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Trent Revisited: A Reappraisal of Early Modern Catholicism's Relationship with the *Commedia Italiana*

Written by
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Notwithstanding Ferdinando Taviani's important observation that the Roman Catholic Church never launched a systematic attack against the professional theatre, the Catholic world *after* the Council of Trent was far more hospitable to antitheatrical sentiment than it was before. In evaluating this religious hostility to professional performance, theatre scholarship has borne the traces of an "antireligious prejudice" that, unfortunately, hesitates to explore religious realities with the same rigor as it does theatrical ones.

This essay aims to deepen our appreciation of the world in which the *commedia italiana* matured by situating theatricality and antitheatricality, *comici* and clerics, within the more inclusive field of religious history.¹ This wider frame allows both early modern Catholicism and the professional theatre to emerge as parties in a cultural conversation who have particular needs, desires, and interests. Considering these needs, desires, and interests moves us beyond superficiality and helps us engage the more dramatic subtext of the relationship between the Church and the theatre. Essentially, I contend that Trent's disciplinary and pastoral concerns manifested clear objectives regarding the role of Catholicism in the "theatre of the world." These objectives and the tactics for attaining them set professional religion in lively competition with the professional theatre.

¹ Pertinent bibliographical sources recently published that treat early modern religious history within its cultural context include: William J. Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550-1640*, Yale Intellectual History of the West, eds. J.W. Burrow, et. al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel, eds., *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honor of John W. O'Malley, S.J.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Pamela M. Jones and Thomas Worcester, eds., *From Rome to Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy, ca. 1550-1650*, Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions, vol. 14 (Boston: Brill, 2002); Michael Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation* (New York: Routledge, 1999); R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770*, New Approaches to European History, eds. William Beik and T.C.W. Blanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Tridentine Reform: Disciplinary and Pastoral Concerns

The Council of Trent² began in 1545 after many delays and ended in 1563 after several interruptions. It provides a good starting point for exploring the religious context of theatricality and antitheatricality for two reasons. First, the event of the council bears the weight of almost all subsequent attempts at understanding early modern Catholicism.³ Second, Trent straddled the shifting plates of a world in flux. At its beginning it included people who had experienced the institutional hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church as a fact of life. At its end it included people who would experience Catholicism as only one force in a cultural

² The success of the Protestant Reformation and the internal demands for Roman reform made the calling of a council imperative for Catholicism. Political disputes and papal intransigence, however, had long postponed the inevitable. Eventually, Pope Paul III resolved to convene a universal council of the church and, after several false starts over a period of eight years, finally succeeded in opening the ecumenical Council of Trent on 13 December 1545. Spanning the reigns of four popes (Paul III, Julius III, Paul IV, Pius V), Trent was regularly interrupted by political and religious conflicts. The council took place in three periods over the course of eighteen years: 1545-1547, 1551-1552, 1562-1563. It considered dogma as well as discipline and, for a time, attempted to address the concerns of Protestant reformers. Pope Pius IV confirmed the decrees of the council in January 1564. At its beginning the council was composed of a small clerical assembly that included papal legates, bishops and some heads of religious orders. The membership grew to include more clergy, theologians, and even Protestant representatives (during the second period). For an overview of the scholarship on the Council of Trent and the issues involved in its various sessions see Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Council of Trent" in *Catholicism in Early Modern History: A Guide to Research*, ed. John O'Malley, Reformation Guides to Research, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1987), 211-226. Alberigo is especially good in making clear how the Council cannot be seen as monolithic (cf. 217-218).

³ See John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). See also John O'Malley, "Was Ignatius Loyola a Church Reformer? How to look at Early Modern Catholicism," *The Catholic Historical Review* 77 2 (April 1991): 177-193. Following O'Malley's lead, I use the attribution "early modern Catholicism" in reference to sixteenth and seventeenth century Roman Catholic religious history. This particular designation consciously avoids two more common titles for the period: "Counter-Reformation" and "Catholic Reformation." "What's in a name?" For O'Malley, a great deal. "Counter-Reformation" implies that the religious history of the period remains primarily a function of Catholicism's feverish efforts to counter the effects of Protestantism. "Catholic Reformation" suggests that the period is essentially concerned with the canonical renovation of Church offices and conceives the construction of Catholicism as predominantly the work of church hierarchy. O'Malley seeks to add "early modern Catholicism" to the list of interpretive terms applied to this period because, though it implicitly includes the elements of Catholic Reformation and Counter-Reformation, it allows for the period's complexity to emerge without an *a priori* judging of the evidence. O'Malley's reflection that "there's much in a name" reminds us that both theatre professionals and their critics moved in a religious environment defined by many different issues. To situate these *dramatis personae* in the "Counter-Reformation" (or even in the "Catholic Reformation") means confirming longstanding, and perhaps misleading, prejudices about the period: that it was consistently and systematically repressive, that theatrical success demanded pandering to church authorities, that theatrical authors of religious plays essentially carried the favor of the religious establishment to make their lives easier, etc. Using the attribution "Early modern Catholicism" represents an attempt to clear the stage so as to revisit more effectively the intercourse between the professional theatre and the Roman Catholic Church during the later 16th and early 17th centuries.

marketplace that included many other political and social forces as well as several other religious confessions.⁴

The event of the Council proves an important marker in the history of theatre because it convenes in the same year as there appears the first extant evidence of a professional *commedia* troupe—the Paduan contract of 1545. And it ends one year before there appears the first extant evidence of a professional *commedia* troupe that includes an actress—the Roman contract of 1564 signed by one Lucrezia da Siena.⁵ Simply, Trent is significant because it manifests the Roman Church's efforts at adapting to a changing world into which the public, professional theatre is making an entrance. One obvious reason for an increase in antitheatrical sentiment during the years after the Council of Trent is the growing visibility of the theatre itself.⁶

Though it did have some things to say about music and art, Trent made no pronouncements on the theatre—professional or otherwise. The council's explicitly doctrinal concerns regarding original sin, justification, and sacramental theology probably had little influence on the interaction between theatre and religion. Trent's disciplinary and pastoral concerns, however, focused on the relationship between ecclesiastical order and Christian

⁴ For a brief overview of the struggles surrounding interpretation and reception of the council see Alberigo, "The Council of Trent," 219-223. See also Eric Cochrane, *Italy: 1530-1630*, ed. Julius Kirschner, Longman History of Italy, ed. Denys Hay (New York: Longman, 1988), 184-201. For a more detailed discussion of the council and its reception see chapters 1 and 2 in Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: a new view of the Counter-Reformation*, trans. Jeremy Moiser with an introduction by John Bossy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977). See also Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, trans. Dom Ernest Graf, O.S.B., 2 vols., (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1961). For a more focused sense of the various religious and political obstacles in implementing the council see also John B. Tomaro, "San Carlo Borromeo and the Implementation of the Council of Trent" and Agostino Borromeo, "Archbishop Carlo Borromeo and the Ecclesiastical Policy of Philip II in the State of Milan" in *San Carlo Borromeo: Catholic Reform and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. John M. Headley and John B. Tomaro (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988).

⁵ See Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della commedia dell'arte: La memoria delle compagnie italiane del XVI, XVII, XVIII sec.*, 2nd ed., (Florence: La Casa Usher, 1986; reprint, 1992), pp 183-186.

⁶ The beginnings of the professional theatre in Italy, known variously by contemporaries as the *commedia italiana*, *commedia all'improvviso*, or *commedia degli zanni*, can be located in the mid-sixteenth century. Though the gestation of particular character types (*tipi fissi*), the use of regional dialects, the development of rustic popular plots, etc. had begun earlier in the sixteenth century among amateur and semi-professional performers like the Venetians Angelo Beolco (1502-1554) and Andrea Calmo (c. 1510-1571), the first extant evidence of a professional troupe appears in a Paduan performance contract dated 1545. The company of "Ser. Maphio called Zanini from Padua" agreed to work together for one year sharing all earnings and resources. Likely, as Kenneth and Laura Richards observe, this contract was not the first of its kind, though it provides a convenient *terminus a quo* for the formation of Italy's professional companies. The major troupes like the Gelosi, the Confidenti, the Desiosi, etc. formed in the later 1560s, 1570s and 1580s at which time the activity of the professional troupes began dominating the Italian peninsula. For a discussion of the antecedents of the Italian *commedia* and for an overview of the emergence of the professional companies, see Kenneth and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Shakespeare Head Press, 1990), 11-31, 32-54.

living. In this arena the competitive subtext in the relationship between *commedia* and church comes clear.

The "Christianization" of ordinary Catholics remains one of the more striking features of the Council. The reform of religious life and church offices (that is, the episcopacy and clergy) aimed not only at eliminating abuses so as to achieve the internal stability of the religious establishment, but also, and more importantly, to evangelize and thereby work the sanctification of the ordinary lay person. How could Catholics be more than superficially religious without the edifying example of competent pastors who could lead their flocks in the way of Christian perfection? The disciplinary and pastoral reforms of Trent sought to make the Church and its representatives a more efficacious force in ordinary people's lives.

Let us turn now to the most significant of these reforms and consider their possible effects on religious attitudes toward the professional theatre.

1. The Residency of Bishops

Presuming that "only a renewed pastoral body could effectively proclaim the sacred message to the people," the council proceeded to re-establish norms for bishops and clergy.⁷ The first and most significant of these norms was the residence of bishops. In the words of the sixth session of the Council, rather than "wandering idly from court to court, or abandoning their flock and neglecting the care of their sheep in the flurry of their worldly affairs," bishops were obliged to live in their own dioceses discharging their responsibility as shepherds.⁸ In addition, the reform bishops were urged to "visit their diocese, preach in person, and assure preaching in all their parishes."⁹ The obligation of residence and regular pastoral ministry opened up the possibility for preached and published antitheatrical sentiment because bishops grew more aware of and connected to the rhythms of life in their jurisdiction. These rhythms alternated between work and play, Lent and *carnevale*, liturgy and performance.¹⁰

⁷ Delumeau, *Catholicism*, 15-16. I follow Delumeau's lead in seeing the reformation of religious offices as deriving from the need to preach the gospel.

⁸ The quotation is taken from the Sixth Session of the council quoted by Delumeau, *Catholicism*, 16.

⁹ Delumeau, *Catholicism*, 18.

¹⁰ This expanded awareness on the part of reform bishops is especially apparent in the experience of Carlo Borromeo in the see of Milan to be discussed more fully in the next section of the essay.

With this emphasis on the obligation of bishops to exercise ordinary pastoral care in their dioceses came the correlative affirmation of episcopal power and authority. The bishop was "from then on to be 'delegate of the Apostolic See' in his own diocese."¹¹ Hence, his office demanded the renewed respect of the secular clergy (of whom he was directly in charge), religious houses (which had often enjoyed exemption from episcopal jurisdiction), and civil authority (which had usurped many of the powers of the episcopacy). Championing episcopal rights placed the local bishop in collateral line with the secular government. Competition and conflict between the two powers were certainly not uncommon. In cases where the secular authority strongly supported theatrical entertainments, as in the Spanish-governed Milan during the archiepiscopacy of Carlo Borromeo (discussed more fully below), religious antitheatricalism functioned not only as an admonition to the Christian faithful but also as an affirmation of ecclesiastical influence in the face of secular government.¹²

2. Reform of the Clergy

Though the reformed bishop functioned as the pastor of the local church, he could not undertake the Christianization of the people by himself. The rejuvenation of the Christian life depended upon a well-trained and energetic clergy. Hence, Trent made provision for the establishment of seminaries to train secular priests, though these did not appear in great number for very many years. Domenico Sella reminds us that the seminaries were "aimed at turning out priests who, in terms of education, piety, moral conduct and outward decorum would stand as models of Christian living and exude the high dignity and the distinct nature of the clerical status."¹³ Clerics, as supposed models of virtuous living, became the object of much criticism and correction regarding dress, behavior and lifestyle; they were frequently chastised for attending the *commedia mercenaria* precisely because they gave bad example. Attending the

¹¹ Delumeau, *Catholicism*, 18.

¹² This is not to suggest that all prelates were opposed to theatre. In addition to many other examples, consider Cardinal Ferdinando Gonzaga, a major patron of the actors Giovan Battista Andreini and his wife Virginia Ramponi even before his accession to the Mantuan dukedom, the Cardinal Harrach of Vienna who invited Andreini and their Fedeli troupe to Austria in the late 1620's, and Cardinal Richelieu to whom Andreini dedicated *Teatro Celeste*, a cycle of poems in praise of actors.

¹³ Domenico Sella, *Italy in the Seventeenth Century*, Longman History of Italy, ed. D. Hay (New York: Longman, 1997), 116.

professional theatre visibly lowered their status in the community; priests at plays undermined efforts at reconstructing the role of clerics in the social order.

Further, as Jean Delumeau notes, since "one of the scourges of the ecclesiastical society of the time was the enormous number of wandering clerics" who exercised priestly functions in exchange for payment, the council attempted to put an end to itinerant professional priestcraft by decreeing that "no one could be admitted to holy orders without having enough to live on."¹⁴ Interestingly, such a concern parallels the antitheatricalist distrust of itinerant professional players who earned a living by finding audiences willing to pay for performance. The connection in this case is itinerancy; having no established domicile, wandering priests and performers introduced a foreign, uncontrollable element into early modern society. The exchange of money, then, rather than ongoing membership in a hierarchically ordered community provided the basis for relationships. No doubt the monetary link also proved very suspicious because it eluded external regulation.

3. Reform of Religious Life

The atmosphere of reform permeated even the walls of convents, monasteries and apostolic houses of religious orders that had traditionally enjoyed a certain freedom from the ordinary jurisdiction of the church. Clerics who belonged to religious communities were urged to "practice the strictest observance of their rule" that their witness might not only result in their own salvation but in the edification of the larger Catholic community.¹⁵ Most pertinent to this inquiry, however, is the attitude toward religious women. In the end, the conciliar decree on religious life demanded two things with regard to women: first, that "'[u]nder pain of eternal damnation,' bishops will re-establish nuns' clausura [or cloister] wherever it has fallen into abeyance, and see that it is rigorously maintained where it still holds;" second, that a woman neither be forced to enter religious life against her will nor be prevented from doing so should she desire it.¹⁶

¹⁴ Delumeau, *Catholicism*, 20.

¹⁵ Delumeau, *Catholicism*, 22.

¹⁶ Delumeau, *Catholicism*, 22. "...the principle that no woman ought to be forced to enter the cloister against her will was spelled out in unmistakable terms, excommunication was threatened for its violators, and it was ruled that any prospective candidate to the convent must be closely questioned by the bishop or by his deputy in order to

These pronouncements reveal the period's absolute conviction that women required regulation, either through marriage or through the structures of religion. Notwithstanding the eventual establishment of apostolic congregations of women who would teach, nurse and care for the poor (e.g., the Ursulines, the Sisters of the Visitation, the Sisters of Charity),¹⁷ Trent's insistence on the stricter observance of cloister in the case of women suggests that "unattached" women could not be allowed to take part in public transactions or move about *ad libitum* without conjuring the possibilities for compromising virtue (theirs and others') and occasioning immorality.

Though this fundamentally misogynistic attitude was hardly an invention of early modern Catholicism, it certainly contributed to the religious ambience of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Not surprisingly, then, religious antitheatricalists of the period fixed their disapproving gaze on the highly visible actresses who from the mid-sixteenth century on performed with and, in several cases, assumed the management of *commedia* troupes. The professional actress was almost a religious anti-type, seemingly unregulated, certainly uncloistered, probably unchaste, and disturbingly visible in the marketplace.¹⁸

4. Primacy of Preaching

As Robert Bireley notes, "[p]reaching as a mode of evangelization...was as important to Catholics as it was to Protestants in the sixteenth century."¹⁹ In fact, the final cause of the episcopal, clerical and religious reform just mentioned remained the effective preaching of the Christian message to ordinary women and men. And since that message was preserved within

ascertain 'whether she is being forced, whether she is being deceived, whether she knows what she is doing' (*an coacta, an seducta sit, an sciat quod agat*)." Sella, *Italy in the Seventeenth Century*, 119.

¹⁷ Angela Merici's Ursulines taught young girls in the manner of the Jesuits; Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal's Sisters of the Visitation taught and nursed the sick; Louise de Marillac's Sisters of Charity nursed the sick and cared for the poor. For an enlightening overview of women in western Christianity see Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of their Own*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 181-266 *passim*. Anderson and Zinsser note that "in the seventeenth century...pious Catholic women claimed the right to an unorthodox life in the name of service to the ill and poor...*Because of the needs of the time, women were allowed a modified rule and life of service outside the cloister.*" (Anderson and Zinsser, vol. 1, 239, emphasis mine.) The apostolic focus was generally by way of exception.

¹⁸ On the relationship between religious women and the professional actress, see Michael Zampelli, "The 'Most Honest and Most Devoted of Women': An Early Modern Defense of the Professional Actress," *Theatre Survey: The Journal of the American Society for Theatre Research* 42:1 (May 2001), 1-23.

¹⁹ Robert Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700* (Washington: CUA Press, 1999), 98.

the sacred scriptures and the tradition of the Church, the council identified preaching as the "chief duty" especially of bishops (*praecipuum episcoporum munus*) but also of the lower clergy.

This focus on preaching the Word of God not only connected Tridentine reform with Protestant reform, but it also placed a central religious activity in direct competition with professional theatricals. The aims of preaching coincided, at least in part, with the aims of Renaissance theatre: to teach, to move, and to please.²⁰ In a manner not unlike the itinerant *comici* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, touring preachers of religious orders were often contracted by ecclesiastical patrons to perform during the strong seasons of the liturgical year such as Lent.²¹ Like actors, preachers found themselves playing before discriminating urban audiences making use of a variety of performative strategies to insure an effective hearing. Manuel Morán and José Andrés Gallago reveal that the delivery of a typical baroque sermon involved the kind of theatrical expertise sported by *comici*. Since

reading from the pulpit was not admissable, and reciting by heart was considered fitting only for beginners...[the] most common practice was to get the scheme of the sermon well fixed in mind—its formal structure, exempla, ideas—and commit that scheme to memory, leaving the rest to improvisation.²²

In the religious world made possible by the Council of Trent, professional religion competed with professional theatre in very concrete ways; hence, the emergence of religious antitheatrical sentiment within this world is hardly surprising.²³

²⁰ See John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 96-97.

²¹ O'Malley, *Jesuits*, 93.

²² Manuel Morán and José Andrés Gallago, "The Preacher" in *Baroque Personae*, ed. Rosario Villari, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 148. "The preachers complained that city-dwellers were so accustomed to evaluating the quality and execution of sermons that a preacher could never rest on his laurels." (145)

²³ When speaking of the 1570 tour of the Gelosi in Paris, Armand Baschet quotes the contemporary *Journal* of "Le sieur de l'Etoile, bon Parisien" who notes that the Gelosi attracted more of an audience with their performances than did the the four best preachers in Paris with their preaching: "...ou il y avoit tel concours et affluence de peuple que les quatre meilleurs prédicateurs de Paris n'en avoient pas tretous ensemble autant quant il preschoient." L'Etoile quoted in Armand Baschet, *Les Comédiens Italiens a la Cour de France sous Charles IX, Henri III, Henri IV et Louis XIII* (Paris, 1882; reprint Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1969), 74.

A Case in Point: Carlo Borromeo

In order to graft some flesh on the preceding skeleton of an argument by substantiating its claims with reference to concrete historical details, we turn to a consideration of the antitheatrical sentiment of Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584). As cardinal archbishop of Milan from 1565 to 1584, Carlo Borromeo defined the *emploi* of the reforming Tridentine prelate. His views of Christian life and worship shaped the self-understanding of reform-minded pastors and proved a valuable currency in subsequent centuries. Though Borromeo's virulent and persistent arguments against Milanese spectacles certainly echoed the already familiar antitheatrical critiques of the church fathers, he was the first significant ecclesiastical authority to translate the antitheatrical prejudice into the early modern era.

Although his attacks on secular and sacred performance created an awkward climate for professional players in Milan, even Borromeo's articulate and zealous criticism could not finally suppress theatrical activity. The archbishop's antitheatrical statements recurred throughout his archiepiscopacy, indicating that despite his protestations, theatre continued to find its audience.²⁴ Even though his persistence could not overcome the popular theatre's ability to endure, Borromeo's antitheatrical writing did establish a way of seeing the theatre that would affect other religious writers in Italy and France. Essentially, Borromeo's objections to theatre's interaction with Christian society revolve around three general points that derive directly from the cardinal's commitment to Tridentine values: First, theatre disrupted social, and religious order; second, it undermined genuine religious activity; third, it sabotaged the 'Christianization' of society.

In Borromeo's view, theatre tore at the social fabric; hence, he advised the civil magistrates to drive from their jurisdictions "actors, mimes, vagrants, and all other similarly 'lost' people" unless they agreed to establish permanent residency and resolved to "live honestly and comport themselves, in everything, as befits a Christian." Professional performers, because of their itinerancy, threatened society with instability. Since a wandering society remained an

²⁴ *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* (Rome: Casa Editrice Le Maschere, 1954), 549-569. The Gelosi company performed for the first time in Milan in 1572 and again in 1583. Even after 1576, a year marking the visit of the plague and the establishment of several ordinances condemning players and prescribing severe penalties for public productions, many companies made stops in the area and found refuge in the homes and businesses of the Milanese Jews who were immune from the religious prohibitions of the cardinal archbishop.

uncontrollable one,²⁵ Borromeo insisted that the civil authorities, charged with the task of keeping social order, should police and censure the inns, "all filled with wickedness," that might give refuge to actors, mimes, and vagrants.²⁶

The *spettacoli* disrupted the religious order envisioned by this Tridentine pastor by confusing, or even ignoring, the boundaries separating the sacred from the profane. And in this regard Borromeo quickly cast his wandering eye toward his own clergy. In a document concerning internal governance, for example, the cardinal archbishop forbids all members of the episcopal household to "carry arms...play cards, dice, ball, or other indecorous games of this kind, or attend the games of others." Neither are they permitted "to walk about masked, to participate in hunting parties, to attend theatrical performances, comedies, or any other impure activities of the professional actors." Since a reprimand must obviously have an object, Borromeo's diocesan clergy must have been every bit as involved in these profane activities as their lay brethren. With such involvement the clergy blurred the boundaries between the religious and secular worlds, thus sending mixed signals to those for whom they provided pastoral guidance.²⁷ In Borromeo's view theatricals, masquerades and the like spoke of a different world, a world not contained by the embrace of faith.²⁸

²⁵ According to Domenico Sella, "[i]n the late sixteenth and through much of the seventeenth centuries a recurrent theme in government circles was the danger that hordes of beggars, vagrants, 'rogues and vagabonds' posed to the public peace and to personal safety...The view of the poor as socially dangerous was, of course, widespread in Europe at the time and reflected in part the rapid pace of urbanization underway since the sixteenth century" (Sella, 86).

²⁶ All quotes from Borromeo and the *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis* (*Acts of the Church of Milan*) are taken from Ferdinando Taviani, *La Commedia dell'arte e la società barocca: La Fascinazione del teatro*, La Commedia dell'arte: Storia testi documenti, ed. Ferruccio Marrotti, no. 1 (Rome: Mario Bulzoni, 1969). Borromeo, *Acta*, "De histrionibus, Cingaribus, Tabernis meritoriis et aleatoribus" (1565) in Taviani, 11. "De his etiam principes et magistrates commonendos esse duximus. Ut histriones et mimos, coeterosque circulators, et eius generis perditos homines e suis finibus eiiciant; et in caupones et alios, quicumque eos receperunt, acriter animadvertant. Ut vagum et fallax cingarorum genus arceant; nisi certis sedibus collocati, vitam honestas artibus et in reliquis omnibus, ut christiano homines decet agree velint." "...omnis nequitiae sentinas..."

²⁷ Borromeo, *Acta*, "De gubernatione rei familiaris. Pars secunda" (1566) in Taviani, 12. "Nullus ex familia ne armis certare, nec chartis lusoriis aut talis, aut pila maiori, aut alio eiusmodi indecoro ludi genere ludere, ludentesne spectare, nec choreas exercere, nec personatus incedere, nec venationi, fabulis, comoediis, aliisque histrionum impuris actionibus vacare audeat."

²⁸ Yet, at the same time that he attempted to maintain a clear separation between religion and worldliness, Borromeo himself pressured political authorities to implement his religious vision through secular power. In a 1571 letter to Monsignor Giambattista Castagna, the archbishop of Rossano and apostolic nuncio in Spain, Borromeo asked that the nuncio petition Philip II for a civil prohibition of festivals and spectacles, at least on religious feast days.

Borromeo's *acta* reveal the archbishop's keen sensitivity to the competition between theatre and religion. For him, the former corrupted while the latter sanctified. Early in his career as archbishop, Borromeo prohibited "comedies, scenic or theatrical representations, tournaments or other spectacles of whatever kind" during the three weeks preceding the start of Lent, a high point of Carnevale.²⁹ The reason for the prohibition remained the need to give religious spectacles a performative edge over theatrical ones:

The bishop is to see to it that in the time of Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima (in which holy mother Church, with the rites of the divine office, with songs and hymns urging us to sadness and penitence, and finally with every style of dress and other thing, instructs the people of God and prepares them...to worthily celebrate the Passion of Christ) that the faithful entrusted to his care—fleeing from all that is contrary to the precepts of the Church (the spectacles, the scenic representations, and all that has the tinge of paganism) introduced especially in these corrupt times—are more attentive to the exercise of Christian piety and to prayer...³⁰

In 1579 Borromeo issued an edict prohibiting tournaments on all Sundays as well as those special feasts of the year when the divine office was celebrated in the metropolitan church. The penalty for all those who presented spectacles, those who knowingly cooperated with their production, and those who attended them, was automatic excommunication (*latae sententiae*) and interdict, the absolution of which was reserved to the archbishop alone. Respect for sacred, liturgical time was crucial in Borromeo's post-Tridentine understanding of life in a Christian city. Liturgical feasts were not being observed with proper devotion; popular celebratory entertainments, like plays and banquets, did not correspond with the dignified and solemn

²⁹ Borromeo, *Acta*, "De festorum dierum cultu" (1569) in Taviani, 12. "Ne item comoediae, ludi scenici, vel teatrales, hastiludia, et alia cuiusvis generis spectacular agantur."

³⁰ Borromeo, *Acta*, "De festorum dierum cultu" (1569) in Taviani, 12. "Studeat etiam Episcopus, ut quo tempore in Septuagesimae, Sexagesimae et Quinquagesimae hebdomadis Ecclesia mater, et officiorum ritu et hymnis canticisque fidelium mentes ad moestitiam, atque ad poenitentiam excitantibus, et omni denique tum vestimentorum, tum aliarum rerum apparatus populum Dei instruit, ac praeparat tot ante diebus ad sancta recolendam Christi Domini passionem et Crucem; eo postissimum tempore fideles sibi in curam traditor, spectacula, ludos scenicos, et aliaquae gentilitatis speciem prae se ferunt, tunc praesertim morum corruptelis introducta, illa ipsa tanquam a sanctissimis Ecclesiae institutis abhorrentia omnino fugientes, ad pietatis christianae studia, et ad orationem attentiores sint...."

ceremonies staged by the church in marking sacred time (e.g., public processions, the Forty Hours devotion to the Eucharist, continual preaching in church).³¹

Carlo Borromeo insisted that the theatre sabotaged the project of "Christianizing" society; at his most extreme, he invested the opposition between *commedia* and church with cosmic significance. On the seventh Sunday after Pentecost in 1583 (17 July), Borromeo preached on the two blind men of Jericho. In this homily he likens these scriptural characters to his Milanese flock, blind people whose reason is increasingly occluded by corrupt professional actors. He plays on the traditional images of the nets and fish, noting sadly that Milan is "a famous school of libidinousness and impudence where comedies are frequently performed and actors, more indecent than any type of person...catch in the nets of the devil great numbers of unwary youths."³² In the end, Borromeo urges his church to acknowledge the cosmic competition between church and comedy, between Christ and the Devil:

Christ lives in churches and oratories, in hospitals and schools of Christian doctrine. The demon lives in impudent places, in taverns, on stages, in spectacles. Both are calling servants; both want to be followed, but which rightly?...Both send their ambassadors to you: the mime and the actor with placards affixed to walls inviting you to that devilish return they call comedy. Comedy they call it, but believe me, for you it is always tragedy...³³

Carlo Borromeo recognized that the professional theatre, like professional religion, had the power to change the face of the social and cultural scene. The professional theatre

³¹ Borromeo, *Acta*, "Editto per la proibizione di Giostre e spettacoli nelle Domeniche e Feste" (1579) in Taviani, 14-15. It seems that the edict was issued because of the continual interruption of religious rites by "drums, trumpets, carriages, shouts and tumults of tournaments, running, games, masked characters and other similar profane spectacles" ("tamburri, trombe, carrozze di concorso, gridi e tumulti di tornei, corriere, giostre, mascherate et altri simili spettacoli profani").

³² Borromeo, "Dalle Omelie recitate il 17 luglio 1583" in Taviani, 32. "...adeo nempe in hac civitate saevissimam illam libidinum ac impudicitiarum officinam patere, ut frequentes comoediae recitentur ac in scenis histriones, indignissimi homines, personati in Diaboli reia innumerous huius iuvenes incautos adducant."

³³ Borromeo, "Dalle Omelie recitate il 17 luglio 1583" in Taviani, 32. "In Ecclesiis habitat Christus, in Oratoriis, quae apud vos tam sunt frequentia, in Xenodochiis, in Doctrinae Christianae gymnasiis. Daemon vero in loci impudicis inhabitat, in tabernis, in scenis atque spectaculis. Uterque ad servos advocat; uterque multos cupit asseclas habere. Sed ille iure vos repetit, utpote suos...Ambo oratores suos ad vos mittunt. Mimus atque histrio vos schedules parieti assixis ad Atanicum inventum, quod Comoediam vocant, invitat; sed mihi credite, traegodia vobis est semper."

represented a philosophy of life very different from Borromeo's, a philosophy of life that admitted the human need for play and diversion. For Borromeo, though, play and diversion signaled the wasting of precious time, time ordered by the sacred rhythms of the liturgical calendar. As a prelate imbued with the reform ideals of Trent, Borromeo saw his social and religious role as insuring the sanctification of the Milanese by insisting on the explicit Christianization of ordinary life. The sanctification of time in official church liturgies, devotional programs, and sermons provided the most expedient means of schooling the religious imagination and inserting Christian realities into everyday living. Theatrical play, then, set itself in competition with liturgical celebration causing what Borromeo saw as a potentially fatal arrhythmia in the heart of Milan.

Some Conclusions

In the mid-sixteenth century, just as the church began negotiating the shifts in the social scene, the professional theatre made its entrance onto the cultural stage. Though considered a base component of culture, the professional theatre and its related entertainments became popular in public and private venues, thus earning the attention of other vendors in the marketplace. From the perspective of the institutional church, the professional theatre embodied a way of being in the world that undermined its own evolving understanding of the nature and aims of modern Christian society. Here the disciplinary and pastoral concerns of early modern Catholicism clashed with the modes of theatrical organization and professional practice. Whereas the religious hierarchy—especially in someone like Carlo Borromeo—championed ecclesiastical and social order as the most expedient means by which to assure the salvation of souls, theatrical professionals exemplified itinerancy and sexual integration, crossing a variety of literal and figurative boundaries in the plying of their trade. Naturally, the existence of such an obvious countersign to religious order opened up possibilities for antitheatrical critique.

Further, the efforts at evangelizing society and the attempts of ordinary men and women to achieve some measure of religious integration involved both church and laity in the education of imagination.³⁴ Printed catechisms, devotional literature and confessional books kept religious matters alive in the minds of the literate public. Public preaching, revivalist

missions, spectacular processions and elaborately staged devotions were designed to move hearts to piety and hands to action. The cult of the saints held in imaginative tension the agenda of official religion and the projection of popular needs.

The professional theatre addressed this same faculty of imagination. By the end of the sixteenth century theatrical books fixed ideal performances in print, allowing the theatre to transcend the confines of this *piazza* or that *stanza* and find an audience in any literate person. *Scenarii, lazzi, tipi fissi*, costumes, innovative stage machinery sought to entertain and divert audiences (thus removing them from "useful" occupations and encouraging "idleness") even while, in some cases at least, they attempted to move and teach. The saints became objects of theatrical exploration and the subjects of theatrical performance. Clearly, religion and theatre moved in the same circles. In the practice of their respective crafts, religious and theatrical professionals engaged similar parts of the same clientele.

Revisiting Trent—and by extension the religious world that it helped shape—helps us understand the ways Roman Catholicism began adapting to a radically changing world. Revisiting Trent also provides us with a way of seeing how the *commedia italiana* was beginning to intersect with early modern culture. Religion's engaging the theatre—even negatively, even as an unworthy competitor—gives the emerging professional theatre a "vote of confidence" at a critical time of social reorganization. That a powerful proprietor of cultural life like the Roman Catholic Church would address the reality of theatrical professionals, draws the *commedia* onto an even more public stage and gives *comici* the opportunity to articulate and defend their *arte*.

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³⁴ For an enlightening discussion on the shifting and sometimes problematic status of the imagination in the early modern period, see Bouwsma, 169-170.