, however, stresses that careers such as these were extraordinary. By his calculations, maritime miscarriages were frequent enough that annual rates of return for sea traders—contrary to popular opinion—were not significantly higher than those of property holders (Richard Grassby, “The Rate of Profit in Seventeenth-Century England,” *English Historical Review* 84, no. 333 [October 1969]: 721–51, 732).

14. Samuel R. Bawlf, *The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake, 1577–1580* (New York: Walker, 2003), 110. I am grateful to Christopher Hodgkins for bringing this to my attention.

15. Kenneth R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480–1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 27. The radically leveling effect of the ocean figures prominently into fictional voyages as well as factual ones. In Shakespeare, for instance, a mighty storm forces Prince Pericles to labor alongside his seamen, “galling his kingly hands with haling ropes” (*Pericles* 15.105). In the opening scene of *The Tempest*, the surly boatswain does not hesitate to tell his passengers that their royal authority has no sway on a ship. Pointing to the unruly waves, he exclaims, “What cares these roarers for the name of king? To cabin!” (1.1.15–16). Read alongside stories like Drake's and Hudson's, these moments suggest that oceangoing in both literature and life has a way of undoing significant sociopolitical distinctions, effecting what Ariel will call a “sea-change” (*Tempest*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. [New York: Norton, 1997], 1.2.404; all references to Shakespeare, hereafter cited parenthetically, come from this edition).

forceth his Rider to what him list mauger his will.”<sup>16</sup> Comments like this can help us appreciate the significant pressures seafaring was putting on traditional social structures. For both the high and the low, sea trade introduced a great deal of opportunity and instability.

Accordingly, a measure of antinauticalism makes its way into many of the conservative discourses of the day. David Quint, for instance, notes its presence in early modern epic, where the *barca aventurosa* of bourgeois romance is reimagined so as to match up with epic’s more aristocratic ideals. In epic poems, Quint remarks, ships are stripped of their mercantile function and presented as instruments of discovery and empire, not exchange. By eliding the commercial motives and economic outcomes of sea voyages, early modern epic suppresses the ship’s tendency to upset the status quo. A similar distress over the ship’s ability to redistribute wealth and status also manifests itself in conservative legal discourses. As Quint reports, statutes in both France and Spain during the sixteenth century prohibited gentlemen from taking part in overseas trading ventures.<sup>17</sup> While lawmakers in Gosson’s England did not go to such lengths, the same sort of antipathy is nevertheless in evidence. In his *Angliae Notitia*, for example, Edward Chamberlayne condemns English nobles who participate in maritime commerce, calling it “the shame of our nation.”<sup>18</sup> This conservative distrust of the sea trade would seem to undergird Gosson’s antinauticalism in important ways. Though Gosson’s belief that ships should not sail is oxymoronic, it is of a piece with his socially conservative mind-set.

The point here is that Gosson’s aversion to seafaring coheres—in at least a couple of ways—with his intellectual investments and social commitments. But to talk about Gosson’s antinauticalism in these terms, perhaps, is to pass it off as a sociopolitical tic or a rhetorical reflex: an unconscious expression of his humanism or social conservatism. This does not seem sufficient to account for the prominent role it plays in Gosson’s pamphlets. Even if antinauticalism conventionally keeps company with humanism and social conservatism, its appearance and operation in Gosson’s discourse would seem to suggest more than just a loose connection. We must dig deeper if we are to discover why Gosson would pair these prejudices as pervasively as he does. What links play going to ocean going in Gosson’s mind? Why does he recurrently associate stages with ships and theaters with seas?

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16. Quoted in Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement*, 27.

17. David Quint, “The Boat of Romance and Renaissance Epic,” in *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985), 178–202.

18. Quoted in David Cressy, “Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England,” *Literature and History* 3 (1976): 29–44, 36.

In answering such inquiries, it is helpful to recognize that for Gosson, the sea is first and foremost a place of hidden hazards. Seamen can never be sure what lies beneath the surface, and this makes them especially vulnerable. As Gosson advises, “The Marriner is more indaungered by priuie shelues, then knowen Rockes” (SA, sig. C4r). Yet privy shelves are the rule of the ocean, imperiling even those who are native to its depths. According to Gosson, even the great whale would run aground and wreck himself, were it not for “a litte fishe [that] swimmeth continually before . . . to shewe him the shelues” (SA, sigs. E6v–E7r). Without the benefit of such a guide, sailors must rely on their own perspicacity to discern the danger. And in this endeavor, even the most attentive are likely to err, since oceanic appearances are so often at odds with reality. “The calmest Seas hide dangerous Rockes,” Gosson observes (SA, sig. A2r).

Such being the case, the ties between oceans and amphitheaters begin to tighten, since Gosson understands the theater to be analogously opaque. As he repeatedly avows, the sights and sounds of the early modern stage are utterly unreliable, disclosing no more of their privy dangers than does the sea. Inside the theater, young boys disguise themselves in feminine attire, basely born actors encase themselves in sumptuous costumes, and immoral meanings mask themselves in delightful meters. Of poets and players, Gosson direly warns, “There is more in them than we perceiue” (SA, sig. C4r). Like the sea, then, the stage is a place of untrustworthy appearances. To confide in its prospects is to risk being deceived and destroyed.

Of course, the early modern playhouse is up-front about its artificiality, and the myriad deceptions and dissemblings that disturb Gosson are the very things that delight its patrons. Audience members attend the theater so as to be deceived: to be caught up in illusion and transported beyond themselves. The theater is alluring precisely because it exists apart from quotidian reality. This is particularly true in early modern England, where the imaginative and psychic separateness common to all theatrical spaces is compounded by the geographical liminality of the playhouses themselves, established as they were in the liberties and suburbs of London, just outside the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor and his aldermen. As scholars like Steven Mullaney and Jean-Christophe Agnew have shown, the extraterritoriality of the early modern amphitheaters encouraged all manner of contestations, mutations, metamorphoses, and suspensions.<sup>19</sup> In this way, the playhouse constitutes what Michel Foucault would call a “counter-site.”

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19. See Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Steven Mullaney, *The*

Foucault employs this term in an essay titled “Of Other Spaces” to describe places that exist outside of or apart from other social spaces but nevertheless remain in relation to these other spaces in such a way as to contradict, neutralize, or question them. The first kind of counter-site that Foucault considers is the utopia: a site without real existence that presents society with a fictive version of itself, either perfected or inverted. The second type is the heterotopia, which differs from the utopia in being both geographically locatable and physically accessible. In its real—albeit alienated—actuality, the heterotopia challenges the inevitability of current cultural configurations by rendering them as surreal as the heterotopian spaces in which they are reflected, exerting what Foucault calls “a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy.”<sup>20</sup> Foucault notes quite early in the essay that the theater constitutes a potent counter-site. At the end of the essay, however, Foucault turns our attention seaward, announcing that the quintessential counter-site is the ship: “If we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea . . . , you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development . . . but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*.”<sup>21</sup> Foucault’s framing is highly suggestive. If the theater and the sea are alike in that each acts as a heterotopia where traditional social formations are interrogated and undermined, and if the ship excites the imagination as the heterotopia *par excellence*, then it stands to reason that Gosson would come to identify the stage with the ship, couching his antitheatrical message in antinautical imagery.<sup>22</sup>

This antinautical imagery is a distinctive feature of Gosson’s antitheatrical rhetoric, but it bears nothing that he is not alone in associating stages with ships. Several Renaissance playwrights encourage this very identification. In Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, for instance, Gower invites audience members to think of the stage as a ship:

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*Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), esp. 1–59.

20. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 22–27, 24.

21. *Ibid.*, 27.

22. For further discussion of Foucault and the heterotopic qualities of the early modern playhouse, see Daniel R. Gibbons, “Thomas Heywood in the House of the Wise-Woman,” *SEL* 49 (2009): 391–416, esp. 395–400.

In your imagination hold  
 This stage the ship, upon whose deck  
 The sea-tossed Pericles appears to speke.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Ralph Berry reports that the number of plays calling for the space of the stage to stand in for the deck of a ship rises steadily throughout the seventeenth century, and John Cranford Adams demonstrates that this increasing frequency is paired with an increasing sophistication. By the time we get to Fletcher and Massinger's *The Double Marriage*, Adams observes, all three stage elevations are transformed into ship, with the main platform serving as the main deck, the tarras serving as the raised quarter deck, and the music gallery serving as the maintop or crow's nest.<sup>24</sup> Considered alongside staging practices such as these, the antinautical elements of Gosson's anti-theatricalism might begin to look a little less arbitrary. In his maritime metaphors, it would seem that Gosson is piecing together a relationship between seafaring and playacting that becomes more pronounced as both the English theater and the English sea trade mature beyond their Elizabethan beginnings.

Yet the points of contact between these two enterprises are more than merely metaphorical or imaginative. As Stephen Greenblatt points out, early modern playmaking and early modern seafaring share a number of economic ties and ideological affinities. In fact, Greenblatt contends that the Renaissance stage cannot be understood apart from the acquisitive energies of the merchants, entrepreneurs, and adventurers who promoted not only the English trading companies but also the English acting companies. As Greenblatt sees it, seafaring and playmaking are parallel activities, inextricably bound together by their commitment to "absolute play." In his eyes, amphitheaters are analogous to oceans insofar as each cultivates a kind of "transcendental homelessness" that incites individuals to cast off stable identity categories and forage new, virtually autochthonous selves through sheer force of will.<sup>25</sup> As one

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23. William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 10.58–60.

24. Ralph Berry, "Metamorphoses of the Stage," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 5–16, 8; and John Cranford Adams, *The Globe Playhouse*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961), 304.

25. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), esp. 193–221. Philip Edwards faults Greenblatt for not staying with the relationship between stage acting and sea venturing. He complains that "Greenblatt's essay, one of the best pieces of writing on Marlowe in the twentieth century, in the end heads in the wrong direction, forgetting all about the voyagers" (Philip Edwards, *Sea-Mark: The Metaphorical Voyage, Spenser to Milton* [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997], 62).

who resists this kind of self-fashioning whenever and wherever it presents itself, it makes sense that Gosson would intuitively associate seafaring with playmaking, opposing each in his desire to ground us in our God-given identities and offices.

But if we are to insist upon the explanatory force of Gosson's social conservatism with regard to his antinautical rhetoric, we would do well to remember that Gosson's conservatism encompasses gender as well as class. Indeed, Gosson often seems more concerned about slippages in the sex/gender system than about alterations in the socioeconomic system. This being the case, it is fitting that we attend as well to Gosson's antifeminism, considering how his negative attitude toward women underlies and informs his negative attitude toward ships.

On the face of it, antifeminism and antinauticalism might seem unrelated, but early modern authors conventionally connect women with ships. One point of convergence is the idea that women are the primary consumers of overseas commodities. As the work of Shannon Miller suggests, Renaissance plays, pamphlets, and proclamations often point to the insatiable appetites of women (particularly pregnant women) as the driving force behind the Elizabethan sea trade. According to these materials, female desire is the thing pushing England into the risky arenas of ocean and international marketplace, since women are the ones greedy for the silks, spices, and sweet wines brought back by merchant traders.<sup>26</sup> If, as the Renaissance aphorism has it, "far-fetched and dear bought is good for ladies," then women must be seen as largely responsible for England's overseas activities.<sup>27</sup>

For an author like Gosson, the ostensibly feminine orientation of the sea trade would be enough to cast a pall over the entire enterprise. At the same time, it would effectively align seafaring with playmaking, since Gosson sees the latter as also driven by and devoted to the appetites of women.<sup>28</sup> In his

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26. Shannon Miller, "Consuming Mothers/Consuming Merchants: The Carnavalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy," *Modern Language Studies* 26 (1996): 73–95. Miller does not explicitly refer to the sea trade in her analysis, but the economic changes she posits as the source of this sexist understanding (the transformation of the local, feudal market into the abstract, global market) are directly connected to the development of speculative maritime mercantilism.

27. Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), D12. Montaigne quotes this proverb in his essay "Upon Some Verses of Virgil" (in Michel de Montaigne, *Montaigne's Essays*, trans. John Florio, Everyman's Library, 3 vols. [New York: Dutton, 1965], 3:110). Cyrus Hoy cites a number of examples of its appearance in English stage plays, even noting an entry in the Stationers Register for 1566–67 for a play titled *Far Fetched and Dear Bought Is Good For Ladies* (Cyrus Hoy, *Introduction, Notes, and Commentaries to Texts in the "The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker,"* ed. Fredson Bowers, 4 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980], 1:231–32).

28. Such an understanding would seem to be borne out by Queen Elizabeth I's role in the establishment and operation of England's theaters. Not only did Elizabeth lay the foundation

mind, the feminine orientation of the stage is evident not only in its sensual displays but also in its erotic plots, which—like the commodities imported from overseas—could only appeal to a feminine sensibility. Instead of trafficking in manly prudence, Gosson complains, what the playhouses perpetually present are “those wanton spectacles of lyght huswiues, drawing gods from the heauens, & young men from them selues to shipwracke of honestie” (SA, sig. B4v). Yet the “shipwracke of honestie” that is the preferred subject of the stage is also the predominant action of the assemblies themselves. Everywhere one looks in the early modern playhouse, one sees men debasing themselves before women:

In our assemblies at playes in *London*, you shall see suche heauing, and shoouing, suche ytching and shouldring, too sitte by women; Suche care for their garments, that they bee not trode on: Such eyes to their lappes, that no chippes light in them: Such pillows to ther backes, that they take no hurte: Such masking in their eares, I knowe not what: Such giuing them Pippins to passe the time: Suche playing at foote Saunt without Cardes: Such ticking, such toying, such smiling, such winking, and such manning them home, when the sportes are ended, that it is a right Comedie, to marke their behaiour. (SA, sig. C1v)

On the stage and in the yard, then, Gosson encounters the same kind of unmanly solicitude, and this causes him to think of the theater in roughly the same terms as the sea trade: namely, as an irresponsible enterprise born of and beholden to the appetites of women.

But women in the early modern period were not only associated with the cargoes of the merchant ships; they were also compared to the ships themselves. Both of these ideas are at play in *Gods Arithmeticke*, as Francis Meres recriminates against a worldly wife: “[F]or before yee can be full fraught and furnisht, yee must have one thing from Egypt, another thing from Spaine, and

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for the public playhouses by licensing London’s first acting companies, but she also intervened with regularity on behalf of the players. As Peter Lake explains, the pleasures of the queen were decisive in policy debates about the professional stage: “Whenever the issue of order came up or the question of reopening the theatres after a period of plague was broached, the clinching argument was always that the actors were expected to entertain the Queen at court and could not be expected to do so if they could not both practice their skills and make their living by performing before paying audiences in the city. . . . Throughout these exchanges the desire of the queen to be entertained by the players was always central.” Each time the privy council insisted upon the overriding importance of Elizabeth’s amusement, it reinforced the idea that the theater’s *raison d’être* is the fulfillment of female pleasure (Peter Lake, *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002], 487–88).

another from Italie, you must have your bracelets from one countrie, your girdle from another, and your perfumes from another, and all the world must bee travelled too, to rigge out one woman, & when shee is once furnisht, then she cuts her Ankor, all a flaunt under sayle, and abroad she goes like a Gyant to runne her race: Of such an unprofitable wife I must needs say, one is better than two."<sup>29</sup> The woman/ship analogy is also central to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, where Dalila is said to come "sailing" in

Like a stately Ship  
 Of *Tarsus*, bound for th'Isles  
 Of *Javan* or *Gadier*  
 With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,  
 Sails fill'd, and streamers waving,  
 Courted by all the winds that hold them play<sup>30</sup>

Laying bare the antifeminist logic of this particular conceit, Joseph Swetnam explains in his *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women* that authors liken women to ships because their gaudy exteriors often conceal worthless interiors. As Swetnam relates, "[Women] are also compared vnto a painted ship, which seemeth faire outwardly & yet nothing but ballace [ballast] within hir."<sup>31</sup> Of course, this kind of deceptiveness also involves the actor and thereby enlarges our understanding of the overlap between antinauticalism, antifeminism, and antitheatricalism in Gosson's discourse. Insofar as women, ships, and players all threaten to take us in with enticing shows and alluring outsiders, the feminine, the maritime, and the theatrical interpenetrate and interchange in Gosson's rhetoric, operating as mutually reinforcing signifiers of falsehood and hypocrisy. If we are wise, Gosson advises, we would do well to suppress them all.

To this convoluted complex of ideas and associations we can add one more wrinkle by noting that women in Gosson's time were also identified with the oceanic element itself, in addition to the ships and cargoes that traversed it. We see something of this in George Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois*, where the character called Monsieur inveighs against "the unsounded sea of women's bloods / That, when 'tis calmest, is most dangerous," and in Swetnam's *Arraignment*, where the author alleges that woman is "like vnto the Sea which at

29. Francis Meres, *Gods Arithmeticke* (London: Richard Johnes, 1597), 17.

30. John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), lines 713–18.

31. Joseph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women* (London: Edward Ailde for Thomas Archer, 1615), 3.

sometimes is so calme that a cockbote may safely endure hir might, but anon againe without rage she is so grown that it overwhelmeth the tallest ship that is."<sup>32</sup> Underlying each of these passages is the idea that women resemble the ocean in their inscrutability, mutability, and potential treachery. Yet the early modern connection between women and water goes even deeper, since humoral theories forged strong links between femininity and fluidity. As Gail Paster has shown, the female body in the Renaissance was routinely troped as a leaky vessel or overflowing container. Whether it be tears, breast milk, menstrual blood, or urine, women were understood to be awash in fluids, which consequently kept them from exhibiting either continence or constancy.<sup>33</sup> As a result of their fluid constitutions, women were regarded as inherently unreliable. According to this mode of thought, one might say of all women what Othello says of Desdemona: "She was as false as water" (*Othello* 5.2.143). Statements such as these invite us to see Gosson's antinauticalism as suspended in a web of antifeminist assumptions wherein actors, ships, and women are all knotted together by their ties to an immoral and unmanly shiftiness. Gosson's hydrophobia, in other words, goes hand in hand with his gynophobia.

Bearing this in mind, it is easier to appreciate Gosson's antinautical tendencies, especially his recurrent characterization of the playhouse as a dangerously fluid environment that dissolves important distinctions and sweeps up spectators in deadly currents of desire. According to Gosson, one cannot immerse oneself in this ocean of iniquity without being corrupted. "Hee that goes to Sea must smel of the Ship," Gosson writes, "and [he] that sayles into Poets wil sauour of Pitch" (SA, sig. A5r). In an environment where players and patrons alike are encouraged to manipulate the signs of selfhood so as to impersonate and impress, identity is unmoored and all are set adrift. By neglecting or doing away with the moral and material barriers that are necessary if things are to flow in their proper channels, the playhouses open the floodgates for effeminacy to burst forth, inundating and overwhelming all within. Indeed, this would seem to be the playhouse's very purpose. According to Gosson, "The *Poetes* that write playes, and they that present them vpon the Stage, studie to make our affections ouerflow" (PC, sig. Fiv). As he exhorts his reader to dam up this unmanly overflow, Gosson thoroughly intermixes fluidity, femininity, and theatricality. Each is implicated in the early modern playhouse, which he calls "the gulfe, that the Diuell . . . hath digged

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32. George Chapman, *Bussy D'Ambois*, ed. Robert J. Lordi, Regents Renaissance Drama (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 3.2.289–90; and Swetnam, *The Araigment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women*, 3.

33. See Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

to swallow you" (*PC*, sig. E2v). If we are to keep from drowning, Gosson advises, we must "fill vp the gulfe." In many ways, Gosson's advice is perfect: to pair with the image of the ship that no longer sets sail, Gosson urges upon us a gulf that no longer contains water.

Gosson's abiding interest in converting water into land, fluidity into solidity, and motion into stasis is a telling witness of his desire to give traditional social structures the permanence and stability of the unmoving earth. However, this impulse is also implicated in an antifeminist identification of women with fluids. In Gosson's world, where women's incontinence was a cultural given, this antifeminist identification is especially acute. Nevertheless, a number of twentieth-century feminists have seen fit to embrace a similar idea, alleging a fundamental connection between fluidity and femininity. One such is Luce Irigaray, who claims that fluidity is the essential modality of women. According to her, this is why fluids pose such problems to masculinist theoretical models. As she explains it, phallogocentrism is so tied to a mechanics of solids alone that it is unable to account for the very different behaviors and properties of fluids. Because real fluids resist adequate symbolization within the masculinist rationalist project, they threaten its integrity. In order to mitigate this threat and keep fluidity from "jamming the works of the theoretical machine," Irigaray states, phallogocentrism has found it necessary to formulate abstract mathematical models that conceptualize fluids as semisolids, giving rise to what she call "theoretical fluids." These "theoretical fluids" are not fully commensurate with real fluids, but for this very reason they enable the continuing fantasy of masculine comprehension. Thus, by idealizing fluidity in such a way as to convert it into semisolidity, phallogocentrism "seals . . . *the triumph of rationality.*"<sup>34</sup>

Gosson's antinauticalism, I would like to suggest, is apropos. By repeatedly turning sailing ships into floating docks, Gosson undertakes something akin to the conversion of real fluids into semisolids. As he endeavors to minimize all types of flux or flow, he characteristically creates what might be called "theoretical ships": sea vessels so static they have more to do with solidity than fluidity and in this way prop up a particular kind of masculine rationality. But if Irigaray's analysis is helpful in opening up this aspect of Gosson's discourse, it perhaps pushes us even further, for she makes a shift to say why solidity should be so central to the androcentric outlook. According to Irigaray, the masculinist commitment to solidity is implicitly anatomical. What makes firmness so important in phallogocentric systems of thought is the ideal of the

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34. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 107, 106–7, 113.

ever-erect phallus. Behind the fear of fluidity is the more basic fear of phallic flaccidity.<sup>35</sup>

It is perhaps tempting to turn Irigaray's analysis into a provocative gloss of Gosson, clarifying what is at stake in his frequent complaints about the "softening" effects of the theater. For it is certainly true that Gosson sums up his opposition to stage plays in the claim that they make men soft and womanish. "These outward spectacles," Gosson writes, "effeminate, & soften the hearts of men" (*PC*, sig. G4r). As he would have it, play going is to be avoided because it strips men of the hardness that both comprises and confirms their masculinity. On this point, the ancient Spartans offer an intriguing contrast. According to Gosson, the men of Sparta refused to patronize plays and consequently enjoyed a legendary hardness: "The *Spartans* [were] all steele, fashioned out of tougher mettall, free in minde, valiaunt in hart, seruile to none" (*SA*, sigs. D6v-D7r). With Irigaray in mind, we might see a phallic referent in all this talk of men as hard as steel. Following this line of thought, we might surmise that Gosson sees play going as analogous to the sexual act itself, which makes men impotent by drawing them into a feminine space and pleasuring them to the point of loss.<sup>36</sup>

However, I hesitate to sanction such a reading, inasmuch as an interpretation as reductively psychosexual and literal-minded as this is likely to sustain our sense of antitheatrical discourse as neurotic or fetishistic or hysterical, which is the very characterization I am trying to countermand. But how is it possible to read Gosson's writings otherwise? If Gosson believes that stage plays can emasculate actors and effeminate audiences, isn't that incontrovertible evidence of his irrationality? In thinking through questions such as this, it is useful to consider recent studies suggesting that sexually coded words in early modern usage may have 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 in Milton can be insufficiently masculine, and women are not precluded from assuming "masculine" moral positions. Accordingly,

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35. *Ibid.*, 110.

36. The emasculating effects of intercourse are comic fodder for the fool in *All's Well That Ends Well*, who remarks of the conjugal relation: "The danger is in standing to't; that's the loss of men, though it be the getting of children" (in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3.2.39-40). Camille Paglia intends something similar when she wryly observes that male sexual success "always ends in sagging fortunes." "Men enter in triumph," she writes, "but withdraw in decrepitude" (Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* [New York: Vintage, 1991], 20).

Milton's discourse of manliness should not be taken too literally: it is "about the mind, and very specifically not about the body."<sup>37</sup> I submit that the same is true of Gosson's works. Before we rush to give literal weight to Gosson's allegations of effeminization, we need to remember that his is an ethical discourse, first and foremost, far more interested in moral postures than in genital structures. Accordingly, when Gosson uses terms like "effeminization" and "degeneration," he is much more likely to be describing a process of mental/spiritual corruption wherein virtue is turned into vice than he is a process of anatomical alteration wherein penises are turned into vaginas. The latter is certainly fantastical, but the former is not hard to imagine at all. One need not be irrational to think that watching a lascivious interlude might induce an otherwise upright individual to slacken his (or her) "manly" temperance and slide into "womanish" lust. Once we recognize that in Gosson's writings, "manliness" and "effeminateness" are primarily moral conditions, not sexual configurations, a great deal of his illogic evaporates. Which is to say: the man might not be mad after all.

To be sure, Gosson is not immune to excess or incoherence. But what I hope to have shown by now is that what appears outlandish or nonsensical in his discourse often follows a recognizable, if sometimes obscure, line of logic. The ship that does not sail is a case in point. Though the conceit is oxymoronic, it is largely coherent with Gosson's attitudes toward stasis and status, property and probity, fluidity and femininity. Yet because this complex of ideas is foreign to our modern, progressive sensibilities, we often misinterpret it. We do not always read Gosson on his own terms, and the result is a criticism in which Gosson becomes a caricature of himself: an unsophisticated ideologue who neither thinks nor writes coherently. Nevertheless, a close examination of his writings reveals something quite different—and can be richly rewarding in its own right.

As I bring my own examination of Gosson to a close, I would like to return one more time to the image of the unsailing ship so as to ask a final question. It is fitting that we conclude with this conceit, since this is precisely what Gosson does on the last page of *The Schoole of Abuse*. Determining that he has rehearsed enough of the playhouse's ills, Gosson puts an end to his theatrical tour by comparing himself to a sailor shipping in to port at the end of a long journey. "I will caste Ancor in these abuses," Gosson writes, "[and] rest my Barke in the simple roade" (SA, sig. E5r). One last time, Gosson conflates the dangers of the sea and stage, impressing upon his readers the wisdom of withdrawal. As he does so, he revisits the pamphlet's opening gambit, in which he

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37. Gina Hausknecht, "The Gender of Civic Virtue," in *Milton and Gender*, ed. Catherine Gimelli Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19–33, 19.

confesses to having “roaued long on the Seas of wantonnesse” and vows to avail himself of his experience to map out every danger and prevent others from perishing (SA, iv). By presenting himself as a qualified pilot, though, Gosson not only implicates himself in the fluidity he exhorts others to avoid but also intimates that the theatrical element is navigable after all, if one only has sufficient knowledge, skill, or guidance. Perhaps most intriguing, however, is the way Gosson’s metaphor expresses an unwillingness to abandon ship for once and for all. Significantly, Gosson’s parting image does not put him safely ashore. When Gosson bids us farewell, he is still afloat, bobbing up and down in the simple road, as if he cannot quite bring himself to quit his bark. Such a situation is worth considering.

It is not hard to see Gosson’s antinauticalism as operating at cross-purposes with itself. Even though the conceit of the unsailing ship connects with and conveys many of Gosson’s conservative ideals, it ultimately runs afoul of his presumptive intentions by slipping into oxymoron and begging the question, “What good is a ship that does not sail?” But if Gosson’s maritime metaphors falter in this fashion, why does he keep coming back to them? If the figure of the ship invites those theatrical flights of fancy that Gosson wants to anchor, what accounts for his inability to leave it alone?

At one level, Gosson’s relentlessly fluid figures lend credence to Bryan Reynolds’s claims about the theater’s “transversality”: its power to transcend, fracture, and displace the subjective space of the established order in such a way as to overwhelm even its staunchest opponents, catching them up in the very transgressiveness they wish to eradicate. According to Reynolds, “Transversal power radiated from the public theatre, such that everyone exposed to this theatrical nexus’s efflorescing reach, including its most fervent enemies, was infected with transversal thought.”<sup>38</sup> When Gosson’s rhetoric runs into water, then, we might see him as “infected” with transversal thought. Indeed, it is unlikely that Gosson would resist such a reading himself, since he readily acknowledges his own corruption over the course of his antitheatrical career. Yet Gosson’s relationship to the stage involves at least as much in the way of “attraction” as it does “infection.” After all, Gosson is no abstemious outsider, looking in. This is a man who wrote for the stage and still thrills to think what theater can do, when properly directed. Everything about Gosson’s pamphlets—from their playfulness to their inventiveness to their delight in language and imagery—reveals his enduring appreciation for the theatrical. In *Playes Confuted*, Gosson even arranges his arguments into five acts, writing his pamphlet

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38. Bryan Reynolds, “The Devil’s House, ‘Or Worse’: Transversal Power and Antitheatrical Discourse in Early Modern England,” *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 2 (May 1997): 142–67, 152.

as if it were a play. For several critics, this suggests a lack of self-awareness or a level of hypocrisy. I see it, on the other hand, as an indicator of Gosson's abiding interest in the self-liberating and self-fashioning possibilities of the theater, even though he recognizes that these possibilities are almost always actualized in wicked ways. Gosson sincerely wishes we could enjoy the pleasures of the stage responsibly. But since our sinful souls cannot seem to manage this, Gosson calls for the theaters to be closed. Such a stance is not hypocritical so much as it is principled.

On this count, Gosson perhaps comes off better than literary apologists such as Sidney or Milton. Neither Sidney nor Milton can pretend that the literary arts never promote depravity or error. In the *Apology*, Sidney openly acknowledges that poetry's "sweete charming force" affords it unparalleled destructive power. Nevertheless, he dismisses this destructive potential by sophistically insisting that the misuse of a thing is irrelevant to its real value: "But what, shall the abuse of a thing make the right use odious? Nay, truly, though 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, yet shall it be so far from concluding that the abuse should give reproach to the abused that, contrariwise, it is a good reason that whatsoever being abused doth most harm, being rightly used (and upon the right use each thing conceiveth his title) doth most good."<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Milton entertains no illusions in *Areopagitica* as to literature's prejudicial effects on the unprepared or susceptible, but he writes this off as the cost of doing business. In his eyes, the corruption of ten vicious readers is insignificant, if only one virtuous man is advantaged: "For God sure esteems the growth and compleating of one vertuous person, more then the restraint of ten vitious."<sup>40</sup> In order to value, as Milton does, the benefit to the one over the injury to the ten, one must make some rather callous calculations. Gosson's approach is decidedly different. Expressing a higher level of concern than either Sidney or Milton, Gosson argues on behalf of those most likely to be led away. As absolute as Dostoevsky's Ivan, who cannot approve of a God that allows even one innocent child to suffer, Gosson cannot approve of a professional stage that brings even a handful of spectators to harm.<sup>41</sup> This may be paternalistic and inflexible, but it is neither paranoid nor irrational. In other words, what sets Gosson apart is not the weakness of his thought but rather the strength of his convictions. The fluidity of the stage

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39. Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Glen Allen, VA: College Publishing, 2001), 100–101.

40. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *The Riverside Milton*, 1010.

41. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: Norton, 1976), 224–26.

and sea quite frankly fascinate Gosson. But since those who give themselves over to either element are likely to be carried beyond their depth, he feels the need to anchor the ship and empty the theater. Better safe than sorry, he advises. Better dry than drowned.

Bearing this in mind, it might become more difficult to imagine Gosson as ranting without reason—even when he is talking about ships that do not sail. As a close examination of this particular conceit makes clear, Gosson's antitheatrical discourse is a dense weave of neoclassicism, conservatism, and antifeminism. Its textures and tensions are strange, but they ultimately have less to do with lunacy or "magical thinking" than with wanting what one knows one should not have. If we tug on the apparent loose ends in Gosson—like the paradoxical image of the unsailing ship—everything does not unravel. Rather, the pressure we apply permits us to see how each thread ties together in a tight network of connections. Though the fabric of antitheatrical discourse may strike us as curious and overwrought, it does not have as many holes as we have assumed.