

THEATRICAL CONVENTION
AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE
IN EARLY MODERN DRAMA

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CHAPTER I

“As it was acted to great applause”: Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences and the physicality of response

The purpose of this book is to explain how Elizabethan and Jacobean drama works: what it assumes of its audience and how its audience experiences it and responds to it. If this project is to be successful, a working notion must be developed of what is meant by the term “audience,” and in particular of that term as it applies to a group of playgoers for whom the plays under discussion can be imagined to have been written. That is the aim of this chapter. But the purpose of this book is also to invigorate analytical and theatrical discourse around a body of largely forgotten drama, and if *that* project is to be successful, the notion of “audience” must be expanded to include modern and even future audiences. The argument thus becomes more a phenomenological than a historical one. That must, for the most part, be the aim of the subsequent seven chapters.

My own audience may wonder then why I begin with a historical approach only to seem to discard it. The reason is this: significant distinctions between a Renaissance audience and a modern audience are, like distinctions between different kinds of audience members in any audience, more frequently made than necessary. Modern audiences can understand and appreciate even the most bizarre conventions of Renaissance drama; this is attested to by the enduring popularity of, and the enduring willingness of directors to work with plays like *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*, and *Love’s Labors Lost*. The work of the seven chapters that follow this one must be to show that these and the rest of Shakespeare’s plays are for the most part simply of a piece with the majority of extant Renaissance drama: if the phenomenology I argue for in those chapters is convincing, it will be because the claims it makes seem plausibly pertinent to hypothetical audiences of Shakespeare and his contemporaries at any time. For now I will make certain claims about Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, and these claims will absolutely pertain to the word “audience” as it is used throughout. But the claims I make about Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences should at no time be

seen as exclusive of possible effects a modern audience might experience. It is essential to historicize audience response in order to be confident, as I wish to be, in making claims about what playwrights expected of dramatic action and their audiences; but it is then equally important to dehistoricize audience response in order to argue for the continuing vitality of a theatrical tradition.

Most of my historical evidence in this chapter will be antitheatrical writings from between the years of 1574 and 1642. These writings, I suggest, represent the darker side of theatrical pleasure in the period, but the fact that they differ from protheatrical writings only in their estimation of the virtue of the tremendous hold plays could have over audiences, makes them a good index of the ways in which plays maintained this hold. In using anxiety about the theatre as a way of introducing a discussion of the pleasure of the theatre, I will lay the foundation for an ongoing discussion of the way in which plays rely on and manipulate audiences' awareness of themselves and of dramatic artifice, and the potential for excess, self-indulgence, and failure, as well as for spectacular success that this entails.

Twenty-eight purple lines into his Hecuba-speech in *Hamlet*, the Player is interrupted by Polonius: "This is too long" (2.2. 456).¹ The audience, having been taught that nothing Polonius says can be taken seriously, laughs. The simple interpretation of this laughter is that one laughs because one sees once again how Polonius is misguided in his judgment: the speech is not too long. It is notable that the audience has this kind of laugh at this point because it is prepared for quite the opposite reaction. Hamlet himself speaks the first part of the speech (lines 408–22) and Polonius's response, "Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent and good discretion" (lines 423–4), indicates either that the speech was bad but Polonius does not know any better, or that the speech was bad but Polonius is simply humoring Hamlet. An audience in 1600–1, immersed in the biting satire of the war of the theatres to which Hamlet and Rosencrantz allude in lines 314–38, would probably have found Hamlet's vivid recollection of an old play amusing more than anything else – and would have been prepared to think of it somewhat sardonically. That is, a remark like the one Polonius makes could only be made by a yes-man, since everyone would know that such plays were out of style. Further, Hamlet, who has shown himself to be "up-to-date" on matters theatrical

¹ In order to minimize edition-related footnotes, I have cited all editions of plays discussed in this study in the list of plays cited at the end.

in the way that his audience would be, might simply be playing another verbal game with Polonius or the Player or both, the irony of which will soon become apparent.

This would have been the audience’s frame of mind as the Player himself began to speak. If Polonius’s interjection at line 456 is to have the proper effect, however, there would have to be a moment in the Player’s speech where the audience stopped thinking sardonically and, even if only because of the Player’s genuinely “good accent and good discretion,” began to take it seriously. At the same time, the sardonic tendency could not be squelched entirely, because audiences are wary of missing opportunities for irony. Thus Polonius’s line provides a moment where the audience can remember how it is supposed to feel about speeches like this. Hamlet’s own interruption of the speech just as it is about to get going again (“The mobled queen?” [line 460]) provides similar breathing room and reintroduces the possibility that Hamlet is simply playing a mysterious game. But that Shakespeare was aware of the potential for this kind of speech actually to affect audiences seems clear from the fact that he gives the player fifteen more lines, at the end of which Polonius and Hamlet are actually in agreement.

POLONIUS Look where he has not turned his colour, and has tears in’s eyes.

Prithee no more.

HAMLET ’Tis well, I’ll have thee speak out the rest of this soon.

(lines 477–9)

If Polonius and Hamlet are not genuinely moved, Hamlet’s later use of the players will not have much force. In this way *Hamlet* strikes a double-edged blow in the war of the theatres, not only giving its audience the satire and railing it expects and enjoys (as at lines 314–38 or 456–61), but also making that audience susceptible to, and thus proving the effectiveness of, a public theatre style that even public theatre audiences of 1601 would have claimed to find silly. And still further, that same audience is given with line 456 an opportunity for irony that it can simultaneously take and pass up – Polonius’s line expresses what one would think one *should* feel but, since it is spoken by Polonius, ends up also expressing something worth disagreeing with.

I want to suggest that the multileveled experience I have just described was among the chief pleasures Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences looked for in plays, and that *Hamlet*’s consistent and highly efficient presentation of such experience was what made that play among the most popular plays of its age. While I will not be discussing *Hamlet* very much

throughout this chapter, I feel that it is a useful point of departure for a discussion of what audiences value in plays because both contemporary accounts and the subsequent centuries of criticism give ample testimony to the play's ability to "please all."² It is worth noting, however, and usually not noted, that when the author of *Daiphantus*, who is talking about what an Epistle to the Reader should be, said this about *Hamlet*, he went on to say that if his Epistle were like Prince Hamlet, "it were to be feared he would runne mad: In sooth I will not be moonsicke to please: nor out of my wits though I displeased all." This conveys a certain anxiety about the potentially frantic nature of something that tries to or actually can "please all," and this is an important point, which will become more relevant in later chapters where I discuss the plays' potential for failure.

The question of audience has become more and more fraught over the last one hundred years, and has resulted in the tradition of audience study we see most clearly in Alfred Harbage, Ann Jennalie Cook, and Andrew Gurr. This tradition has generally presented audience study and debate about audiences as a hard science. The four major works on audiences in the last sixty years – Harbage's *Shakespeare's Audience* and *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions*,³ Cook's *The Privileged Playgoer in Shakespeare's London*,⁴ and Gurr's *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*⁵ are full of numbers, statistics, charts, measurements, and original documents, all combining to create an impressive, quite exact picture of the playhouse's physical, social, and economic place in early modern England. There is much classification: of "popular" and "coterie" plays and audiences in Harbage; of "privileged" and "plebeian" plays and audiences in Cook; of "amphitheatres" and "halls," "citizen" and "artisan" audiences, and even different kinds of "mental composition" in Gurr. All of this classification, used to provide a context within which to consider the drama, gives on the surface the impression of more rigidly segregated audiences and more easily dichotomized audience tastes than the evidence actually yields up.

² This phrase appears in the Epistle to the Reader of the 1604 *Daiphantus* (ed. Alexander B. Grossart [Manchester: Charles Simms, 1880]). For further discussion of *Daiphantus* and *Hamlet* see Josephine A. Roberts, "Daiphantus (1604): a Jacobean Perspective on Hamlet's Madness," *Library Chronicle* 42.2 (1978): 128–37. Roberts notes that *Daiphantus* demonstrates the way in which "echoes of Hamlet's role could be combined in a skillful burlesque of the stock literary convention of the tormented lover" – an idea that will be important to consider alongside the arguments I will make in the final chapter of this book.

³ New York: Macmillan, 1952. ⁴ Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

⁵ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Harbage can in some ways be seen as responsible for this: his separation of popular and coterie plays combined with his valorization of the “Shakespearean” audience as “an audience of the many”⁶ inspired the desire to break down the idea of a sentimentalized “popular” audience and to set up new, more accurate categories than “popular” and “coterie.” Anne Jennalie Cook supplied the categories of “privileged” and “plebeian.” Gurr, taking exception to these, reestablished a broad category of “playgoers,” and then attempted to break that category into the smallest pieces possible, searching for truth in a mosaic rather than a panoramic picture. Audience study begets audience study, and the search for new, more accurate categories is as seductive as the search for a common humanity in a diverse audience – and not always more useful, as we see in Gurr’s highly detailed but frequently redundant *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642*. The encyclopedic impulse obscures the importance of the idea of a playgoing public which is at the heart of even the later audience studies. Gurr, for example, provides surprising evidence for unity in spite of his search for distinct categories, noting that only “by 1630 – though not much before – the . . . Red Bull and Fortune served a distinctly less gentlemanly clientele than the hall playhouses in the City . . . and, in the summer, the Globe” (*The Shakespearean Stage*, p. 77); and that there was essentially no “class loyalty” to “specific repertoires” (p. 79). And while Cook devotes much energy to implying a distinction between “privileged” Londoners and the rest of the people who lived there, she all but renders that distinction useless in terms of the theatre by arguing that anyone who *could* go to a play *was* “privileged.” The increasing exactness, especially in the economic focus, of audience study may have moved us away from facile discussions of “the common man,” but it may also have begun to be unnecessarily paralyzing, making it seem as though we cannot talk about the effects of a play on an “audience” until we understand the exact composition of that audience. But *Antonio’s Revenge*, an utterly unexpected sequel to *Antonio and Mellida*, was acted at Paul’s in 1600, with presumably heavy indebtedness to the “ur-*Hamlet*” of some ten or more years prior; was probably written to capitalize on the popularity of *Hamlet* (probably first produced in 1600 and similarly indebted to the older play) and revenge tragedy;⁷ and was

⁶ *Shakespeare’s Audience*, p. 25.

⁷ James P. Bednarz says that *Antonio’s Revenge* was probably staged “to capitalize on Shakespeare’s revival of revenge tragedy” and also argues, agreeing with Honigmann’s 1956 “The Date of *Hamlet*,” that *Hamlet*’s “little eyases” passage was added to the text in 1601, shortly after the staging of *Poetaster*, *Satiromastix*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. See Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poets’ War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 275.

then parodied by the Chapel Children in *Poetaster* the same year. And the awareness each play assumes its audience has of the others, and the way the plays themselves (especially *Antonio's Revenge* and *Hamlet*) do not conform very rigidly to what we might expect from their auspices, would seem to suggest that we can to a large extent generalize a playgoing public even while acknowledging that it was in no way homogenous.

One of the main problems with using audience study as a tool for understanding plays, over and above London society of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is that the impulse to divide and classify inherent in such studies can make arguing for a collective experience – which is what plays try to provide – more difficult than it needs to be. Passages like Middleton's prologue to *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* are frequently invoked to prove the diversity of audience constitution and response:

How is't possible to suffice
 So many ears, so many eyes?
 Some in wit, and some in shows
 Take delight, and some in clothes;
 Some for mirth they chiefly come,
 Some for passion, for both some;
 Some for lascivious meetings, that's their arrant;
 Some to detract, and ignorance their warrant.
 How is't possible to please
 Opinion toss'd in such wild seas?

This is what Cook quotes, by way of making this point: “Besides the various tastes of the audience, the playwright also had to contend with distractions from the performance. It was a difficult, if not impossible task, as Thomas Middleton openly confessed” (*The Privileged Playgoer*, p. 164). But such an interpretation of this and other, similar prologues ignores the fact that this kind of self-reflexivity is a tool for unifying the spectators; for making each person see him or herself good-naturedly as a part of an unruly bunch, and also as someone above the “ignorant” who “detract.” It seems to me that if Middleton had really been worried about the diversity of tastes in his audience ruining his play, he would not have risked taunting this audience quite so casually, or in such bad poetry. Further, Cook omits from her argument and her quotation the last four lines of the prologue,⁸ in which we see Middleton's confidence in being able to get a diversity of collective response from his diverse audience.

⁸ Her footnote to the quotation, which does not give line numbers, even seems to suggest that she has quoted the prologue in its entirety.

Yet I doubt not, if attention
 Seize you above, and apprehension
 You below, to take things quickly,
 We shall both make you sad and tickle ye.

Open hostility to audiences from the stage is rare, even in the case of the pugnacious Jonson.⁹ More typically, such hostility is saved for prologues for readers, as in Webster’s “Address to the Reader” of *The White Devil*, or the much less subtle “Dedication to the Reader” of Jonson’s *The New Inn*.¹⁰ The reason for these remarks is not the diversity of response, but a collectively *negative* response, something with which Jonson was quite familiar; and the reason for putting these remarks on the page rather than the stage is to avoid further such collective responses. In his plays, Jonson, and others with gripes about audiences, are more carefully equivocal: remarks like the one about the man who will “swear, *Jeronimo*, or *Andronicus* are the best plays” (*Bartholomew Fair*, Induction, lines 94–5) assumes that anyone in the audience who feels this way will laugh at himself, and that the audience in general is in agreement about these old plays. Similarly, his parody of theatre gallants in *The Devil is an Ass* (1.6. 31–57) mocks the members of the play’s actual audience, but does so in a way that assumes that the ironic laughter the joke will provoke will both give pleasure and incorporate distracting behavior into the desired response. Above all, playwrights seem simply to have wanted audiences that would pay attention to their plays and laugh or be moved in the right places.

While we do not have very much evidence about how audiences felt about specific plays or specific moments in specific plays, we do have a fair amount of evidence about how plays and playgoing in general were perceived. Somewhat unfortunately most of this is negative evidence, in the

⁹ Jonson’s first prologue to *Epicœne* is in fact highly solicitous – or at least seems to be. Comparing poets to cooks and audiences to diners, Jonson condemns poets who “will taste nothing popular” (line 6) and promises that there will be “cates” fit for “ladies . . . lords, knights, squires, / . . . your waiting-wench and city-wrens / . . . your men and daughters of Whitefriars (lines 20–25).” It is difficult to see this as anything but disingenuous, coming from the pen of Jonson – particularly in light of the second prologue (occasioned by the “Prince of Moldavia” scandal that had *Epicœne* suppressed in February 1610) in which all particular audience response is made subject to the judgment of the poet (lines 7–8). Examples from Jonson must always be considered rather separately but the idea of the first prologue to *Epicœne* seems to be fundamentally similar to Middleton’s attitude and the attitude of playwrights of the period in general: the audience is made a collective when each person in the audience believes the play is specifically speaking to him (or her).

¹⁰ Webster said that his play “was acted, in so dull a time of winter, presented in so open and black a theatre, that it wanted . . . a full and understanding auditory” (*The White Devil*, lines 4–7). Jonson found his audience to be full of a “hundred fastidious impertinents, who . . . make affidavit to the whole house of their not understanding one scene” (*The New Inn*, lines 4–12).

form of antitheatrical tracts and responses to them. This is unfortunate because most of the antitheatricalists, with some notable exceptions such as Gosson, did not really patronize the theatres – or at least betray no knowledge of plays specific enough to suggest that they did. And because the antitheatricalists tended to repeat and even plagiarize each other's arguments, it can be difficult to take them seriously. In *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*,¹¹ Jonas Barish says that no antitheatrical pamphlet between 1575 and 1642 “makes an important dialectical contribution. Rarely do they pursue an argument closely; more often they disintegrate into free-associative rambles. They repeat themselves, and each other, without shame or scruple” (p. 88). This dismissive point of view is seductive, but also worth being somewhat wary of, as it potentially implies that the Puritans ought to have imagined the possibility of a protheatrical prejudice, and engaged seriously with the opposition – made a “dialectical contribution” – when it is clear from all their writings that this was quite literally out of the question. If the antitheatricalists repeated the same scriptures again and again as evidence for the Biblical proscription of playgoing, it was generally not so much out of laziness as out of a sincere conviction that the players and playgoers had to be made to hear what was obviously true. Elbert N. S. Thompson, in *The Controversy Between the Puritans and the Stage*,¹² makes this point about Puritan redundancy and plagiarism:

without acknowledgment Northbrooke incorporated in his [*Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes, or Enterluds . . . are reprovod . . .*] the words of a forerunner [William Alley]; Stubbes described the subject matter of plays in almost Gosson's exact words, as if the passage were the common property of all Puritans; and now we see how closely the author of the *Refutation* [of *The Apologie for Actors*] was dependent on Stubbes . . . These passages reveal the intimate relation between the different Puritan attacks. In its argument there is nothing especially new in the *Refutation*, but in its spirit evidences both of changed feelings and changed conditions are noticeable. (pp. 139–40)

The “changed feelings and changed conditions” Thompson refers to are that the moderate, more careful condemnation of the stage seen in Northbrooke is gone by the time of the *Refutation* (1615), and that the author of the latter work clearly writes with at least the feeling of a great deal of public support behind him. Repetition in this case works only to validate that which is being repeated, and the increasing vehemence in

¹¹ Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981.

¹² New York: Henry Holt, 1903.

antitheatrical attacks would eliminate the need for nuance in or variation on old arguments. Indeed, the arguments only get simpler in later years: by the time of the *Refutation*, there is less attention to other idle pastimes like dicing and dancing. Says Thompson, “Of all the unlawful and artificial pleasures devised by Satan, stage-plays, the author felt, were ‘the most impious and pernicious’” (*The Controversy Between the Puritans and the Stage*, p. 141).

As with the plays themselves, I assume that repetition in antitheatrical writings is an index of perceived success, and a key to understanding what the authors were trying to achieve with respect to their audience. The antitheatricalists employed rhetorical methods similar to those of the medium they opposed in order to persuade those who were not clearly on one side or the other of the debate. The consistent repetition, increasing in intensity, of antitheatrical arguments, culminating in the massive and highly redundant *Histrio-Mastix* of William Prynne (1633), shows that there was a sense among the antitheatricalists that the plays themselves were always the same, both in substance and in their effects. Of course, a certain narrowness of mind can be blamed for this, and one might easily argue that since the antitheatricalists were probably not going to plays they simply relied on the arguments of writers like Northbrooke and Gosson, who did have theatrical experience, and supplied the appropriate invective. But this argument is not entirely sufficient, since no protheatrical writer ever really contradicts the central antitheatrical argument that plays teach audiences to do bad things. Rather, they simply provide the opposite (but not mutually exclusive) point of view. “[W]hat English blood,” asks Heywood in his *Apologie for Actors* (1612),

seeing the person of any bold English man presented and doth not hugge his fame, and hunnye at his valor, pursuing him in his enterprise with his best wishes . . . as if the Personater were the man personated, so bewitching a thing is lively and well spirited action, that it hath power to new mold the harts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt. (B4r)

This is itself a repeated idea among the defenders of the stage, and I will return to it later. I introduce it here to emphasize that the perception of plays as having an importantly collective effect is a constant on both sides of the debate, and that the issue at stake is whether the effect is positive or negative. Even when Heywood, or Lodge, admits that different plays might have different (negative rather than positive) effects, the focus is collective rather than individual.

... if you [Gosson] had reprehended the foolish fantasies of our Poets *nomine non re* which they bring on stage, my self would have liked of you and allowed your labor . . . I abhor those Poets that savor of ribaldry; I will with the zealous admit the expulcion of such enormities; Poetry is dispraised not for the folly that is in it, but for the abuse which manye ill wryters couller by it.¹³

The argument is that certain plays affect whole audiences negatively, not that certain audience members make of good plays bad ends. The antitheatricalists and those actors and playwrights who respond to them do not make much of a distinction between public and private theatres or privileged and plebeian playgoers. While in each case this obviously reflects an agenda – to lump all playgoers and players together as sinners or as saints – I think it also indicates fairly clearly that, outside of individual playwrights' quarrels with audiences, the pleasures and perils of playgoing were seen by Londoners on both sides of the debate as applicable to any member of any audience of any play.

It will be useful here to list some of the most common repetitions in antitheatrical literature between 1576 and 1642. These are: a propensity for voluminous lists of the evils in plays, the evil effects of plays, and/or the evil people who patronize plays; a form that either mimics or seems to mimic the form of the drama it is condemning; the presence of at least one statement clarifying the difference between comedy and tragedy; and the use of at least one metaphor involving food as a means of illustrating the effects of the theatre. Obviously there are more common characteristics than these. I have chosen these, and listed them in this order, because I find them to be particularly important for the issue of what kind of experience antitheatricalists see plays providing, and because they will allow me to move from a discussion of general trends in antitheatrical criticism to specific moments in specific texts.

Philip Stubbes's *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583)¹⁴ spends only about six pages on plays (pp. 140–6), but manages to cover most of the ground that other writers cover in three times that number. The project of Stubbes's work is essentially to catalogue the various "abuses" in English society at the time, and the overall structure necessitated by such a project is recapitulated at the level of individual chapters, paragraphs, and sentences. For the sake of example I will quote at some length three passages from the short section on plays. The first discusses the stage's abuse of the sacred word of God.

¹³ *Reply to Stephen Gosson's Schoole of Abuse*, in Thomas Lodge, *A Defence of Poetry, Music, and Stage Plays*, ed. David Laing (London: Shakespeare Society, 1853), p. 15.

¹⁴ Ed. Frederick J. Furnivall. London: N. Trubner & Co., 1877–9.

All the holy company of Heauen, Angels, Archangels, Cherubins, Seraphins, and all other powers whateuer, yea, the Deuills themselues (as *Iames* saith) doo tremble & quake at the naming of God, and at the presence of his wrath: and doo these Mockers and Flowters of his Maiesty, these dissembling *Hipocrites*, and flattering *Gnatoes*, think to escape vnpunished? beware, therefore, you masking Players, you painted sepulchres, you doble dealing ambodexters, be warned betymes. . . . (p. 141)

The second is on the evils that plays “induce.”

Do not they maintaine bawdrie, insinuat folery, & renue the remembrance of hethen ydolatrie? Do they not induce whoredom & vnclennes? nay, are they not rather plaine deuourers of maydenly virginite and chastitie? For prooffe whereof, but marke the flocking and running to Theaters & curtens, daylie and hourelly, night and daye, tyme and tyde, to see Playes and Enterludes; where such wanton gestures, such bawdie speaches, such laughing and fleering, such kissing and bussing, such clipping and culling, such winckinge and glancinge of wanton eyes, and the like, is vsed, as is wonderful to behold. (p. 144)

And the third is on what one might “learn” from plays.

If you will learn to rebel against Princes, to commit treasons, to consume treasurs, to practise ydlenes, to sing and talke of bawdie loue and venery: if you will lerne to deride, scoffe, mock, & flowt, to flatter & smooth: If you will learn to play the whore-maister, the glutton, Drunkard, or incestuous person: if you will learn to become proude, hawtie, & arrogant; and finally, if you will learne to contemne GOD and al his lawes, to care neither for heauen nor hel, and to commit al kinde of sinne and mischeef, you need goe to no other schoole. (p. 145)

These lists are typical of the rhetoric of antitheatrical writings in the period. Compare, for example, Northbrooke’s warning against the slippery slope of taking pleasure in idle words;¹⁵ or Gosson’s discussion of the behavior of audiences in *The Schoole of Abuse*;¹⁶ or I. G.’s lists of the matter and characters of plays in the *Refutation of the Apologie for Actors*;¹⁷ or almost any page of Prynne’s *Histrio-Mastix*.

While such passages certainly have a shrillness about them – are in fact stylistically among the chief reasons it is so easy now to dismiss antitheatrical pamphlets with a laugh – they also reveal quite clearly what must have been one of the most powerful forces against which the authors had to fight: audiences’ love of the variety offered by plays. The lists give a sense of a wide variety of desires among playhouse audiences,

¹⁵ In his 1577 *A Treatise against Dicing, dauncing, Plays, and Interludes, with Other idle Pastimes*, ed. J. P. Collier (London Shakespeare Society, 1853), p. 68.

¹⁶ Ed. Edward Arber (London: Alex Murray, 1868), p. 35.

¹⁷ Ed. Richard H. Perkinson (New York: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1941), pp. 56–7.

and of the ability of plays to satisfy them all. They are almost a direct inversion of Middleton's prologue to *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*; the all-encompassing appeal of plays unites the disparate desires of the spectators into a collective evil. At the same time, it is as though the Puritan writers are attempting to drown out or substitute for the sumptuous variety of personalities, events, and costumes on stage, with their own elaborate stylistic displays. Indeed Stubbes's entire work seems to epitomize this project. By providing an extensive, minute, and endlessly colorful picture of England's abuses, he attempts to draw readers away from the abuses themselves. While other antitheatrical authors are not always as successful as Stubbes, they are certainly on the same path. They clearly take pleasure in writing these lists, and hope that their readers will take pleasure in reading them; and that the attention and interest sparked by this pleasure will lead to a realization of the truth of the words. One might argue to the contrary that the repetition of such lists over time would make them less pleasurable. It is probably true that by the fourth or fifth pamphlet one read one would begin skimming over the lists, but this would come about because the claims of the lists began to be taken for granted: the lists took on the status of a convention which one looked for as part of one's experience when coming to a pamphlet.

Puritan authors, of course, would not have thought of their tracts or the lists in them as "fun," but rather as instructive. The primary function of the lists is to show an awareness of all sides of a given issue (which is not the same as a desire to give any credence to the opposing side). Whether or not Stubbes or I. G. or Prynne has been to a play, each seems to be encyclopedic in his knowledge of them, seems to know his adversary well enough to justify his invective. This kind of rhetoric aims at inspiring a sense of knowingness in the reader, and it is not necessarily appealing only to those who agree with its argument. As the popularity of Stubbes's book would seem to demonstrate, even people participating in the many abuses listed by the book took pleasure in reading about them. The kind of pleasure involved in reading *The Anatomie of Abuses*, or the more vigorous sections of the antitheatrical works, can be similar to the kind of pleasure involved in watching the first scene with the Players in *Hamlet*. One can take pleasure in seeing a picturesque description of certain activities one knows well or participates in, even as they are being condemned; or one can feel that one sees the whole of the situation and is therefore in a position to judge both sides.¹⁸ Obviously the antitheatrical

¹⁸ In *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959) C. L. Barber says of the *Anatomie's* invective against May Day:

writers are looking for a positive judgment on one side and a negative on the other in a way that Shakespeare is not, but they also seem to be trying to harness the impulse that would obtain for plays as a step toward converting the skeptical reader. Whether antitheatrical tracts were read by avid playgoers who did not (like Lodge or Heywood) have a vested interest in refuting them is uncertain. But they must have been read by a fair number of on-the-fence Londoners, and this undecided readership, those who perhaps found playgoing to be a slightly guilty pleasure, would have accounted for much of the rhetorical usefulness of the lists I have just discussed.

This undecided readership would also have accounted for the usefulness of the dialogue or quasi-dramatic form in which antitheatrical tracts are written, and their apparent eagerness to clarify and define dramatic genres. As to the first of these, much could be and has been made of the fact that Northbrooke's *Treatise* is in the form of a dialogue between Youth and Age; that Gosson followed his *Schoole of Abuse* with *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*; that Stubbes's entire book is in dialogue form and in fact creates an imaginary, anagrammatic land, *Aligna*, to stand in for Anglia; and that Prynne's *Histrio-Mastix* is divided into two “tragedies,” each consisting of thirteen “acts,” complete with prologues and choruses. Elbert Thompson sounds a useful note of caution with regard to pursuing an ironic reading of tracts not as explicitly “theatrical” as Gosson's or Prynne's: “to the Puritan, dialogue had no necessary connection with the drama. The Book of Job had that form; it was used by Grindal . . . and later by Bunyan; and even to those Puritans unfamiliar with Plato no inconsistency in Northbrooke's method could have suggested itself” (*The Controversy Between the Puritans and the Stage*, p. 56). At the same time, even while protheatrical respondents to the Puritans do not make anything of the potentially self-contradictory form of the Puritan writings, it seems hard to imagine that the irony would not occasionally suggest itself to a reader, especially when it is obviously intentional, as in Gosson and Prynne. The desired effect of this irony, from the antitheatrical point of view, can be seen magnified one hundred-fold in Prynne's work which, as Barish says, both exploits “the possibilities inherent in

It is remarkable how pleasantly the holiday comes through in spite of Stubbes' railing on the sidelines. Partly this appeal comes from shrewd journalism: he is writing “a pleasant invective,” to use a phrase from the title of [Gosson's] similar *School of Abuse*. Partly it is the result of the fact that despite his drastic attitude he writes in the language of Merry England and so is betrayed into phrases like “sweet nosegays” [placed on the horns of oxen in May Day parades]. And his Elizabethan eye is too much on the object to leave out tangible details, so that, astonishingly, he describes “this stinking idol” [the May Pole] as “covered all over with flowers and herbs.” (p. 22).

[a dramatic] arrangement, and [creates] a running irony, to turn the terminology of dramatic structure against its usual practitioners and make it serve a godly rather than a satanic purpose” (*The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, p. 85). As with the catalogues of abuses in and at plays, the dramatic structure of the tracts allows the antitheatricalists to capitalize on a reader’s desire to feel knowing and sophisticated, to feel that the irony of a potential contradiction can be resolved neatly into a sound judgment.

A related but different appeal to the judiciousness of the reader is involved in the statement of generic characteristics that can be found in virtually every antitheatrical tract. Northbrooke provides an example that is striking in its detachment from any antitheatrical argument. This comes at the very end of the section on stage plays, just after Age has laid down some rules for the acceptable academic use of theatre.

YOUTH What difference is there, I pray you, between a tragedie and a comedie?
 AGE . . . a tragedie, properly, is that kind of play in the which calamities and miserable ends of kings, princes, and great rulers, are described and set forth, and it hath for the most part a sadde and heauy beginning and ending. A comedie hath in it humble and private persons; it beginnith with turbulent and troublesome matters, but it hath a merie ende.

Immediately after this passage, Northbrooke moves on to “An Inuectiue Against Dice Playing.” This moment feels tacked on – no judgment is made about the virtues or relative virtues of either genre – and also like something Northbrooke thought essential to get in one way or another. His successors feel the same way, but do more to make the generic specifications part of the argument against plays. I. G.’s *Refutation* provides a typical example.

To discribe the matter of prophaine playes, wee are to consider the generall kindes of Playes, which is the *Tragedy*, and the *Comedy*. The matter of *Tragedies* is haughtinesse, arrogancy, ambition, pride, iniury, anger . . . Of *Comedies* the matter is loue, lust, lechery, baudry, scortation, adultery, vncleannesse, pollution. (pp. 55–6)

The need to make these kinds of generic claims seems tied to the antitheatricalists’ fear of the seductive variety provided by the theatre, and bespeaks a desire to order that variety by means of categories with distinct characteristics (which nevertheless, as we see in I. G., sometimes overlap), the better to judge them. At the same time, no author making such generic claims makes them as though they are unknown – rather, there is a sense of amplifying with invective and hyperbole something

that is taken for granted. This again responds, I think, to an impulse the Puritans saw in the audiences they were trying to convert or correct: the impulse to give a single and simple name to an experience of great variety and even disparity in its parts. That this impulse was something audiences felt would seem to be at least partly corroborated by the title pages of printed plays of the period, on which the genre of the play is almost always mentioned; or by works such as Meres’s *Palladis Tamia*, which is incessantly, often tediously exact in its “Comparatiue Discourse,” dividing authors into the “best” of various modes and genres, usually by means of encyclopedic lists.

Each of the three repetitions I have discussed – lists, dramatic or dialogic structure, statements of generic characteristics – as well as the repetition of similar or identical Biblical arguments by different authors, is a deliberate rhetorical strategy. The authors employ these strategies for specific stylistic reasons and, I have suggested, do so in response to habits they perceive in the theatregoing public they are attempting to convert. The repetition of food metaphors, however, is not something the antitheatrical authors insist on, or seem concerned to call attention to. That is why I have singled it out as particularly important. Food metaphors seem to be something that antitheatrical authors are able to call up automatically as an obvious way of thinking about their subject, and thus they represent something particularly inherent to the writers’ assumptions about theatre. I now list some key examples, starting as far back as the early fifteenth century, with the anonymous Lollard piece, *A Treatise of Miraculis Pleyinge*.¹⁹ I list them to the end that we might see both the development and the various expressions of the common idea.

For right as the children of Israel, when Moyses was in the hil bisily preying for hem, they mistrusting to him, honouriden a calf of gold and afterward eetyn and drinken and risen to playn, and afterward weren sleyn of hem thre and twenty thousand of men . . . So this miraculis pleyinge is verre wittnesse of mennus averice and covetise byfore . . . for that that they shulden spendyn upon the nedis of ther neighbors, they spenden upon the pleyis. (*Miraculis Pleyinge*, pp. 110–1)

YOUTH I marvayle why you do speake against such enterludes and places for playes, seeing that many times they play histories out of the scriptures.

AGE Assuredly that is very evill so to doe; to mingle scurrilitie with diuinitie, that is to eat meate with vnwashed hands.

(Northbrooke, *Treatise*, p. 92)

¹⁹ Ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 1993).

I may well liken *Homer* to *Mithecus*, and Poets to Cookes, the pleasures of the one winnes the body from labor and conquereth the sense; the allurement of the other drawes the mind from vertue, and confoundeth wit. (Gosson, *Schoole of Abuse*, p. 22)

... those wanton spectacles . . . will hurte them more, then if at the Epicures table they had nigh burst their guts with ouerfeeding. For if the body bee ouercharged, it may bee holpe; but the surfeite of the soule is hardly cured. (*Schoole of Abuse*, p. 30)

... the exercise that is nowe among vs, is banqueting, playing, pipying, and dauncing, and all suche delightes as may win vs to pleasure, or rocke vs a sleepe. (*Schoole of Abuse*, p. 34)

SPUDEUS [Some say] that [plays] be as good as sermons, and that many a good example may be learned out of them.

PHILO Oh blasphemie intollerable! Are filthie playes & bawdie enterluds comparable to the word of God, the foode of life, and life itselfe?

(Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses*, pp. 143–4)

[Whether plays] be diuine or prophane, they are quite contrary to the word of grace, and sucked out of the Diuill's teates to nourish vs in Idolatry, heathenry, and sinne. (I. G., *Refutation of the Apology for Actors*, p. 55)

[Papal Rome showed its decadence] not onely in their great solemnities and festivals, which were spent commonly in bellie cheare and Playes . . . much after the fashion of the Israelites, sitting downe to eate and drinke, and rising up to play: but specially in their rich Iubilies. (anon., *A Short Treatise of Stage Plays*, p. 9)²⁰

Those who are temperate and abstemious at all other times, prove Epicures and drunkards [during Christmas revels]. Those who make conscience to *redeeme all other seasons*, deeme it a *point of Christianity to mispend all this, eating drinking, and rising up to play*, whole days and nights together. (Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, p. 746 [Cccccc v], emphasis original)

All the eloquence and sweetnesse therefore that is in stage-playes, is but *like the drops of honey out of a poisoned limbecke*, which please the palate onely, but destroy the man that tastes them. (*Histrio-Mastix*, p. 792 [Hhhhh4v], emphasis original)

These examples of the food metaphors are by no means all the same. But the differences between the passages, combined with the fact that they are all based on a common idea, reveals the idea of *food* generally to facilitate an important confluence of a number of different but related ideas about plays.

Here are some of the relevant associations I think there are between food and playgoing in these passages: food and “play” showed the sin and

²⁰ London, 1625.

brought about the death of the Israelites in the desert, and are therefore against God’s will; eating, like playgoing, and especially eating excessively, is time spent indulging oneself when one could be serving or helping others; food, like the sumptuous variety of sensory experience at plays, provides the potential for surfeit, which is gluttony; eating, like playgoing, requires leisure time, which can lead to idleness; food nourishes the body as the word of God nourishes the soul, and as one destroys the body by feeding it improperly (or starving it), so one destroys the soul by indulging in things contrary to (or lacking) the word of God. This is all fairly obvious from the passages and, above that, conventional. I present the list as a synthesis rather than a revelation. What I want to look at more closely is the attitude in these passages toward both the physical effects of plays and toward the human capacity for self-control.

The author of the *Treatise of Miraculis Pleyinge* does not mean that the Israelites in the desert put on a play after “eetyn and drinken,” but the ease with which his analogy moves into a condemnation of “miraculis pleyinge” hardly calls attention to the distinction between the two kinds of “play.” Subsequent authors, as we see in the *Short Treatise* and Prynne, are more than happy to continue the punning connection. Preceding the easy phonetic slip into “pleyinge,” is the causally automatic association of eating, drinking, and “play.” Once the Israelites have worshiped the golden calf, they inevitably tend toward the misuse of nourishment and free time. The Lollard author clearly has not spent a lot of time creating his figure and analogy here, but the very automaticness with which food and “play” get associated bespeaks the attitude that the misuse of one inevitably leads to the misuse of the other.

We see a similar automatic association of “banqueting” and “playing” as pernicious vices of the age in the third passage from Gosson, and in the first from Prynne. In the first Gosson passage, the analogy between poets and cooks makes explicit what is probably going on in each author’s mind in the other works. Here, both food and plays are seen as inescapable traps of gluttony.²¹ The diner or the playgoer is a relatively passive victim, “conquered” or “confounded” by the sensory feast before him. What is more, the distinction between the works of the poet and the cook is initially even more blurry than one would expect. The structure of Gosson’s analogy turns out to be chiasmatic – Poet: Cook. Food: Poetry – but one could quite easily think at first that “the one winnes the body

²¹ Prynne makes a similar analogy, citing the Roman Marius’s claim that “he kept never a stage-player nor costly cooke about him, as other voluptuous, effeminate, dissolute Romans did” (*Histrio-Mastix*, 40 [Mmm1 v])

from labor and conquereth sense” was the first part of a former–latter construction, and referred to the poet and poetry rather than to the cook and food. Thus the differences between “labor” and “vertue,” “sense” and “wit,” which are meant to be the differences of things physical and things mental, also become blurred so that the upshot seems to be that going to plays destroys you both physically and mentally. This is similar to what happens in Northbrooke’s figure, where the discussion of “meate” makes “diuinitie” into something that one almost consumes physically simply by representing it or seeing it represented. There is the sense that once you have mixed divinity with your vain play, you have set a disease in motion in your body: it is not within your power any longer to control it.

Even as there is this identification of playgoing with poisoned or un-nourishing food, there is also the implicit claim that playgoing is *worse* than eating too much, or eating the wrong kind of food. For, as Gosson says, “if the body bee overcharged, it may bee holpe; but the surfeite of the soule is hardly cured” (*Schoole of Abuse*, p. 30). Underlying this notion is the idea in the central argument of Stubbes, where plays are opposed to “the word of God, the foode of life, and life itselfe.” Stubbes begins his discussion of plays by invoking the gospel of John and the equivalence of the word and God: “Wherefore, who so euer abuseth this word of our God on stage in playes and enterludes, abuseth the Maiesty of God” (*Anatomie of Abuses*, p. 141). And since the word of God is the “foode of life,” indulging in something contrary to that word is to eat the food of death. Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in the *Refutation*, with its metaphor of the “Diuils teates” (to which Prynne’s discussion of eloquence and honey runs a close second). This last passage brings together a number of related and slightly contradictory ideas floating around in all of these passages: that plays, like the word of God, are a form of “nourishment,” but the wrong kind; that the nourishment is taken both voluntarily (one wants to eat) and passively (one *must* eat, or satisfies an appetite automatically, as an infant would); and that the nourishment affects the body (draws it from labor, tempts it with idleness, leads to other kinds of gluttony), but even more the soul (takes over the mind, replaces the word of God with something else). If we take as the basic metaphor at work in all these passages that plays are like, in Gosson’s words, a feast at “the Epicure’s table,” the general idea seems to be that one cannot help partaking of this feast once one comes to the table, that one’s sense – in all senses of that word – is overcome, that the satisfaction of the appetite only increases that appetite, and that the food begins to

destroy one both inside and out. Nowhere do the authors suggest that one might be able to check the appetite once the fruit, as it were, has been tasted.

That the antitheatricalists did not labor to create these connections – that they were, rather, fundamental to their, and others’ way of thinking about the theatre – seems clear from the fact that the defenders of the stage do not labor to respond to them;²² Heywood and Lodge, who are responding quite directly to most of the literature noted here, do not much talk about food. Where they do overlap with the ideas of self-control and experience at work in the antitheatrical tracts, the defenders of the stage actually seem to agree with their adversaries; arguing from the same assumptions about the effects of plays on audiences, they only put a more positive spin on their conclusions.

Even though he finds Heywood’s *Apologie for Actors* to be the “only comparable attempt [after Sidney’s *Defence*] to defend the theatre itself” in the period (*The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, p. 117), Jonas Barish shows little admiration for the tract. Peppering his discussion with words like “absurd,” “inept,” and “clumsy,” Barish faults Heywood for managing, like the Puritans, to “befog the distinction between the real and the imaginary” (p. 119).

... when he attempts to defend the public stage, Heywood manages to push the argument into absurdity at once, by alleging as his prime instance of the power and the glory of the stage the rape of the Sabines, the signal for which was given by Romulus *at the theater*. This extraordinary example in effect not only concedes, but actively espouses, the thesis of the opposition. For the adversaries of the stage never doubted its hold over audiences; they simply considered that hold a malignant one. Northbrooke had actually cited the incident of the Sabine women as an instance of the iniquity of the theater. (p. 118)

Whether Heywood’s defense is adequate or not, what is striking is the correspondence between defenders of and detractors from the stage in their assessment of the theatre’s effects – precisely their inability, or perhaps unwillingness to separate “the real and the imaginary.”²³ And if both the Puritans and their adversaries were willing to argue publicly that a play could affect reality and the lives of its audience, it seems more

²² Jonson, of course, uses the food metaphor in the first prologue to *Epicœne* (see above, footnote 9), and the off-hand manner in which he does so stresses that metaphor’s conventionality. Jonson will later use a similar metaphor in the prologue to *The New Inn*.

²³ While Lodge tends to see more “abuse” in plays than Heywood, he also holds that, were plays as pure as they could be, they would allow audiences to “decypher the abuses of the world” (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 26).

than safe to assume that this is the kind of assumption playgoers would have brought with them to the playhouse. I should make it clear at this point that I am not arguing one way or the other about whether plays actually had or have an effect on “reality” – that is, whether it is possible *not* to “befog” the distinction between the two – only that playwrights and play-opposers and playgoers alike seem genuinely to have believed in the possibility.²⁴

The attempt to present positively the physicality of effect or response suggested by the antitheatrical food metaphors can be seen not only in something like Heywood’s example of the rape of the Sabines, but also in descriptions like the one that follows, from “An Excellent Actor,”²⁵ which is somewhat less invested in “defending” than simply describing the stage.

... by a ful and significant action of body, [the actor] charmes our attention: sit in a full Theater, and you will thinke you see so many lines drawn from the circumference of so many eares, while the *Actor* is the *Center*. (p. 209)

An ideal performance is one where there is a sense of physical and emotional connection between audience and actor; the shape of this connection seems to mimic the physical shape of the theatre itself.

Thus it is significant that Hamlet’s long speech after the Player is gone (2.2. 501–58) tends notably toward physical imagery. Three times in the first fifteen lines, he mentions the Player’s weeping. The hypothetical audience is also physically susceptible to the words the Player speaks: these words will “cleave the general ear” (line 515). Further on, Hamlet hopes that the play he will give the Players will make “murder, though it have no tongue . . . speak / With most miraculous organ” (lines 546–7). Upbraiding himself for his cowardice, he asks, “Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across, / Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face, / Tweaks me by th’ nose, gives me the lie i’ th’ throat / As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?”, and laments that all he can do is “like a whore unpack my heart with words, / And fall a-cursing” (lines 524–39). The audience is meant to, and I think does, see the logic of this – does feel

²⁴ Lest this argument begin to seem too much to be presenting a quaint picture of credulous Elizabethans standing agape with passion at the high astounding terms of their theatre, I should make clear the probably obvious fact that modern audiences and critics and students of all kinds of dramatic literature and performance (Brecht is one prominent example) similarly believe in the possibility that representation can and does affect reality.

²⁵ In *The “Conceited Newes” Of Sir Thomas Overbury And His Friends: A Facsimile Reproduction of the Ninth Impression of 1616 of Sir Thomas Overbury His Wife*, ed. James E. Savage (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968), pp. 209–11.

that Hamlet *should* be able to act because mere plays *do* move spectators emotionally as well as physically.

I am not saying that this connection is logical, only that it seems so; and it seems so, I think, not only because of the correspondence between “world” and “stage” which plays (and thus audiences) are always ready to make, but also because of the fact that plays fundamentally and always seek a specific physical response: applause. I cannot say for certain, but it seems to me that more than any other drama, early modern drama talks about and openly solicits applause. To call attention to this as an example of the belief in a direct, collective physical response as a measure of a play’s value might be merely ingenious if it were not for this passage from Prynne’s *Histrion-Mastix*:

if we believe *Tertullian*, these Applauses so pollute men’s hands, that they can neither lift them up to God in prayer, nor yet stretch them out to receive the Sacrament in an holy manner. God requires Christians to lift up holy hands to him in prayer: to bring cleaned, washed, pure hands and hearts unto his sacraments, not tainted with the filth of any sinne. Now Stage-applauses defile mens hands and hearts, making them so polluted, that they can neither lift them up in prayers . . . nor yet extend them to embrace Christ’s saved Body and Blood, without defilement. (p. 298 [QqI v], emphasis original)

This is the most negative possible expression of the idea we have seen presented glowingly in “An Excellent Actor,” where the actor is the center of a circle whose circumference is the audience, and whose radii are each spectator’s relationship with the actor. In both cases the words and actions of the stage, either pleurably mutable and transitory, or vain and unholy, have a direct line to the spectator’s body and soul; either infuse or infect it; move it to the greatest affection or the worst defilement. The audience’s response is in the first case a measure of the play’s worth, in the second of the spectator’s; it is therefore worth noting that Claudius’s response to *The Murder of Gonzago* is a vexed representation of both.

The preceding pages have attempted to give a general outline of the possible nature of the receptivity of an Elizabethan and Jacobean play-going public. I want briefly to review the claims I have made here, in the interest of consolidating the assumptions I am making about audiences which will govern the analysis of the plays that follows. Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences enjoyed the theatre for its variety – the variety of events portrayed on stage, the variety of characters played day to day or even scene to scene by single actors, the variety of emotions it provoked,

and the variety it provided in the routine of daily life. These audiences enjoyed the self-reflexivity of the theatre – Hamlet’s discussion of the boy companies, for example – and the feeling of being “in on” all the jokes this self-reflexivity provided. They enjoyed maintaining an ironic distance from the action or words on stage, and also losing that distance, and then being made aware of moments when they had lost it. They enjoyed going to the theatre for reasons other than seeing the play – to see and be seen by others, to loiter about, to meet members of the opposite sex, to show off new clothes. They enjoyed complex, multi-levelled plays which they could nevertheless easily classify as “tragedies” or “comedies.” They enjoyed thinking of themselves and being thought of as a collective entity, whose collective response quite powerfully determined the value of a play. And above all they enjoyed – and playwrights enjoyed them – *responding*, visibly, audibly, and physically: the transparent self-reflexivity of the language and the dramaturgy, like the relative bareness of the stage and brightness of the theatre, would have made this both inevitable and essential.