

# "We sit in the chaire of pestilence" : the discourse of disease in the anti-theatrical pamphlets, 1570s-1630s

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“We sit in the chaire of pestilence”:  
The Discourse of Disease in the Anti-Theatrical  
Pamphlets, 1570s-1630s

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This essay places the language of disease at the centre of the antitheatrical controversy, which flared up in the late 1500s in response to the rising popularity of the secular theatre. Theatre objectors worried that drama lured crowds away from the pulpit with its visually seductive fleshly spectacles. They accused the theatre of perpetuating the idolatrous culture of Catholicism, and portrayed it as a site of moral and physical contagion. The disease imagery in antitheatrical pamphlets reconfigures the once cooperative historical relationship between drama and religion into one of antagonism. Bringing together cultural associations between Catholicism, idolatry and adultery, the medically-inflected moral rhetoric of antitheatricalists charts a curious mechanism for disease transmission in the theatre. Contagion migrates from the bodies of the players, through the senses of spectators, as they empathetically observe the actions portrayed, into their own bodies and minds. Thus the pamphlets establish a causal link between seduction of the senses, corruption of the soul and contagion of the body. By creating this system of causalities, I suggest, the pamphleteers sought (and failed) to regain the attentions of playgoers.

Lamenting the ruinous effects of the public stage on the morals of the nation, the clergyman Stephen Gosson exclaims, “Happy saith the Prophet is he That walketh not in the Counsell of the vngodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sits in the chaire of pestilence.” Gosson quotes from Psalm 1 in the translation by Miles Coverdale, published in the 1540 *Psalter*. As this was the version of the Psalms included

in the *Book of Common Prayer*, it would have been etched into the memory of all churchgoers. Gosson develops the familiar imagery in a new direction, portraying the theatre as the seat of disease condemned by the psalmist:

if we flocke to Theaters to gase vpon playes, wee walke in the Counsell of the vngodly. . . We stand in the way of sinners, because plaies are the procéedings & practises of the Gentiles in their Idolatrie; We sit in the chaire of pestilence, because we thrust our selues into the companie of them. (*Playes confuted in fiue actions*, 1582, sigs. Bvi<sup>v</sup>-Bvii<sup>r</sup>)

Thus the antitheatrical pamphlets construct a medically-inflected argument which locates the theatre at the crossroads between pestilence and idolatrous religion.

In the three sections of this essay, I will place the language of disease at the rhetorical centre of the antitheatrical controversy. First I argue that antitheatricalists deployed plague imagery in order to reconfigure the once cooperative historical relationship between the theatre and the church into one of antagonism and competition. In the second section, I explore the linguistic and cultural associations between popery, idolatry and adultery which were linked with images of disease in the medically-inflected moral rhetoric of theatre objectors. In the third section, I explore the mechanism for disease transmission proposed in antitheatrical pamphlets, which I describe as the epidemiology of affective identification. Moral contagion migrates from the bodies of the players impersonating sin, through the senses of spectators, as they empathetically observe and identify with the actions portrayed, into their own minds. From there contagion spreads into the bodies of spectators, inciting them to action and carnal sin. Ultimately, I argue, by portraying the theatre as a locus of disease transmission, antitheatricalists sought (and failed) to regain the attentions of an audience divided between the medicinal powers of the pulpit and the fleshly attractions of the stage.

*From cooperation to competition: rewriting the relationship between the stage and the pulpit*

The antitheatrical polemic flared up in the latter decades of the 1500s in response to the rising popularity of the secular theatre, and continued into the 1630s. Among the antitheatricalists were Church of England clergymen known for their Puritan leanings, including John Northbrooke, Stephen Gosson and John Rainolds, as well as secular authors and controversialists, notably Philip Stubbes and Anthony Munday. As a

collective body of opinion, the pamphlets convey a strong iconophobic sentiment, portraying the theatre as a site of corporeal idolatry which, like the Catholic Mass, lures spectators with visually seductive spectacles, and spreads moral and physical diseases.

Linking the stage to the Catholic liturgy, the pamphlets project anxiety about the ability of dramatic arts to satisfy a communal hunger for aesthetically mediated affect in a way that the sober Protestant liturgy could not. Arguably, generations of Elizabethan churchgoers who experienced the Mass prior to the Reformation remembered nostalgically the lavish spectacle of the Catholic service. Louis Montrose has suggested that the theatre compensated for the absent rites of Catholicism by providing a “distinctive source of affective and intellectual stimulation and satisfaction, an experience that was collective and commercial, public and profane” (31-32). This experience, Montrose writes, provided a secular alternative to the “ritual practices and popular religious festivities” of late medieval religion (30, 32n). Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt has argued that Elizabethan theatre “effects a drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular” and depicts “evacuated rituals, drained of their original meaning,” constructing a hollow space “that calls forth what is not, that signifies absence” (126, 127). By providing a secular substitute for the rich sensory appeal of pre-Reformation religion, the theatre fulfilled an experiential need created by the Reformation. The urgent tone in which the antitheatricalists plead with playgoers to get back into the church indicates that many a respectable parishioner had yielded to that experiential need and swapped a Sunday sermon for a play.

Peter Lake has suggested that the competition between the pulpit and the stage was over “a common stock of discursive and ideological materials” that appealed to “what may well have been more or less the same ‘popular’ (i.e. socially, culturally and confessionally mixed) audience” (425). It is here that the medical rhetoric of the antitheatricalists enters the equation. If the playhouse poached audiences from the church, the way to regain their attention was to lay claim to ideological materials that lay beyond the mandate of the theatre. The antitheatricalists did that by portraying the theatre as a locus of disease transmission and by claiming medicinal powers of healing against its virulent, infectious influence.

Thus John Northbrooke announces that he undertook the writing of his work, *A treatise wherein dicing, dauncing, vaine playes or enterluds . . . are reprovued* (1577), “that I mought therby helpe those that are diseased with any of these diseases, either of diceplaying, dauncing, or vaine playes or enterludes” (sig. Aiii<sup>r</sup>). Northbrooke worries that the mystical body of Christ is being crippled by the lewd culture of playgoing. Elaborating on Paul’s analogy between the church and the body, he offers to help as a

physician would, by “giuing herein medicines and remedies against these diseases which most of al trouble the whole mébers of the body” (sig. Aii<sup>v</sup>). Likewise, Anthony Munday, in *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theaters* (1580), evokes the metaphor of Jesus the Physician while pleading with city authorities to take prompt action against the playhouses:

In the beginning euerie disease is to be stopped, and cured; but if a sore run ouer-long it wil growe past the cure of the Physition. The Magistrate is therefore to prouide in time a remedie to redresse the mischiefes that are like to ensue by this common plague. (72-73)

In portraying the evils of playgoing in somatic terms, as ailments that could be treated by amputating corrupt tissues or administering salves, the antitheatricalists drew on a philosophical tradition in which the bodily and spiritual worlds were perceived not merely as analogous but as continuous. In *Fictions of Disease*, Margaret Healy emphasises the discursive continuities between religion and medicine, and between the moral, physical and societal flaws to which the two professions directed their efforts:

the activities of the body and the soul are so thoroughly intertwined that any attempt to separate “medical” from “religious” matters would be erroneous and impossible. The boundaries between discourses and professions concerned with “disease” are inevitably weak in a medical schema where body and soul are intimately related and restraint of bodily pleasures is construed as fundamental to health with implications for society (and its controlling mechanisms) as well as the individual. (47)

If health and sickness are manifestations of divinely ordained principles that apply with equal force to the material and spiritual worlds, an institution promoting moral laxity is bound to be at fault for spreading bodily infections. The theatre seat becomes, literally and not just metaphorically, a chair of pestilence. Healy notes that fear of the plague was exploited for purposes of political propaganda, by targeting “a readily identifiable group of people, whose sins or moral deficiencies had incurred the wrath of God” and who could be “scapegoated” as both the moral and the physical polluters of a community” (62-63). It is to this end that the antitheatricalists deployed their pestilential rhetoric, seeking to ostracise and eliminate an institution which proved a powerful competitor but could be demonstrated to draw its strength from moral deficiencies.

In constructing a medical argument against the theatre, however, the antitheatricalists were rewriting an alternative cultural narrative in which the relationship between religion and drama was not portrayed as antagonistic but as cooperative. In *Performance and Cure*, Karelisa Hartigan describes the pageants enacted by priests in the sanctuaries of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, as an example of the productive relationship between theatrical and religious institutions. Before patients gained admission into the sanctuary of Asclepius, Hartigan relates, they participated in dramatic interludes enacted by the priests in a space outside the temple. The performance prepared them psychologically for the rituals they were about to witness, and modelled the affect and ritual gestures they were expected to replicate (29ff).

Early modern accounts of classical antiquity emphasise this role of Graeco-Roman theatre in facilitating the implementation of religious and medical regimens in times of disease epidemic. In *Th'overthrow of stage-playes* (1599), John Rainolds cites his opponent, the dramatist Gager, as proof that theatre-defenders were too eager to draw dividends from the cooperative ties between the theatre and religious and economic authorities in pre-Christian societies: “playes (say you) were sometime instituted, as in a common plague, *ad placandos Deos*, and were provided by great officers of the common treasure: and so they are referred *ad religionem & deuotionem*” (68). The antitheatrical response to this argument was patterned on *exempla* from the early church fathers, who were understandably annoyed by the prominence of dramatic arts in the devotional life and plague-response strategies of the Roman polis.

Augustine, whose aversion to public entertainments was enthusiastically referenced by the antitheatricalists, admits in the *Confessions* to having enjoyed immensely the Roman theatre and games prior to his Christian days.<sup>1</sup> Post-conversion, he exploits the association of the plague with pagan drama and devotions, constructing a medical argument against the theatre. The gist of this argument is here recounted by Northbrooke:

S. Augustine sayth that such Enterludes and Playes are filthie spectacles. For when the Heathen did appoint and ordeyne (sayth he) Playes and Enterludes to their Gods, for the auoyding of the Pestilence of their bodies: your Bishops for the auoyding of the pestilence of your soules, hath prohibited and forbidden those kynde of Scenicall and Enterlude playes. (69)

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine discusses his love of the Roman theatre in *Confessions* 1.10.16, 1.19.30 and 3.1.1.

The fledgling Christian church promoted by Augustine refused to share its medicinal powers with a ritual integral to the devotions of the pagans. Consequently, Augustine reinterprets the plague as a spiritual condition, and accuses the theatre of spreading moral plagues by assisting the pagan priesthood in their attempts to contain disease epidemics. In this medico-religious schema picked up by the antitheatricalists, the plague predictably becomes the trope of choice for portraying the publically-transmitted moral evil.

Stephen Gosson enforces the same association between the theatre, the plague and pagan customs, drawing on Tertullian's treatise, *De Spectaculis*, which names disease as the catalyst for the export of the Greek theatrical tradition to Rome:

Playes wer not set vp by the Gentiles of any blinde zeale within themselues, but by the motion of the diuell, as may be prooued by the originall of them in Rome. This kinde of Idolatrye was long practised among the Gréekes, the Romanes not being acquainted with the same. Therefore the deuill spying his time to bring it into Italie, about 400. yeares after the building of Rome . . . the inhabitantes beinge mightelie deuowred with a greate plague, the Deuill foreseeing the time when the plague should cease, taught the Romanes by the oracles of *Sibilla* to set forth plaies to appease the anger of the Gods, that the pestilence ceasing after this solemnising of their plaies, might nussle them in idolatrie and wantonnesse euer after. (sigs. Ci<sup>r</sup>-Ci<sup>v</sup>)

The story carries an ambiguous moral, as the plague seems to have receded following the introduction of playacting into the city. Gosson compensates for what the tale lacks in consistency with accusations of satanic worship and adultery. Presumably, the twin threats of spiritual fornication and venereal disease balanced out the fact that the ancients hoped to please the gods and restore their health by attending a performance.

These anecdotes about measures for disease control in the ancient world indicate that renegotiating the relationship between the church and the theatre was not as straightforward a business as the antitheatricalists would have it. Historical links had to be acknowledged before they could be severed. To portray the relationship as one of antagonism, theatre objectors emphasised the theatre's ties with pagan devotions. They insinuated that idolatrous dramatic rites contributed to the spread of moral diseases, yet substituted the Greek and Roman customs condemned by Augustine and Tertullian with the more topical problem of Catholicism.

*Seduction and contagion: the plagues of popery, idolatry and adultery*

When John Northbrooke argues that all manner of sin and criminality spring from an idle lifestyle, he places the theatre in the same category as whoredom and the popish faith of Catholicism. “Idleness,” he asserts, “is the fountayne and well spring whereout is drawne a thousande mischiefes . . . as whoredome, theft, murder, breaking of wedlocke, perurie, Idolatrie, Poperie, &c. vaine playes, filthy pastimes, and drunkennesse” (33). For Northbrooke’s contemporaries, “play” is a blanket term for drama and other public entertainments, including card-playing, bear-baiting, and dancing. The link between these moral “mischiefes” and communicable diseases was circumstantially justified by the realities of life in London’s two entertainment districts – Shoreditch, near Bishopsgate and Southwark, on the Bankside.<sup>2</sup> Loiterers, street vendors peddling their wares, sailors, apprentices, crooks, and prostitutes migrated between playhouses, bear-baiting houses and taverns. While churchgoers were encouraged to abstain from fleshly excess and to practice moderation in their appearance, diet and occupations, playgoers departed from performances drunk on passions, blood and deviant spectacles. In the minds of the respectable burghers whose interests were adversely affected by the entertainment industry, the theatre stood at the epicentre of a culture of excess and promiscuity which spread venereal disease, dietary imbalance, alcoholism, and violence.

The plague makes a natural appearance in this context. As a poly-semantic trope for a publically transmitted evil, the plague evokes associations with famine, political strife and the moral and social devastation that followed disease epidemics. It is an especially convenient trope for condemning venues which drew large crowds and contributed to the spread of disease as well as public disturbances. Hence Northbrooke’s caution to playgoers to flee from the idle pursuits of the theatre “as thou wouldest flee from the plague of pestilence” (33). Hence, too, William Prynne’s similar caution in *Histrion-mastix: The players scourge, or, actors tragædie* (1633), to “feare, and flie” the theatre “as much, nay more then any Pest-house.” Plays, Prynne thunders, are “the Plagues, and Poyson of mens Soules, and Manners,” and playhouses are “Oratories of the Deuill” and “Synagogues of Satan” (69).

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<sup>2</sup> In Shakespeare’s lifetime, Shoreditch housed the Red Lion (1567), the Theatre (1576), the Curtain (1577), the Fortune (1600), the Boar’s Head (1602), and the Red Bull (1604). In Southwark on the Bankside stood the Rose (1587), the Swan (1595), the Globe (1599), and the Hope (1614). On public theatres in Shakespeare’s lifetime, see Andrew Gurr (13-22).

In the wider context of Prynne's and Northbrooke's argument, adultery, with its accompanying threat of venereal disease, triangulates with the plague and idolatry as a metaphoric short-hand for spiritual and bodily corruption. This triple link between disease, sins of the flesh and the unholy urges of the spirit originates in analogies which were emphatically enforced in the seminal text of public devotion in Reformation England, Thomas Cranmer's *Sermons, or Homilies* (1547). "A Sermon Against Whoredom and Uncleaness" places whoredom and idolatry on the same quick path to damnation:

It is necessary unto salvation to abstain from idolatry; so it is to abstain from whoredom. Is there any nigher way to lead unto damnation, than to be an idolater? No: even so, neither is there any nearer way to damnation, than to be a fornicator and a whoremonger. (111-12)

"The Third Part of the Homily against Images, and the worshipping of them" metaphorically conjoins the two sins by defining idolatry as spiritual fornication:

Doth not the word of God call idolatry, spiritual fornication? Doth it not call a gilt or painted idol, or image, a strumpet with a painted face? Be not the spiritual wickednesses of an idol's enticing like the flatteries of a wanton harlot? Be not men and women as prone to spiritual fornication (I mean idolatry) as to carnal fornication? (221)

This link between seduction and false religion was so prominent that accusations of harlotry flew in all directions in the controversial prose of the period. Defending the Anglican church Richard Bancroft, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, calls the religion of his adversaries "the harlotte a false Church." Its proponents, he warns, are "most daungerous and pestilent seducers . . . Theyr dealing is counterfeyt and corrupt" (419).

Here we arrive at a linguistic cluster in post-Reformation rhetoric which establishes a causal link between seduction and corruption. Adultery and excessive decoration (the "strumpet with a painted face") are for the physical world what iconophilia and idolatry are for the spiritual one. Their dealings are corrupt: both harm the body and soul with diseases.

The iconophobic rhetoric, with its parallels between disease and the erotic and idolatrous desires aroused by painted idols, was enthusiastically redirected by the pamphleteers towards the theatre. In a much-quoted passage from *Playes confuted in five actions*, Gosson asserts that "maygames, stageplaies, & such like, can not be suffred among Chris-

tians without apostacy, because they were suckt from the Deuilles teate, to nurce vp idolatrie” (sig. Bviii<sup>r</sup>). An erotically-charged image of the female breast, with possible anti-Catholic connotations evoking the Virgin Mary, mediates between the stage and the practice of idolatry. The theatre, like the ambiguously gendered devil who is in possession of a breast, becomes a nexus of erotic and idolatrous desires.

Anthony Munday places “harlots, vtterlie past al shame” in direct proximity to the players themselves, metonymically represented by the scaffold of the dramatic stage:

Whosoeuer shal visit the chappel of Satan, I meane the Theater, shal finde there no want of yong ruffins, nor lacke of harlots, vtterlie past al shame: who presse to the fore-front of the scaffoldes, to the end to showe their impudencie, and to be as an obiect to al mens eies. Yea, such is their open shameles behauior, as euerie man maie perceauē by their wanton gestures, wherevnto they are giuen: yea, they seeme there to be like brothels of the stewes. (89)

The harlot is not merely a vivid presence in the theatre. She is herself something of a keen performer: given to dramatic gestures, eager to position herself at the nexus between the adulterous gaze and the idolatrous image mounted on the scaffold. The role she performs in Munday’s “chappel of Satan” is of a devil’s nun, a seductress whose carnal charms entice her victims into demon worship. As Alison Shell has argued, the painted harlot in the iconophobic rhetoric of the Reformation descends from the biblical Whore of Babylon – a female goddess of polytheism who signifies spiritual degeneracy and translates idolatrous worship into the physical act of copulation (31-36).

The moral consequences of copulating with harlots were represented in the antitheatrical discourse through the most grotesque manifestations of venereal disease and bodily corruption. Asserting that “there is no sin greater before the face of God, then whordome,” Philip Stubbes briefly cautions that “euerlasting damnation” awaits all whoremongers, then compiles a generous list of the “inconueniences” inflicted by this sin on the body:

it dimmeth the sight, it impaireth the hearing, it infirmeth the sinewes, it weakneth the ioynts, it exhausteth the marow, consumeth the moisture and supplement of the body, it riueth the face, appalleth the countenance, it dulleth the spirits, it hurteth the memorie, it weakneth the whole body, it bringeth it into a consumption, it bringeth vlcérations, scab, scurf, blain, botch, pocks & biles, it maketh hoare haire, & bald pates: it induceth olde age, & in fin, bringeth death before nature vrge it, malady enforce it, or age require it. (sig. Hiv<sup>4</sup>)

The “painted harlot” who transfers ulcers and boils to her customers became, for the antitheatricalists, an icon of the theatre’s own brand of devious eroticism. Rainolds asserts that “mony spent on playes” is as “mony spent on harlots” (147). Northbrooke cautions against watching plays “bicause the arguments (for the moste part) contayned the actes and doings of harlots,” so that “to exercise this arte . . . is not onely a dishonest and wicked occupation but also to beholde it, and therein to delite” (64-65). Like harlots, actors paint their faces and wear “fantastique costly apparell,” Prynne complains (sig. A\*\*v). Like harlots, they seduce with gestures and speech.

More worryingly, actors dress like women, employing the female costume as an instrument for constructing false identities and ambivalent sexualities. Jonas Barish and Louis Montrose, among others, have observed that the female costumes worn by the all-male Elizabethan troupes provoked especially vehement attacks from theatre-objectors.<sup>3</sup> Citing the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22 against cross-dressing, Gosson reminds that actors “put on, not the apparrell onely, but the gate, the gestures, the voyce, the passions of a woman” (sig. Ciii<sup>v</sup>). Rainolds quotes Cyprian’s Letter 61 “To Euchratus, About an Actor,” where the bishop of Carthage accuses actors of corrupting young boys “by instructing them how to play the wemen, and to expresse & counterfeit vn honest wanton gestures” (21). Prynne lists the players’ “effeminacy” in the same breath as “wanton Fashions, Face-painting, Health-drinking, Long haire, Love-lockes, Periwigs, womens curling, pouldring and cutting of their haire” (“To the Christian Reader” sigs. A\*\*v-A\*\*\*r).

The cross-dressing, face-painting actor is a transvestite, and the transvestite, let us remember, is guilty of the sin of sodomy. The link between seduction and sexually-transmitted disease is apparent. As Sander Gilman notes in *Disease and Representation*, sixteenth-century portrayals of the syphilitic patient foreground the fashionably dressed young man as the at-risk demographic. “It is the fop, the young male,” Gilman argues, who is represented as the victim of “defilement and illness” (57). Actors and a sizable segment of their audience fell into this demographic, described by Jonas Barish in a summary of the antitheatrical argument as “a class of upstart vagabonds who strutted the town in finery it was illegal for them to wear” (114).

The implicit causal relationship between seduction and contagion is at the root of the pamphleteers’ harangues against what Barish describes as “the whole complex of theatre, dance, music, gorgeous attire, luxuri-

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<sup>3</sup> See Barish 124-125 and Montrose 36, n27, as well as Stephen Greenblatt 66-93; Jean E. Howard 93-128; Laura Levine 121-43.

ous diet, cosmetics, feminine seductiveness, feminine sexuality, transvestism.” This complex, Barish suggests, “aroused a painful anxiety in the foes of the stage . . . because it represented a deeply disturbing temptation” (115). John Rainolds worries that no one is immune from this temptation. Heterosexual spectators may experience homoerotic desires when a cross-dressed male actor convincingly impersonates a woman “because a womans garment beeing put on a man doeth vehemently touch and moue him with the remembrance & imagination of a woman; and the imagination of a thing desirable doth stirr vp the desire” (97).

Marjorie Garber has suggested that in representing women’s clothes “as transferential objects” which kindle “a metonymic spark of desire,” Rainolds creates “a classic description of a fetishistic scenario” which triggers transvestite tendencies in the spectators (29). The logical conclusion of this scenario, as Philip Stubbes describes it, is that “these goodly pageants being done, euery mate sorts to his mate, euery one bringes another homeward of their way verye fréendly, and in their secret conclaues (couertly) they play the Sodomits, or worse. And these be the fruits of Playes and Enterluds” (sig. Lviii<sup>v</sup>).

Thus we arrive at an interesting epidemiological argument proposed by the antitheatricalists. In the theatre, diseases migrate through empathetic observation and imaginative identification with the actions performed.

### *The epidemiology of affective identification*

According to the antitheatricalists, moral diseases, like communicable diseases, transfer by mental contact. By enticing the mind to meditate on the lives of lechers, drunks and murderers, the theatre transmits corruption from the bodies of the players impersonating those evils, through the senses of the spectators into their thoughts.

Anthony Munday asserts that actors and spectators alike become adulterers by watching lusts represented in the theatre:

in that representation of whoredome, al the people in mind plaie the whores. And such as happilie came chaste vnto showes, returne adulterers from plaies. For they plaie the harlots, not then onlie when they go awaie, but also when they come. For as soone as one lusteth after a filthie thing, whiles he hasteneth to that which is vncleane, he becometh vncleane. (3-4)

John Rainolds warns that physical and spiritual diseases can be contracted by enacting them or even by meditating on their properties:

diseases of the mind are gotten farre sooner by counterfeiting, then are diseases of the body: and bodily diseases may be gotten so, as appeareth by him, who, faining for a purpose that he was sicke of the gowte, became (through care of counterfeiting it) gowtie in deede. So much can imitation & meditation doe. (20)

Rainolds cautions again and again that imitation of villainous deeds is dangerous for the actor, who identifies with them: “the earnest care of liuely representing the lewde demeanour of bad persons doeth worke a great impression of waxing like vnto them” (108). For the spectator, mere presence at the scene is dangerous because “the maners of all spectators commonlie are hazarded by the contagion of theatricall sights (163). By witnessing lewd spectacles, spectators, too, as Munday argued, “in mind plaie the whores.”

The catalyst for this transfer of disease is the idolatrous gaze enticed by a visually enticing object. Michael O’Connell, among others, has pointed out that the theatre’s idolatry, from the point of view of its detractors, consisted, like that of Catholicism, in its strong appeal to the eye: “[t]heatrical presence is not a mere sign but a use of corporeality to “body forth” the fiction is portrays” (20). Objectors viewed the theatre as an idolatrous institution which celebrated the link, discredited during the Reformation, between “the eye and the image, whether painted, sculpted, or realized kinetically” (*ibid.*, 32-33). Peter Lake also highlights the antitheatricalists’ unease with the visual and auditory appeal of the theatrical sign: “popery and the theatre seduced their victims into sin and damnation through inherently fleshly appeals . . . directed as much to the eye as to the ear” (453).

The problem here is that the eye and the ear provide direct access to the soul of the spectator. Northbrooke cites Chrysostom’s commentary on the Psalms in support of his claim that in the theatre “the soule of the wise is snared & condemned” by filthy spectacles and speeches: “thou seest not only *Res infaustas*, vnlawfull things: but also hearest *spurciloquia*, filthie speaches, whereof is (sayth he [i.e. Chrysostom]) *in-cessu meretricis*, the beginning of whoredome, and the habite of all euilnesse and mischief” (61). “For what is there which is not abused thereby?” Munday exclaims, introducing his work, the “blast of retrait from plaies and Theaters”: “our eies with vaine aspects, gestures, and toies; our eares with filthie speach, vnhonest mirth, and rebaldrie; our mouths with cursed speaking; our heads with wicked imaginations; our whole bodies to vncleanes” (sig. Aii<sup>r</sup>). Likewise, Gosson cautions: “how dilligent, how circumspect, how wary ought we to be, that no corruption of idols, enter by the passage of our eyes & eares into the soule” (sig. Bviii<sup>v</sup>).

John Rainolds illustrates how the theatre infects the mind by seducing the eyes and the ears, with an interesting anecdote about a “strange distemper” gathered from the Greek writer Lucian. The iambic verses of Euripides affected the mind of spectators so greatly, Rainolds relates, that they collectively fell ill: “at midsummer, in very hott weather, *Andromeda* (a Tragedie of Euripides) being played, manie brought home a burning ague from the theater.” Having caught the reader’s attention with an introduction that relates disease directly to playgoing, he describes the symptoms of this ague:

about the seventh day folowing, they were ridde thereof, some by much bleeding, some by sweating, but all, as soone as they were abroad out of their beddes, did fall into a strange distemper and passion of a light phrensie. The which exciting them to say & cry aloude such things as were sticking freshly in their memorie, and had affected most their minde, they grewe all to Tragedie-playing, and full lustilie they sounded out Iambicall speeches: their touns harping chieflie on Euripides, Andromeda, and the melodious woords of Perseus touching love. So that the whole citie was full of pale and thinne folke, pronouncing like stage-players, and braying with a loude voice. But O Cupido, prince of Gods and men, with the rest of that part: vntill at length the winter and colde, waxing great, asswaged their distemper, and eased them of their frantike follie. (118-19)

The antitheatrical theory of disease transmission through imaginative identification is again at work in Rainolds’ tale. A summer epidemic is triggered by Euripides’ amorous verses, which infect the bodies as well as the minds of spectators. As the primary physiological symptoms of burning and sweating give way to the secondary symptoms of affective identification, a “light phrensie” causes the patients to act out their memories of the performance. Only the advent of the winter assuages this collective poetic frenzy. Notably, Rainolds’ emphasis is on the auditory symptoms of the epidemic. As the sufferers “cry aloude,” sounding “full lustilie” “the melodious woords of Perseus,” the ear provides the main entryway for the melodious sounds of theatrical idolatry for the Protestant clergyman.

Let us conclude with this cautionary tale about the enticing sights and sounds of the theatre. The antitheatricalists fought their battle for the attentions of playgoers on medical grounds, by establishing a causal link between seduction of the senses, corruption of the soul and contagion of the body. Their medically-inflected moral rhetoric charted a quick path from seeing a play to catching the plague. We can speculate whether their harangues about moral plagues and strange fevers drove spectators out of the theatres. Prynne’s *Histrion-mastix* (1633), the latest of the pamphlets discussed in this chapter, provides some evidence to the

contrary: “many who visit the Church scarce once a weeke,” he estimates, “frequent the Play-house once a day” (4). Prynne’s exaggeration suggests he was trying hard to sway the emotions of an unresponsive audience. Despite their fear-mongering tactics, in the 1630s theatre-objectors evidently felt they still remained on the losing side of a public debate.

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