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The Theater's Many Enemies

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The history of “anti-theatrical discourse” is inextricable from the history of theater, *tout court*. The following essays examine complaints made against various aspects of European theater—acting, dramatic literature, authors, institutions, spectating, and more—during early modernity, a period generously defined here as running from the sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth. As an ensemble of articles, this special double-issue of *RECTR* (volumes 29.1 and 29.2) achieves an admirable amount of geographical and thematic coverage. The topic more than justifies a close reading by new students and seasoned scholars of theater history, of European literature, and of cultural studies.

“Anti-theatrical discourse” is a complex, mutable, and sometimes paradoxical term, deployed by a host of participants in early modern culture, including philosophers, ecclesiastics, government officials, as well as theater critics, actors, and dramatic authors. In this introduction, my goal is to describe several intellectual strands of anti-theatrical discourse in order to situate the ten essays that follow.

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Building on landmark studies of the early twentieth century,¹ a host of scholars over the past few decades have sought to tease out the arguments against the theater in France, England, Spain, Germany, Italy, and beyond.² With just a cursory glance at the scholarly landscape of early modern European anti-theatrical discourse,³ several contextual hot points emerge. One example is sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, where writers such as Stephen Gosson, William Prynne, and other puritans lambasted what they viewed as the evil effects of the stage.⁴ Another ripe atmosphere for criticism began in mid seventeenth-century France, where ecclesiastics wrote anti-theatrical sermons and treatises during the heyday of French classical theater, and most notably, against the comedies and tragedies of Pierre de Corneille, Jean Racine, Molière, and others.⁵

Other sources of anti-theatrical discourse include Jesuits in Spain and in Italy who were hesitant to adopt the pro-dramatic stance that is traditionally associated with members of the Society of Jesus.⁶ Calvinists and Lutherans were also vocal critics of theater and of artistic representation in German- and Dutch-speaking lands.⁷ It is important to note that religion

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1. See, for example, Elbert N.S. Thompson, Louis Bourquin, and Margaret M. Moffat.
 2. For more information on the context in continental Europe, see Marc Fumaroli, Cecilia Gallotti, Barbara Simerka, Simone de Reyff, and Laurent Thirouin (the list is not exhaustive); on the British context, see, among others, Margot Heinemann, Randy Robertson, Susan Wiseman, and Laura Levine.
 3. The *Haine du theater* project at the Université Paris-Sorbonne (François Lecerle and Clotilde Thouret) is the most comprehensive resource of primary texts of anti-theatrical discourse in early modern Europe. Lecerle and Thouret are in the process of transcribing, translating, and publishing hundreds of documents related to stage debates through the project's online interface. For more information, see <http://obvil.paris-sorbonne.fr/projets/la-haine-du-theatre>.
 4. The most famous examples of puritan anti-theatrical writing are Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (1579), William Prynne's *Histriomatrix* (1633), and the various signed and anonymous refutations of Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1612). For more information on the puritan context, see Heinemann.
 5. For an analysis of Jansenism and theater, see de Reyff or Henry Philips; for a description of how the debates continued into the eighteenth century in France, see John McManners.
 6. Jesuits were often proponents of dramatic literature and performance in early modern Europe, and especially, of using theater for pedagogical reasons in Jesuit schools. For more information on Jesuits and theater in the Spanish context, see Karine Herzig; for the Italian context, see Louise George Clubb, Salvatore Di Maria, and Michael A. Zampelli.
 7. For Erasmus' critique of the stage, see Peter Burke; for more information on Protestant critiques of theater in the German states, see Herman Braet, 269-313; also see Erika Fischer-Lichte, 44-58.

is not the source of all anti-theatrical criticism. The secular, socio-political critique of theater garnered increasing importance during the Enlightenment⁸ and in revolutionary France.⁹

Which elements of theater—the “kaleidoscopic adventure” that involves people, objects, and movement across time (Wilson 2)—did its early modern enemies find so appalling? With such diverse geographical and cultural contexts, it is important to note that each critique is specific and often intertwined with local religious, political, and economic concerns. Nevertheless, as a collection, these essays reveal a shared apathy toward several aspects of theater across Europe during early modernity.

Theatrical performance—with its live presentation of acting bodies in front of spectating bodies—is one of the most popular targets for anti-theatrical writers. Essential to this collection are the many early modern writers who lamented the dangers of “enchancing” performances from London to Paris to Madrid. Enemies of theatrical performance, usually of religious persuasion,¹⁰ critique the phenomenological and experiential aspects of live performances, arguing that the arrival of dangerous passions into the souls of spectators—passions such as love, hate, and envy—makes theater a perilous event. Several authors in this double-issue discuss how anti-theatrical writers conceptualized the physical, moral, and psychological effects of spectating or acting. From Prynne’s *Histriomatrix* (1633) to Pierre Nicole’s *Traité de la Comédie* (1667) to Johann Melchior Goeze’s *Theologische Untersuchung der Sittlichkeit der heutigendeutschen Schaubühne überhaupt* (*Theological Inquiry on the Morality of the present German Stage* [1770]), *theaterphobes* throughout Europe harped on the dangerous emotions of the “theatrical event.”

Another cross-contextual theme emerges in anti-theatrical complaints about the economics of theater, including the state sponsorship of playhouses and troupes. From Madrid to Lyon to London, detractors viewed theater as an expensive *divertissement* that distracted serious attention and funds from military, religious, and political endeavors. From Paris to Geneva to Venice, many opponents condemn state-sponsored theater as

8. The most famous example of pre-revolutionary anti-theatricality in France is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758). For more information on Rousseau’s criticism of theater, see, for example, Ourida Mostefai, Marshall, Fayçal Falaky, Michel Launay, and Logan J. Connors.

9. For an analysis of the Revolution’s “anti-theatricality,” see Paul Friedland; for an interesting rebuttal to Friedland’s thesis, see Cecilia Feilla.

10. An important exception is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous *Lettre à D’Alembert*, in which the *philosophe* laments the “enchancing” powers of performance, which diverts citizens away from their *civic* duties in virtuous Genevan society.

costly, and condemn theatergoing as a socially and financially detrimental practice in “virtuous societies.”

Other critics argue that representation and imitation—key components of any *fictional* art—are sources of social decay. Their criticism of theater applies to performance, but more broadly, to dramatic literature and all of *belles lettres*. Following a line of anti-theatricality directly from Plato, these enemies of theater folded specific critiques of acting, spectating, and performance into a more general condemnation of *mimesis*. Theater is bad for these critics, but not necessarily any more evil than novels, profane poetry, painting, or other visual arts.

Biblically grounded arguments against spectacles and fiction—from both Protestant and Catholic traditions—are essential to theatrical debates at multiple times and in various places across Europe during early modernity. Several authors in this double-issue tease out theological arguments against the stage, deployed by ministers and priests from London to Vienna. Many religious critics of theater establish patristic grounds for condemning theater by harking back to the writings of Tertullian (*De spectaculis*), Cyprian (*De spectaculis*), and John Chrysostom (*Instructions to Catechumens*); while other religious writers find all the ammunition necessary in Augustine’s *Confessions*.

Not all criticism, however, came from “outside enemies,” such as priests, government officials, and moralists. Also important to the essays that follow is the *dramatic criticism* of “theatricality”—an ambiguous and highly contextualized term,¹¹ which often conveys, as far as the early modern period is concerned, any divulgence of the tacit agreement between spectators and actors that they are part of the same fictive game. From specific critiques of actors to general criticism of certain dramatic genres, *literary* anti-theatricality emerges as a powerful argument in reformist discourses during the second-half of the eighteenth century, and particularly, in England, France, and Germany.¹²

Finally, another interesting conceptual strand of anti-theatrical discourse emerges, quite surprisingly, in the plays themselves, where *theaterphobes* are mocked by comic dramatists in an attempt to show their enemies’ inaccuracy or folly. Several of the following essays engage with the many satirical works, published and performed throughout Europe,

11. See Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait for a detailed discussion on how “theatricality” is a historically specific term.

12. This refers to the great “Enlightenment projects,” such as Diderot’s *drame bourgeois* or Lessing’s *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. See *intra.*, essays by Laurence Marie and Annelie Curulla; in *RECTR* 29.2, see essays by Anne Widmayer, Gillian Skinner, and James Harrison-Smith.

that cast anti-theatrical clerics and officials as hypocrites, dour moralists, and buffoons.

In early modern Europe, the simultaneous deployment of several strains of anti-theatrical criticism was common, and when added up, the list of the theater's ills is massive. Critics complained that men in the theater ogle over scantily clad women in public; that spectators commit idolatry; and that they disrespect the Sabbath by attending Sunday performances. Others argued that government officials promote prostitution by supporting the theater; that actors and playwrights replace Christian mass with profane amusement; and that performed theater and dramatic literature deflect attention away from political duty.

Some argued that playwrights *feminize* virile men (actors and spectators alike) by casting men as women; others argued that plays teach incorrect historical accounts of political regimes or meddle with how the Church teaches early Christian events. Several critics worried that plays erode class boundaries, while others claimed that plays maintain class boundaries (which was equally dangerous, depending on the political climate). Critics argued that theater alienates the individual from his or her true self, or that theater teaches lust and envy, rather than patriotism, honor, and Christian love. A comprehensive list of problems associated with the theater is endless; theater, for some of its enemies, is fundamentally bad for the self, for society, and for all of humanity.

While several scholars have attempted to conceptualize anti-theatrical arguments as a binding, cross-cultural theme in the history of ideas,¹³ two factors prevent a watertight typology of *theaterphobia*. First, are the particular political, social, and institutional motivations undergirding *seemingly universal* religious and philosophical attacks against the stage; and second are the multitude of forms through which anti-theatrical arguments appear.

The authors in this special double-issue are sensitive to the environments in which anti-theatrical discourses operate. For example, the seventeenth-century debates over parliamentary power in England influenced a much different discussion about theater compared to Revolutionary France; Renaissance Venice had a different cultural climate and artistic scene compared to eighteenth-century Hamburg. These particular milieus for anti-theatrical discourse lie beneath any religious or philosophical critiques of theater—even when writers present their complaints against the stage as sincere, universal, or disinterested. In the wake of recent “close”

13. See Jonas Barish; for a very different type of cross-cultural anti-theatricality, see Martin Puchner.

cultural histories of specific theatrical contexts,¹⁴ the authors in both issues of this edition show the complex and variegated ways by which arguments against theater map onto particular debates over sovereignty, political representation, economics, and social order.

Anti-theatrical discourse was not only diverse in content but also in form. The media in which anti-theatrical arguments appear include pamphlets, sermons, public speeches, literary and philosophical treatises, prefaces to dramatic and non-dramatic works, letters, poems, newspapers, governmental decrees, memoirs, and even, quite often, in plays themselves. In the essays that follow, several authors have chosen to concentrate on specific anti-theatrical arguments in one genre, such as the treatise or drama, while others describe how anti-theatrical arguments move among media. By treating anti-theatrical discourses across genres, these authors confront changes to the social import or intensity of specific arguments, such as when the debate shifts from more “private” correspondences to more “public” performances, or from strictly religious contexts to a more *public sphere*.

This issue of *RECTR* is divided into two journal issues: issue one (29.1) includes articles about the contentious relationship between religion and theater in (mostly) France and England. The authors trace a host of ills; but in each case, they focus on the dangers of the stage through the lens of religion. As the contributors to this issue argue, however, the religious critique was not immune to social context. Europe’s holy firebrands were just as quick as their secular counterparts to incorporate economic, social, and political issues into their repertoire of arguments against the stage.

The second issue (29.2), different in scope both thematically and, at times, geographically, is more alert to the “literary” part of anti-theatrical discourse. Issue two includes a series of articles in which authors focus on intra-theatrical arguments against particular dramatic subgenres, playwrights, and actors. This issue is also more “dramatic” (as opposed to institutional, philosophical, or anthropological) in that the authors often dwell on dramatic scripts, literary criticism, and editorial practices to the play-text. While continental Europe plays a major role in issue one, barring a few important exceptions, English dramatic production takes center stage in issue two. Needless to say, there is overlap between the two issues,

14. This list of close cultural histories of theater is numerous. For the early modern British context, see, for example, M.F. Wilson, Ellen Mackay, and Kevin M. Carr. For more information about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, see Martine de Rougemont, Jeffrey S. Ravel, and Lauren R. Clay. For Italy, consult, among others, Robert Henke and Salvatore Di Maria. For Spain, see Melveena McKendrick; see William R. Blue.

which is why the editors and I have decided to present both as one coherent double-issue of *RECTR*.

Issue 29.1 begins and ends in France, with several excursions to England, Italy, and the German-speaking world. In the first essay, François Lecerclé underscores the political and economic motives behind the “early controversies” of the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. Contrary to many scholars, Lecerclé refuses to consider religious *theater-phobes à la lettre* by accepting their theological criticism as part of an immutable and universal discourse of faith and morality. Instead, he shows that many religious opinions of the theater were actually amenable to fluctuating social, economic, and political contexts. According to Lecerclé, polemics surrounding the morality of the stage “can be adjusted to deal with a variety of questions, with economic and political as well as religious stakes.” While many religious enemies of the stage, Catholic and Calvinist alike, claimed universality in the Word, they in fact altered their strategies and trajectories to respond to specific governmental policies of Henri IV or Louis XIII, as well as to the particular pro-dramatic arguments made by government officials (the Duc de Richelieu), critics (Jean Chapelain), and dramatic authors (Corneille; Molière).

In essay two, Clotilde Thouret draws from an impressive corpus of “defenses of theater” to demonstrate how dramatic writers mocked, responded to, and often ultimately defeated their anti-theatrical counterparts through diverse rhetorical and institutional tactics. Mainly focusing on English and French defenses of the seventeenth century, Thouret reveals the significance of a “vein of texts, which have been largely overlooked by critics,” but which provide numerous examples of rhetorical innovation. Of particular interest is the table provided by Thouret in which she details the trajectory of several theatrical debates—polemics that glide among national traditions and involve some of early modern Europe’s most famous cultural participants, including William Shakespeare, Jean-François Regnard, Bruscambille, Ben Jonson, and Molière.

In essay three, Theodore E.D. Braun follows many of the debates outlined by Lecerclé and Thouret into the eighteenth century, as the Catholic Church began to lose its powerful voice in debates over the theater in France.¹⁵ Braun highlights several of the most famous controversies, most notably Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s masterful evisceration of Francesco

15. The last years of Louis XIV’s reign (approx. 1690-1714) were marked by sobriety and pioussness. For example, the king expelled the actors of the Comédie-Italienne in 1697 after they supposedly ridiculed his second wife, Madame de Maintenon, in the comedy, *La Fausse prude*. For more information, see Micheline Boudet; also see Virginia Scott.

Caffaro's defense of theater in 1694.¹⁶ Braun shows that the battle over theater in France at the end of the seventeenth century hinged on rhetorical might and ecclesiastical authority, with the former gradually losing force after the death of Louis XIV in 1714. Braun then details a slow cultural change during which vehement anti-theatrical postures evolved into a "reformerist discourse," proposed in the early eighteenth century by France's "enlightened abbés": Jean Terrasson, Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre, and Jean-Baptiste Dubos; as well as by several theater professionals, such as Luigi Riccoboni and Antoine Yart. Perhaps most interestingly, Braun reintegrates the repertory into his analysis by investigating the "moral operas" of the often-overlooked writer and enemy of Voltaire, Le Franc de Pompignan (1709-84). Braun sees in *Le Franc* the resolution of several theatrical polemics initiated by early adversaries of the stage. *Le Franc* overturns unequivocal criticism of theater by detailing a type of intellectual and "useful" moral pleasure in his operas, ultimately presenting a legitimate *culture* of the stage in the same vein as other, more famous reformist projects of Enlightenment France, such as Denis Diderot's *drame bourgeois* and Nivelle de La Chaussée's *comédie larmoyante*.

The contentious relationship between theater performances and religion is also a theme in essay four: Laurence Marie's incisive examination of morality and acting in early modern France, Germany, England, and Italy. Covering an impressive amount of geography and chronology, Marie brings to light an "intellectual shift" during the eighteenth century, which saw "the harshest critiques" against actors no longer "come from the moralists [...] but from the very people who go to the theater." This "turning inwards" of anti-theatrical discourse—attacks against the stage from sworn enemies evolving into attacks from the theater's own participants—ends with a theoretical "turning outwards," as writers from London to Hamburg began to conceptualize behavioral codes for actors on stage as well as the "social actors" of everyday life. By acknowledging and altering the arguments of seventeenth-century enemies like Bossuet and Nicole, the dramatic theorists of Enlightenment Europe built on established doctrines to create new moral codes. These new codes, however, were fundamentally different during the Enlightenment, as aesthetic pleasure and dramatic excellence replaced Biblical precedent or religious condemnation in discussions on the theater.

In the last essay of issue 29.1, Annelle Curulla takes us into the French Revolution, where debate over the use of religious garb in the theater re-

16. For an anthology of Caffaro's defense of theater and Bossuet's responses, see Urban and Levesque.

flected larger issues of institutional anticlericalism, religious sentiment, and spectator behavior. Curulla examines the dramatic arm of a more general history of “secularization”—a social process that played out in the day-to-day world of theater censors, actors, playwrights, and spectators. Curulla shows how public and private stages echoed legislative acts related to religion, such as the 1790 Civil Constitution of the Clergy. In addition to analyzing “convent plays” in which debate between religion and politics plays a prominent role—works, such as *Vert-vert* (1790) and *Les Capucins, ou faisons la Paix* (1791)—Curulla goes a step further by integrating spectator behavior at performances of these plays into her close analysis. Curulla ultimately shows that, despite the intentions of Revolutionary or Catholic politicians, the relationship between theater and religion, like the relationship between theater and history, was ultimately a “dynamic site of interface” during the Revolution; theater, in short, was never a unified voice of propaganda or a simple mirror of public policy.¹⁷

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