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The Prejudice Against Theatre

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Throughout the Renaissance, drama was defined in certain ways in order to be accepted within a particular ecclesiastical frame if it was to be accepted at all. Drama's defenders who contended with established church dictums sought ways to justify drama as acceptable under those dictums. However, the purpose of the defense determined its end. Thus, scholars necessarily developed strictures, rules, precepts, and theories to define dramatic art which somewhat not only allowed drama to be tolerated under church doctrine, but also developed drama as a practice outside the ecclesiastical frame.

By the time of the Italian Renaissance, Christian political and social power created the ecclesiastical frame founded on medieval ideology, and demanded justification by theatre scholars. However, the interrelationship between Christianity and theatre was based on a prejudiced attitude. When the Christian community gained political power, the theatre was influenced either in theory or in practice, or both. Yet influences do not happen in a vacuum. Roman theatre practices helped mould Christian prejudiced attitudes about the theatre. Medieval prejudices, in turn, helped shape Renaissance theories and Puritan beliefs. This paper attempts to reexamine segments of theatre history in light of the Christian people's prejudice to better understand the significant influence that prejudice had on the theatre, and to help clarify the historical arguments for and against theatre.

The Roots of Christian Prejudice

The roots of the Renaissance Christian and Puritan objections against the theatre lie in the theatrical practices of the Roman Empire (27 B.C. to c.576 A.D.) against Christian believers. During this time, Christianity grew from a strong but small and illegal group to a strong and

unified people possessing a religious doctrine. The beliefs of the Roman people clashed with the beliefs of the Christians. Because of Roman intolerance, Christians were persecuted both by the government and by society.

Yet Christian believers fired Roman intolerance by opposing Roman societal and governmental practices. Christians considered the Roman society to be a pagan society and developed modes of behavior to demonstrate an alternate belief system. They refused to take part in emperor-worship, which society and the government considered to be the duty of all citizens, for Christians' first loyalty was to God and Christ. Neither would Christians hold public office or serve on military duty for both demanded participation in what they considered to be idolatrous ceremonies. These specific behaviors demonstrated Christian denial of Roman gods, of the emperor, and of society, and created a moral and doctrinal philosophy defined by behavior that lasted for centuries.

The more Christian believers grew in opposition to the gods and societal beliefs and behavior, the more they threatened government and society. Romans believed Christians to be consistent and stubborn law-breakers, and, indeed, to the Roman mind they were. Furthermore, the efficient organization of the church and the unity of the Christian people posed a threat to Roman society. At the beginning of the third century, many upper-class citizens became Christians, thereby posing a greater menace to the empire. Eventually, Christianity became a separate and opposing government within the empire.¹

No autocratic ruler could ignore such a threat. In the year 249, Emperor Decius moved to crush Christianity in all parts of the empire.² He created a law that forced all citizens to take part in the ceremonies of official Roman religious. Those who refused were liable to be put to death.

The Roman government persecuted Christian believers to the point of genocide in order to reestablish political authority and social stability. One of the more efficient tools for societal

¹ Henry Osborn Taylor, *Ancient Ideals: A Study of Intellectual and Spiritual Growth From Early Times to the Establishment of Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913) 374.

and governmental persecution was the Roman theatre. The theatre almost always was associated with religious festivals of pagan gods. The *ludi Romani* honored the god Jupiter, the *ludi Apollinares* honored Apollo, and the *ludi Megalenses* Cybele, the Mother Goddess. In an attempt to break their behavioral doctrine, the government required Christians to attend, even though they abhorred honoring pagan gods.

Mime flourished during this time, and the licentiousness of the mimes offended the moral sense of Christians. With the mime, Roman society attacked Christian morality by focusing on behaviors repugnant to Christian believers. For instance, the *ludi Florales* honored the goddess Flora who was a prostitute. During the festival, actors undressed onstage, goats copulated in the circus, and audience members were in a constant state of inebriation. Entertainers prided themselves for their lewdness and violence, and pointedly attacked Christian beliefs. Mimes often ridiculed Christian sacraments such as baptism and communion.

While the early mimes did not physically endanger Christians, they helped to deeply affect society. Audience members were affected by the violence of the mimes' portrayal of Christian behavior and beliefs. Consequently, mimes helped promote the attitude within society that Christians were non-human and no better than criminals. The violent massacre of the Christian ideology as entertainment soon changed to the violent massacre of the Christian people as entertainment. Soon, the government and society used Christians rather than actors to supply theatrical entertainment. The theatre is a form of entertainment, and the Roman idea of entertainment became partly to watch Christians die in the arena. At times, Romans were creative. The Emperor Nero once dipped Christians in tar and then lit them to serve as torches to light an evening chariot race.

However, Christians were not the only living beings destined to be slaughtered for entertainment. Individuals fought individuals and thousands battled thousands. Criminals—Christian or otherwise—were forced to act a character in a mime or drama before death. A man named Laureolus acted in a popular Atellan farce that ended with his crucifixion and tearing apart by animals. Other people were costumed as various characters and then

² Taylor 364.

publicly castrated. Animals consumed people, and men hunted animals. In 80 A.D., the Emperor Titus ordered five thousand animals hunted in a single day. At times, men drove animals with whips and hot irons to kill each other.

The effects of these violent acts, perpetrated against Christians as theatrical entertainment, on audience members dominated the Roman scene. Romans were not concerned with art; the masses loved mediocrity and spectacle. Often during entertainment, the audience responded with displays of enthusiasm. Lucian of Samosata describes a man watching pantomime sitting "in the midst of a parcel of hussies and a frantic audience . . . clapping . . . and shouting very unbecoming words of praise to a noxious fellow who doubles himself up for no useful purpose."³ Some audience members responded to the slaughter in the arena by engaging in sexual intercourse.

To say that Christianity and the theatre became disparate is an understatement. Influential church members moved to deny the theatre as part of their society. For instance, a North African theologian named Tertullian (c. 155-c. 220 A.D.) in his *De Spectaculis* denounced the theatre and strongly stated that drama is untrue. Christians must forswear the theatre when baptized. Furthermore, based on an awareness of the effects that theatre had on his society, Tertullian forbade Christians to attend theatre performances.⁴ Spurred by this influence, church leaders sought to dissuade Christians from attending the theatre, and in 398 A.D. the Council of Carthage voted to excommunicate anyone attending the theatre instead of church on holy days. Also, actors were denied the sacraments unless they denounced their profession.

The bases for Tertullian's writings, however, were not new. The Greek philosopher, Plato (429-347 B.C.), emphasized the effects that theatre has on the audience in his work *The Republic*. Plato's answer to theatre's effects offered a prescription to control those effects. Because the theatre has the power to affect an audience, it ought to have a moral and instructive function in society.⁵ Horace (65-8 B.C.) also contributed support for Tertullian's attack. In *Ars*

³ Lucian, trans. A.M. Harmon, Vol. 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) 217.

⁴ Tertullian, "On the Spectacles," *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974) 85-93.

⁵ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis M. Cornford (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1941) 337-339.

Poetica, Horace developed rules and precepts based upon the effects that theatre has on the audience that would result in theatre's contribution in society as a tool to instruct as well as delight.

Plato's emphasis served as a basis for attack against theatre throughout history, especially by the Christian community. Plato's and Horace's critical approach also influenced Renaissance defenders, for they answered Christian attacks. Thereby, Renaissance scholars necessarily developed critical structures that emphasized theatre's moral and instructional function in society.

Nevertheless, Tertullian's writings promoted the prejudice against the theatre within the Christian community. Attitudes by influential church members helped forge theatre theories and practices for several hundreds of years. Furthermore, for several hundreds of years, these same attitudes helped keep influential church members uninformed about the theatre. Consequently, the very people who attacked the theatre and who had significant input into theatre theory and practice were people who seldom knew what they were attacking and influencing, for they seldom practiced, read, or attended the theatre.

The persecution of Christians by the Roman government diminished under the rule of Constantine who issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. This edict supported the complete tolerance of all religions including Christianity. While Constantine's policy was inspired more by politics than religion, he opened the avenue for Christians to build their organization. Doing so, however, helped create certain problems. After the Edict of Milan, many people were free to join the religion. However, some of those who joined did so out of ulterior motives and consequently brought within the society non-Christian elements. Others joined because it was the popular thing to do. Consequently, they often did not change their life-style or their way of thinking that also yielded non-Christian elements. Other problems were the relationship between church and state and the growth of dogma.⁶

⁶ Wallace K. Ferguson and Geoffrey Bruun, *A Survey of European Civilization*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969) 88-89.

The founder of Latin theology and the most powerful mind during the adolescent development of the church was St. Augustine (354-430). During his early adulthood, he was educated in philosophy and classical literature. In his middle age, he fell under the influence of Bishop Ambrose and converted to Christianity. Then in 395, he was appointed Bishop of Hippo in Africa and spent the rest of his life in pastoral work and in writing. His writings pertaining to the theatre, however, had great influence during the Medieval Age. A discussion of Augustine's writings, therefore, belongs to that period.

The Justification of Prejudice

St. Augustine's writings significantly influenced medieval thought. His theories, couched in faith and logic and founded on the duality of God and Satan, justified the prejudice against theatre and literature. The foundation for his writings followed the early Roman Christian moral and doctrinal philosophy defined by behavior and Tertullian's emphasis on effect with a strong conviction that human will is from birth inclined to evil.⁷ In essence, St. Augustine thought in terms of cause and effect evidenced by behavior. A person's attitudes and experiences determine life's paths that can be seen (and known) by how a person behaves and for the sake of eternal salvation, unrighteous behavior must be abolished. As Will Durant points out, St. Augustine believed that "there must be a clean heart to let in the rays of divinity that surrounds us."⁸ Consequently, the prejudice against the theatre made sense to the medieval mind because theatre led to unrighteous attitudes and behavior. Destroy or ban theatre, and one would then destroy or inhibit a significant cause for an individual's damnation and for society's problems.

During the Medieval Age, the church controlled both the government and society. To the medieval mind, the supreme question in all matters of life was the question of conduct.⁹ Life was hard, so much so that people necessarily needed to focus on a better life after death.

⁷ Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. IV: The Age of Faith: A History of Medieval Civilization – Christian, Islamic, and Judaic – From Constantine to Dante: A.D. 325 – 1300* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950) 69.

⁸ Durant 70.

⁹ Joel E. Spingarn, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908) 6.

They considered life on earth as a gateway to the next life. A better life after death, however, was determined both by how a person acted and his experiences, which in turn was conducive to what thoughts a person harbored. In short, to the medieval mind, how a person behaved determined who a person was. Because the church stood as judge of a person's behavior, and because behavior evidenced a person's motives and attitudes, the church also judged a person's thoughts and determined whether a person goes to heaven or hell. Eventually, this led to church officials determining whether or not a person should be executed for the good of society, based on their own judgment of that person's behavior.

Consequently, church officials prescribed certain standards of experience, thoughts, and attitudes in order to help people behave in such a way that they would attain a better life after death as well as be a righteous contribution to society. These standards can be categorized as morality, reality, and utility or usefulness. For instance, a person must seek only a true experience of reality. Any embellishing or exaggerating was considered to be wrong. That experience must also be practical or useful. A person must also behave morally. That is, a person must act under the strictures of Christian doctrine with the hope of maintaining righteous thought and the reward after death.

Because church officials promoted thinking based on the duality of God and Satan, if people followed these standards they would be rewarded in heaven. If not, they would be damned to hell. Behavioral evidence was clear and final. Thinking was more focused on a dogmatic, static view than process, development, and personal betterment. That is, those in authority judged a person as complete in the moment instead of regarding the moment as a potential transition and part of a person's process of becoming.

The theatre did not fare well under this view of a person's relationship with life. The objections against the theatre can be seen as three interrelating criteria that parallels Medieval standards of living: the criterion of morality, the criterion of reality, and the criterion of utility. These criteria affected the theory and practice of theatre. While the medieval age was not a time of scholarship in theatre, grievances and particular views about theatre developed during this age that Renaissance critics had to answer in order to promote theatre in their time.

According to the criterion of morality, literary works were not conducive to righteous action or behavior. Action on stage does not portray a moral action leading to righteousness. Saintsbury asserts that St. Augustine's writings showed the beginning of Puritan attitudes against the theatre, for literature, heathen religion, and the Seven Deadly Sins were inextricably connected.¹⁰ The subjects of drama were either men or devils masquerading as gods, or men committing shameful acts. Furthermore, since few dramas were entirely free from obscenity and blasphemy, such blemishes were inseparable from dramatic art. In short, the theatre was immoral.

According to the criterion of reality, drama was untrue. Drama was fiction and therefore false, for it embellished and portrayed a life that was different than a reality of the times. Being false, the theatre manipulated people to believe in a lie, which was the work of Satan. Furthermore, because drama was false, it led to spiritual agitation. People experienced an emotional upheaval that affected their spiritual state. Emotional upheaval was immoral because God commanded people to deal calmly, gently and quietly with the Holy Spirit. To Thomas Aquinas, emotions were quieted in real beauty.¹¹ Therefore, the theatre did not portray real beauty, but an illusion.

According to the criterion of utility, drama had no practical use. St. Augustine's writings implied that not only was drama false and its morals detestable, but drama was frivolous and puerile. Drama was not only unworthy of a Christian, but even of a reasonable human being.¹² Even when the subject of drama was unobjectionable, it was idle fiction and possessed no truth or usefulness. There were more profitable occupations in which the righteous person should be engaged.

As is well known, the Christian community also affected theatre practice during the Medieval Age. The theatre did not thrive during the early medieval age. Ironically, however,

¹⁰ George Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism. Vol. I: Classical and Medieval Criticism* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1900) 381.

¹¹ Spingarn 6.

¹² Saintsbury 381. Also see St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Book 3, Chapter 2.

the church reintroduced the theatre into society. Church officials had problems promoting beliefs in society, for most common people could not read in order to study the scriptures. Neither could people speak or understand Latin, yet Mass was conducted in Latin. The church came to realize that people did not know very much about doctrine. Instead, people treated religion as a kind of superstition.

The problem was how to educate people as part of the Mass experience, yet maintain the traditional way of conducting Mass. The answer to the problem was to show people either through a kind of dialogue, moving around the sanctuary from mansion to mansion, or acting it out. An important beginning of liturgical drama was the *Quem Quaeritis* trope given at Easter time. From this beginning, people added mimetic action, properties and costumes, and more complex plots.

Gradually, liturgical drama transformed. Religious plays moved from the interior of the church to the church steps outdoors or adjacent to the church. The stage directions of *The Mystery of Adam* (c. 1150) imply that the drama was performed outside the church. Liturgical drama became more and more elaborate. Eventually, secular plays began to appear, much to the dismay of Christian leaders. Folk plays such as *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham* eliminated moral preaching and paved the way for great drama.

Transition to Defense

The reintroduction of theatre in society posed significant complications, for church officials continued to promote prejudice against theatre. The question was how to control the effects of theatre in a changing society, to use theatre as a tool to promote standards of morality, reality, and utility, and to portray a Christian doctrine based on behavior as evidence of righteous thought. The fourteenth century as least in part offered an answer to church concerns as well as satisfying society's growing demand for theatrical entertainment.

To begin to answer medieval objections against drama, theorists and poets such as Petrarch (1304-1374), Boccaccio (1313-1375), and Dante (1265-1321) developed allegory as the method to interpret drama. They based their method on the writings of Stoic philosophers who introduced allegory as a method of interpretation. Characters came to symbolize or represent a concept of an ideal. For instance, instead of merely being brute conquerors of monsters and giants, characters such as Hercules and Ulysses were regarded as symbols combating the vices and passions of mankind. In time, such characters became types of pagan saints.¹³

After a while, allegory infiltrated the interpretation of scripture. Abraham, Adam, Eve, and Moses became types of various virtues, while biblical events and stories became symbolic of the various moral struggles within a person's soul. Consequently, morality plays such as *Mankind* (c. 1470) and *Everyman* (c. 1500) as well as miracle plays within the cycles such as *Noah's Fludde* and *The Second Shepherds Play* dominated the theatre scene.

Under the criterion of reality, drama became dependent on its allegorical foundations. The moral teachings of drama was sought in the hidden meanings discoverable beneath the literal expression. Even the pagan classical drama was accepted as long as the references to Greed and Roman gods and rituals were regarded only as symbolic truths. According to Boccaccio, Dante, and Petrarch, the playwright's function is to hide and obscure the actual truth behind a veil of fiction.

While regarding allegory as the "warp and wood" of drama, Petrarch and Boccaccio further modified the medieval point of view by arguing that theology is a form of poetry. That is, theology is the poetry of God.¹⁴ However, while perhaps justifying drama from the standpoint of ethics and divinity, allegory allowed drama no place as an independent art. Drama merely became a popularized form of theology.

¹³ Spingarn 7.

¹⁴ Spingarn 8.

The Defense Against Prejudice

The most influential critical system to answer medieval objections against the theatre developed during the Italian Renaissance. Critical response during the sixteenth century was not so much a direct revolt against the Medieval Age, but a discourse against the more severe partisans of Catholicism who disliked men of letters as Reformers, and literature as the instrument of Reformation.

Men of letters, Humanists, and students tried to change their society. To do so, they had to combat the church, or those people who followed a more traditional approach to life. Protestantism developed during this time, and the Reformers allied with these people. Yet men like John Calvin established Puritanism based on well-established principles that behavior evidenced motives and thought, and that ordained ministers were supreme arbiters of behavior. Calvin's followers continued the prejudice against art, literature, and drama. As a result, critical response was also a discourse against the Puritan variety of Protestantism. Therefore, men of letters not only had to attack what they considered to be unworthy, obsolete, medieval foes of dramas, but they also had to defend drama against their own political and ecclesiastical allies.

Circumstances and events of the day channeled criticism in the extreme. Men of letters contested nearly eleven hundred years of established objections with a faint allegorical light near the end. They necessarily had to meet objections on the same level to satisfy those objections. They set themselves to prove that drama and literature were not corrupting influences, but strongholds of religious and philosophical truths. The function of the Renaissance criticism was to reestablish the aesthetic foundations of literature, to reaffirm the significance of classic culture, and to restore once and for all the element of beauty to its rightful place in life and art.¹⁵

Although the Humanist scholars grounded their defense on the writings of Horace, they found rational justification of drama and an answer to every medieval objection against literary works in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Under the criterion of reality, critics such as Cinthio (1504-1573) and

¹⁵ Spingarn 4.

Scaliger (1484-1558) saw in Aristotle's writings the contention that drama revealed a higher reality than mere commonplace fact. Scholars argued that drama did not deal with particulars, but universals. That is, drama had little regard for the actuality of the specific event, but aimed at the reality of an eternal probability.¹⁶ The reality was not mere actuality, but the appearance of reality through drama's imitation of human action. The Renaissance critics were forced to lay stress on the elements of probability and verisimilitude, i.e., a close simulation of the seeming realities of life. But the imitation of life was for them an imitation of life as it ought to be. Because drama dealt with universals, it aimed to portray not what has been, but what might have been or ought to be. The imitation was ideal.

Under the criterion of morality, Renaissance critics saw drama as essentially moral while not having a distinctly moral aim. Drama portrayed an ideal representation of life. And drama must necessarily present an idealized version of human life in its moral aspects. Furthermore, drama did not starve emotions, but excited them in order to regulate them. In other words, by admitting that theatre affected audience members, scholars were able to turn the issue in favor of theatre by giving affectation a moral function. Theatre functioned to purify and ennoble emotions.¹⁷

While the criterion of reality related to the criterion of morality through ideal imitation, the criterion of morality related to the criterion of utility through function. Under the criterion of utility, drama was more serious and philosophic than history because it universalized fact and imitated life in its noblest aspects.¹⁸ The function of drama was to teach the moral ideal delightfully by using example as its instrument. To arrive at this end, the playwright had to incite in the spectator an admiration of the example or the ethical aim of drama would not be accomplished. More than a mere delightful expression of truth, drama attempted to stimulate a desire in the spectator's mind to be like the heroes portrayed.

The problem with the criteria of reality, morality, and utility was that they were at least unfair and at most inappropriate criteria for dramatic art. To judge drama in terms of its moral

¹⁶ Spingarn 18.

¹⁷ Spingarn 19.

content, its closeness with a reality, and its usefulness was to judge drama in non-aesthetic terms. From the Greek philosophers through the Renaissance, drama was seen as a form of scholastic philosophy.¹⁹ Drama was seen neither as an art nor a science, but as an instrument or faculty. Drama was an art only in that it had been reduced to rules and precepts. It was seen as a form of logic.²⁰

Prejudice and Defense Revisited

During the Italian Renaissance, the prejudice against the theatre found its way into Puritan Protestantism through John Calvin, who perpetuated the medieval belief that the supreme question in a person's relationship with life was the question of conduct. The English Renaissance theatre was caught between Queen Elizabeth's use of theatre at times to make a religious and political statement and the Puritans who were backed by a theological philosophy grounded on behavior. However, the Puritan's prejudice against theatre seems to be more fanatical and less based on objectivity than the objections of medieval scholars. The Puritans seemed to be engaged in a more precise definition of prejudice: to form an adverse opinion of judgment without knowledge of the facts and to hold an irrational suspicion or hatred of a particular group.

People following Puritan beliefs blamed theatre practices and practitioners for the misfortunes of life and for the more undesirable aspects of society. In order to promote blame, Puritans infused theatre practices with prejudices that did not necessarily follow the realities of those practices. In other words, what the Puritans said the theatre did, and what the theatre actually did were probably two different things. To the Puritans, crimes of the theatre included emptying the churches, perpetuating pagan custom, distorting truth, showing forth profane, seditious, and bawdy stories, teaching knavery and lechery, causing God to visit the plague on London, leading youth into idleness and extravagance, affording meeting places for harlots and customers, aiding the Pope, and corrupting maidens and chaste wives.

¹⁸ Spingarn 19.

¹⁹ Spingarn 24.

The basic assumption for these crimes stems from Tertullian's and St. Augustine's concern for causal relationships and the effects theatre has on its audience. If a person attended the theatre, then that person would be influenced by the production and act out that influence in society. In *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* (1577), John Northbrooke writes,

In their plays you shall learn all things that appertain to craft, mischief, deceits and filthiness, etc. If you will learn how to be false and deceive your husbands, or husbands their wives, how to play the harlot, to obtain one's love, how to ravish, how to beguile, how to betray, to flatter, lie, swear, forswear, how to allure to whoredom, how to murder, how to poison, how to disobey and rebel against princes, to consume treasures prodigally, to move to lusts, to ransack and spoil cities and towns, to be idle, to blaspheme, to sing filthy songs of love, to speak filthily, to be proud, how to mock, scoff and deride any nation . . . shall you not learn, then, at such interludes how to practice them?²¹

While Northbrooke's view is based on plot and character of the Elizabethan drama, that view displays little understanding of theatre itself. The Puritans saw theatre as a form of direct negative influence on people's behavior and, consequently on the quality of moral life in society.

The Puritan notion of quality of moral life in the Elizabethan age related to salvation. If a person chose to ignore sacred teachings, he was succumbing to temptation by Satan, his soul would be lost, and he would be eternally damned to hell. If enough people were to succumb, then an entire nation would fall, barbarian people would conquer the land, and the gospel would be lost. Herein lies the heart of Puritan reasoning for the power struggle: a genuine fear of eternal damnation linked to the loss of a quality of life in society based on salvation.

Puritan thought followed the early Christian world-view of the duality of God and Satan. Because the theatre influenced a mass of people, because Elizabeth I at times used the theatre as

²⁰ Spingarn 25.

²¹ John Northbrooke, "A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes," in Dukore 160-161.

a political weapon, and because theatre demonstrated ungodly thoughts and actions, the Puritans regarded the theatre as source and service to Satan. Puritan exaggeration was based on a high level of anxiety and fear. Northbrooke describes theatres as houses of Satan and asserts that religious themes in drama are sacrilegious. He writes:

Satan hath not a more speedy way, and fitter school to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into the snare of concupiscence and filthy luste of wicked whoredom, than those places and plays and theatre are. . . . It hath stricken such a blind zeal into the hearts of the people, that they shame not to say, and affirm openly, that plays are as good as sermons, and that they learn as much or more at a play, than they do at God's work preached. . . . Many can tarry at a vain play two or three hours, whereas they will not abide scarce one hour at a sermon.²²

To Stephen Gosson (1554-1623) in *Schoole of Abuse*, the entire classic drama was infected by the blasphemy and immorality of paganism and almost all of the English stage was infected by the abuses of the theatre. Yet Gosson insisted that his intention was not to banish or condemn drama, but to chastise its abuses. Drama contained the germ of its own disintegration and he asserted that disintegration had already taken place in his own time. The delights and ornaments of drama intended to make moral doctrine more pleasing were in reality mere alluring disguises for obscenity and blasphemy.²³

Besides founding their argument on causal relationships and effects, the Puritans also used authority as a foundation for argument. Consequently, defenders of theatre also used authority to counter Puritan argument. Three sources of authority were scripture, classic scholars, and, to the Puritans, a vague but powerful innate knowledge of God's law.

To the Puritans, the innate knowledge of God's law meant that whoever listened to and followed God's law had righteous authority to judge thought, behavior, and influencing aspects

²² John Northbrooke, 160-161.

²³ Stephen Gosson, "School of Abuse," in Dukore 177-183.

of society. This way, the Puritans claimed to be the elect of God, and to exercise authority over others not of like mind. In *Elizabeth I and the Puritans*, William Haller offers a history of Puritan political and social involvement. The Puritans promoted a change of authority over the church from Pope to the Crown. However, because the Crown, as authority over the church, did not follow the Puritan idea of God's law, the Puritans elected themselves to be authority over the church. Haller writes:

Authority over the church was understood to mean authority to declare what was required of rulers and subjects alike by the universal law which God had written in the breasts of all men and which no man could disobey save at the peril of his soul. It meant authority to say what doctrines should be taught, how worship and discipline should be carried on, and who should control those functions and services.²⁴

Since neither the church headed by the Pope nor the Crown followed God's law, the Puritans necessarily needed to fill the moral void. Consequently, when an influential Puritan said that the theatres were houses of Satan, others in society supported his authority to make that statement. This way, a Puritan gained prestige and power.

In *The Art of English Poesy*, George Puttenham (c. 1529-1590) tried to tie the innate knowledge of God's law to a playwright's God-like gift in order to offer a defense. However, his defense was extremist; he related playwrights to creators and tried to endow them with the same kind of authority and prestige reserved for the elite Puritans. To Puttenham, a playwright or poet was a creator like God who formed a world out of nothing. Playwrights and poets were the first priests, prophets, legislators, philosophers, scientists, orators, historians, and musicians of the world. From the beginning, they had been held in the highest esteem by great men, and the nobility, antiquity, and universality of their art proved its preeminence and worth. With such a history and such a nature, it was sacrilege to debase drama or to use it on any unworthy subject or for ignoble purposes.²⁵

²⁴ William Haller, *Elizabeth I and the Puritans* (The Folger Shakespeare Library: Folger Books, 1964) 2.

²⁵ George Puntnam, "The Art of English Posey," in Dukore 166-168.

The authority of scripture offered Puritans irrefutable evidence against theatre. Northbrooke asserts that St. Ambrose ordered theatre to be utterly abolished, for no theatre is mentioned in scripture.²⁶ The argument was that because scripture did not reference theatre, then theatre had no place in God's kingdom. Defenders could not touch that source of authority.

Defenders needed to find a way to overcome the obstacles of scripture as authority, and the self-proclaimed authority of the Puritans. They turned to the authority of classic scholars as their basis for defense. In *A Defense of Poetry, Music, and Stage Plays*, Thomas Lodge (c. 1558-1625) replied to Gosson's attack by almost entirely appealing to the authority of classical scholars. He strung together classical names and dug up old Boccaccioan principles of allegorical and moral interpretation to point out drama's efficacy as a civilizing factor in primitive times and as a moral agency ever since. To Lodge, drama was a heavenly gift and should be condemned only when abused.²⁷ In this respect he agreed with Gosson.

In Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, we find a more supportive and substantial defense. Sidney (1554-1586) introduced the criticism of the Italian Renaissance to England nearly twenty-five years after Minturno and Scaliger published. Consequently, his defense follows Italian criticism and justifies theatre as true, moral, and useful.²⁸ Through Sidney, the Renaissance argument following the criteria of reality, morality, and utility offered a strong and substantial defense. The Puritans ignored it.

Lingering Prejudice Today

The puritanical philosophy of life and objections to the theatre linger within today's Christian arena. Within most if not every denomination, there are some people who believe

²⁶ Northbrooke, in Dukore 161.

²⁷ Thomas Lodge, "A Defense of Poetry, Music, and Stage Plays," in Dukore 166-168.

²⁸ Sir Philip Sidney, "Defense of Poesy," in Dukore 172-173.

conduct to be the supreme arbitrator in life. That is, they believe that a person is according to how he or she behaves. They strive to follow dictums of behavior, for themselves and for others, in order to become a righteous people. Being righteous, then, they can attain a good life after death as well as respond to the world in meaningful ways.

Under this philosophy, objections thrive against theatre. The content of drama portrays a false world; it is not real. Morally, the theatre is objectionable in both content and in practice. It serves to arouse emotions that in turn hurt the spiritual life of the spectator. Furthermore, the theatre has no use. It does not function to help people behave morally, thereby does not help them become a righteous people.

Yet Christianity as a whole has shifted away from the Puritan ideal. Instead of what a person does defining who he or she is, who a person is determines what she or he does. Focus has shifted, then, from an outward appearance to an inward state of being and a process of becoming. Behavior comes from the person. Today's Christian doctrine attempts to reveal guidelines for each individual to inwardly grow and develop as a human being by revealing concepts and philosophies that help people understand the world and their relationship to it. Therefore, the goal is not to dictate behavior, but to help develop the individual as a unique human being having attributes and worth.

Under the same goal, today's Christian doctrine does not aim to dictate the content and structure of dramatic art, but allows theatre the freedom to exist within the confines of its own art form. The mere appearance of theatre is no longer a valid issue. Morality, utility, and reality are not the criteria for theatre under today's ecclesiastical frame. The theatre is no longer shackled with rules and precepts in order to fit under the standards of a particular doctrine. Just as today's theatre cannot be the same as the Roman theatre, the theatre within today's Christian arena cannot be the same as the theatre within the medieval Christian arena. And yet, the dilemma remains.