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# From Anti-Theater to Anti-Theatricality

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## *From Anti-Theater to Anti-Theatricality*

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**R**ECTR issue 29.2 is part 2 of a special double-issue dedicated to anti-theatrical discourse in early modern Europe. My introduction to part 1 (RECTR 29.1) grounds European anti-theatrical discourses in precise theoretical, cultural, and historical concerns, which create specific cultural climates, such as seventeenth-century England or Revolutionary France. With the broader issues therein addressed, the goal of this introduction is to describe briefly the difference in scope between the two parts as well as introduce and situate each of the five essays that complete this double-issue of RECTR.

In contrast to those in part 1, the following essays concentrate less on the religious and social critiques of theater and more on anti-theatricality as a dramatic and critical construct used by playwrights, theater critics, editors, and other participants in the dramatic arts. These essays treat anti-theatrical discourse as an integral part of *theatrical* discourse, showing how anti-theatricality exists both *inside* (in the plays themselves) and *alongside* (in critical works) drama during early modernity. In short, the essays that follow indicate the gradual collapse of powerful, autonomous arguments against the stage into an interesting theme in dramatic criticism and production.

Issue 29.1 includes articles about the contentious relationship between religion and theater in (mostly) France and England. The authors trace a

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host of ills, but in each case, they focus on the dangers of the stage through the lens of religious condemnation. Issue 29.2 is different in scope both thematically and, at times, geographically; most of the essays concentrate on the eighteenth century, when firebrand religious zealots, from Protestant England to Catholic Spain, lost ground to reformers, playwrights, and pro-theater government officials. This *RECTR* issue presents a series of essays that discuss intra-theatrical arguments against particular dramatic sub-genres, playwrights, and actors rather than over-arching denunciations of performance, dramatic fiction, and the social or legal status of actors. This second part of the double-issue is more “dramatic” (as opposed to theological, philosophical, or anthropological) than the first issue: the authors herein deal with dramatic scripts, literary criticism, and editorial practices to the play-text. In sum, while 29.1 concentrates on “real,” physical, political, and institutional critiques against theater, the authors in 29.2 grant that the theater deserves to exist in the daily lives of Europeans. The authors focus instead on the legacy of anti-theatrical discourse in (mostly) theatrical contexts—on how anti-theatricality maintained and even sometimes gained currency during a period of both rising secularization and *theatromania*.

Frieda Koeninger’s opening essay serves as a transition from the religious anti-theatrical discourse of *RECTR* 29.1 to the reformist conception of the stage, which links many of the essays in this second issue. Koeninger traces the efforts of Don Santos Díez González, a civil censor and theater reformer in Madrid during the late eighteenth century. Vacillating between *theatrophobe* and theater reformer, González earned the respect of both innovators and neoclassical *ilustrados*. González’s evolving tastes and opinions about the theater parallel the gradual and contentious transition of Spain from a Catholic cultural establishment to a modern European state. According to Koeninger, officials like González, although conservative at times, recognized the civil benefits of a successful theater and ultimately helped defeat a host of *theatrophobic* discourses in Spain, ushering in a period of dramatic innovation and increased theater attendance during the early nineteenth century.

In essay 2, Maria Teodora Comsa demonstrates that anti-theatrical discourse operated as both a dramatic theme and a mode of anti-establishment criticism in France during the 1730s. Comsa describes the lively world of *society theater*—privately performed, privately financed theater that gained popularity during the eighteenth century. Comsa shows that society writers mocked anti-theatrical discourses on stage as a means both to assert the power of society theater and to critique the traditional institutions and dramatists under Louis XV, such as the Comédie-Française and Voltaire. Through a close reading of two plays—François-Augustin de Par-

adis de Moncrif's *Les Abdérites* and Alexis Piron's *La Métromanie*—Comsa illuminates a theatrical world where both current events, such as Voltaire's profuse literary output, and ancient themes, such as the platonic critique of representation, operated together in a hodgepodge of metatheater and staged criticism. Comsa ultimately proves that society theater contributed to a *défense et illustration* of the dramatic arts, which in turn led to the demise of many anti-theatrical viewpoints during the French Enlightenment.

The remaining essays in this issue concentrate on the legacy of anti-theatrical discourses in eighteenth-century England. In essay 3, James Harriman-Smith begins with the provocative, yet matter-of-fact premise that “anti-theatre needs theatre.” Harriman-Smith explains that anti-theatrical discourses operate differently on the “page and the stage”; printed dramatic literature garners a different set of critiques than audio-visual theater performances. Focusing specifically on eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare's plays, Harriman-Smith reads arguments against the stage in the subtle (and not so subtle) subtractions and additions by the editor's hand. With a close analysis of several iterations of the Bard's complete works and of their accompanying editorial prefaces, Harriman-Smith proves that editorial differences often indicated deeply held opinions over the merits of performed theater. Editors sought often to smooth over or outright change “performative” moments in plays in order to bolster eighteenth-century literary norms rather than the authentic grammatical constructions of Shakespeare's day.

In essay 4, Gillian Skinner takes us into the world of “petites pièces,” and specifically, to how these short, metatheatrical plays represented and refuted a variety of anti-theatrical arguments. Skinner examines two examples from Garrick's repertoire: *A Peep Behind the Curtain* (1767) and *Bon Ton; or, High Life above the Stairs* (1775). In both, anti-theatrical discourse operates as an explicit dramatic theme and, more subtly, as an unintended guide to interpreting the play, beyond the author's control. Skinner argues that even in the case of these plays—“plays that clearly attempt to counter anti-theatrical arguments”—“such attempts seem, paradoxically, to march unavoidably with a reinforcement of anti-theatrical sentiment.” In her astute analysis of the differences between “legitimate” and (what was viewed at the time as) “inferior drama,” Skinner ultimately proves that even Garrick—himself a pillar of institutionalized drama—ended up, by writing plays like *A Peep*, “implicated in the promotion of the form it targets for satirical treatment.” Anti-theatricality thus emerges not as a clear discourse for or against the stage, but as an intellectual current, cutting across authorial intent and confounding any unambiguous interpretation of the dramatic text.

In the final essay of this double issue on anti-theatrical discourse, Anne Widmayer takes the discussion on Garrick into the world of eighteenth-century harlequinades. Also called “metamorphosis” or “turn-up” books, harlequinades were “early precursors to modern comic books,” which, owing to their paper construction, “devalue words and embodied action in favor of doggerel and two-dimensional images.” Widmayer details the theoretical similarities and differences between harlequinades and Garrick’s eighteenth-century pantomimes, the latter of which served as inspiration for the paper harlequinades. Widmayer arrives at the conclusion that the harlequin viewing process—the manipulation of paper folds by readers in order to cover, uncover, and “move” characters—obfuscates the “natural” acting approach proffered by Garrick and other proponents of the stage at the time. Contrary to the theatrical experience, harlequinades allowed the readers “to see behind the curtain,” assume the role of theater director and actor, and thus control the viewing event.

In the end, Widmayer, like several of the authors in this issue, gestures toward the integration of vehement arguments against the theater into anti-theatricality—a *literary and dramatic* construct, practice, and prejudice. Contrary to one century earlier, anti-theatrical discourse during the Enlightenment no longer manifests a clear pitch, voiced by some and refuted by others. With “newfangled” genres, like harlequinades, *dramas bourgeois*, and *comédies larmoyantes*, but also with increasing consideration for stage movement, costuming, and theater finances, it seems that anti-theatrical discourse lost currency and autonomy as social critique. Once a powerful institutional, psychological, and economic value, by the nineteenth century, discourse against theater was in many ways fully embedded in the critical paradigms used to evaluate the experience that *theatrophobes* had worked so hard to combat: theater. In short, anti-theatrical discourse had become one form of dramatic criticism.

From Renaissance Italy to Revolutionary France, from religious critiques of spectatorship to aesthetic criticism of particular acting techniques, this double-issue of *RECTR* on anti-theatrical discourse in early modern Europe covers admirable theoretical, historical, and geographic ground. I would like to take this opportunity to thank each of the contributors to both issues: François Lecerle, Clotilde Thouret, Theodore E. D. Braun, Laurence Marie, Annelle Curulla; Maria Theodora Comsa, Frieda Koeninger, James Harriman-Smith, Gillian Skinner, and Anne Widmayer. I would like also to express my gratitude to *RECTR*’s production staff, and especially, to the general editors, Anne Greenfield and Jessica Munns.