

The Elizabethan Anti-Stage Movement

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Abstract

Criticism of the theater in the Elizabethan period was not the first thing happened in the history of the world's drama. Most historians and critics agree that the antitheatrical prejudice began with Plato. The Platonic belief in the reality of the Idea was often referred to in later arguments against the stage. According to Plato, the physical world is not real because it is an imitation of the Idea and only the Idea is the Truth. Thus, art is three times removed from the Truth because it is an imitation of the physical world. In the Elizabethan era, the anti-stage arguments were later intensified with the conflict of power among the Church, the City and the Court.

Keywords: *Elizabethan period, anti-stage prejudice, Plato, Idea, Truth, conflict of power.*

The criticism of art emerged at the same time as the flourishing of Hellenic culture. In the history of drama, this was the period of the greatest Greek dramatists, Aeschylus and Sophocles. This was not merely a coincidence. In fact, as Jonas Barish (1981) suggests, the most intense hatred of the theater emerges when the theater is demonstrating its strongest power and vitality. The statement is true especially in the Elizabethan drama which is considered one of the most noteworthy periods in the history of the world's literature. The greatness of the Elizabethan drama lies not so much in its literary perfection as in its popularity. It is needless to say that the Elizabethan period has produced some of the greatest world dramatists in terms of literary achievement. The vitality of the period which invited severe attacks, however, was not in the literary values of Marlowe, Jonson and Shakespeare. Barish writes that "the stage provokes the most active and sustained hostility when it becomes a vital force in the life of a community" (p.66). The drama in the Elizabethan age occupied such an important place as a popular entertainment that its values were considered to collide dangerously with the received values of church and state. As seen in the writings of the stage opponents, criticisms of the stage were given in various perspectives: economic, social, political, moral and theological. The early opposition to the English drama, however, arose on grounds entirely apart from questions of morality and theology. The moral and theological bases were used only then to elaborate the arguments against the stage. The sentiment against plays itself was aroused by the economic, social, and political consequences of the popular growth of the English drama.

There is a common tendency to begin a discussion of the Elizabethan drama in the year 1576 and 1577 when the first permanent playhouses, the *Theater* and the *Curtain*, were built in Shoreditch. The drama, however, had taken an important place as a popular entertainment in London before the permanent theaters were built, and it was popular in the provinces before it grew rapidly in London. The great permanent



amphitheaters were the logical development of the performances in inn-yards. For the drama was nothing new to the Englishmen. According to Charles Sisson (1928),

[t] Elizabethan drama is an extension and development of the old Medieval drama, profoundly influenced in form, subject, and style by the new culture of the Renaissance, by the new conditions of performance in the London theaters, and by the new and wider interests of its audiences.(p.16)

The Miracle Play is one of the sources from which the professional London drama drew its tradition, its strength, its recruits, and its audiences. The next source is to be found in the small travelling companies that, on provincial tours, furnished country towns with occasional plays throughout the Elizabethan age. These companies presented plays known as Interludes or Moralities during the first half of the sixteenth century, in early Tudor days. Then, the English drama was polished in the universities. Young scholars with their classical training played an important role in shaping the tradition of the English drama during the last decades of the sixteenth century. Finally, the Court of the Tudors had long been the scene of dramatic entertainments in the form of masques and plays. As Sisson (1928) points out, “during the season of 1600 – 1601, as many as eleven plays were performed at Court” (p.12). Thus, the Court was one of the powerful instruments in establishing the drama.

Against the great popularity of the English theaters and against the favor of the Court grew an increasing hostility to the theater grounded on economic and social reasons. Elbert N.S. Thomson (1966) reveals that “as acting passed from the clergy into the hands of itinerant companies, the social evils attendant on the profession took genuine English color” (p.33). Plays kept people away from their work and families. In his *School of Abuse*, Stephen Gosson (1841), a former playwright and actor, points out the social evils caused by a number of forms of amusement, including drama:

... that eate uppe the credite of many idle citzens, whose gaines at home are not able to weighe doen their losses abroade; whose shoppe are so farre from maintaining their play, that their wives and children cry out for bread, and goe to bedde supperlesse ofte in the yeere. (p.35)

The financial question was used as one of the main arguments against the plays. Thompson quotes from *Manuscripts* reprinted by the Historical Manuscript Commission: “the city of Norwich requested Parliament that players of interludes, who deprived the needy of their earnings, should be excluded from the city” (p.35).

Moreover, England was facing the problems of vagabonds. Wanderers thronged to the big towns to search for a living but the situation was so grave that it was considered a threat to public security. The laws of vagabonds were enacted and renewed to enforce the provision that ruffians and wanderers without a license should be caught and punished severely. Travelling actors were often associated with vagabonds. This early prejudice against players is reflected in William Harrison’s (1877) record:

Among roges and idle persons, finallie, we find to be comprised all proctors that go up and down with counterfeit licences, coosiners, and such as gad about the countrie, using unlawfull games, practisers of physiognomie, and palmestrie, tellers of fortunes, fensers, plaiers, minstrels, iugglers, pedlers, tinkers. (p.220)

In response to the Vagabond Acts, some of the travelling companies sought for licences from the noblemen or patents from the Court through the Privy Council. This practice of licensing players, however, did not solve the problems because it led to the struggle between the Court and the city authorities to take control of players. This controversy will be discussed later in this paper. Moreover, “the system of patent,” according to E.K.

Chambers (1973), "lent itself to certain abuses by travelling companies" (p.305). It was reported that a company would take a duplicate or a copy of another company's licence to go on tour.

Politically, the English theater early proved itself a source of civil disorder and a threat to the power of the new church of England. Thompson (1966) quotes Holinshed's records which report that in 1549 "conspirators took advantage of the crowd assembled at the annual day at Norfolk to incite the people to arms" (p.34). The city authorities feared the opportunities for riots and seditions in the theaters. Furthermore, the anti-stage clergy argued that the theater was the church of infidelity. The theater attracted lots of people because it appealed to the senses. Edmund S. Morgan (1966) reveals that "where the church exhorted its adherents to virtue in sermons and prayers, the theater could present a lively representation of vice in the flesh" (p.343). The stage enemies believed that the audience's watching an act of sin on the stage was equal to committing the sin themselves. Gosson (1869), in his other attack on the stage *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, referred to St. Paul and went as far as comparing playgoing with the eating of meat sacrificed as idols: "If we be carefull that no pollution of idoles enter by the mouth into our bodies, how diligent, how circumspect, how way ought we to be, that no corruption of idols, enter by the passage of our eyes and eares into the soule?" (p.8)

Repeatedly the Elizabethan anti-stage writers lauded the charge of idolatry against the stage. The charge was somewhat odd because the drama that they particularly attacked was secular drama which had nothing obvious to do with worship. It is very likely that the attack was grounded on political reasons and had something to do with the establishment of the new church of England. Michael O'Connell (1985) believes that "behind the attack appears to lie a religious preoccupation, one that surfaces as well in an observe way when Reformed writers attack what they saw as the theatricality of Catholic worship" (p.279). After the dissolution of Catholic monasteries in England, the Reformed clergy still feared that the remnants of Roman ceremonies and rituals occupied the attention of Englishmen. With that suppression of the mass and the destruction of images in Catholic churches, Englishmen turned to the theater to satisfy their longing for images, the devil's weapon to corrupt man. The Reformed clergy meant to impose their control and power on the people but were worried that the newly purified Church of England was considered less attractive than the old corrupt Roman model. Morgan (1966) writes that as early as 150 Bishop Hooper complained of the people's attachment to the church of the devil:

There was neither labours, cares, needs, necessity, nor anything else that heretofore could keepe them from hearing of Masse, though it had been said that at 4 a clocke in the morning ... people were content to lose more labour, and spent more time then to go to the Devil, than now to come to God. (pp.345-6)

The puritan stage opponents preached that human corruption would always find an outlet and that Satan, driven from one church, would find another.

When the plague raged in London in 1563, plays were inevitably accused as the cause of the plague because the assembling of people at the performances in the inn yards was the source of infection and contagion. Chambers (1973) records that "there is an indication that plays were suspended" during the plague (p.278). In the following year, Edmund Grindal (1843), the Bishop of London, urged Secretary Sir William Cecil to set for a proclamation "to inhibit all plays for one whole year (and if it were for ever, it were not amiss) within the city, or three miles compass upon paines, ..." (p.269).

As the sentiment against the stage was growing, the Corporation of the City, goaded by the puritan moralists, attempted to convert their power of regulating plays into a



power of suppressing plays. The conflict of power between the city authorities and the Privy Counciling first declared in 1572. The local authorities were responsible for the regulation of plays as a matter of public order, but they were not always in a position to make their ultimate control without an appeal to headquarters. The Privy Council, on the other hand, were primarily concerned with the exclusion of heresy and sedition from plays. Players were subject to regulation of the city magistrates as to times and places and the precautions needed to secure public health and order. “No play, “according to Chambers (1973), “was to be shown which had not first been perused and allowed by such persons as the Lord Mayor and Aldermen might appoint [and] all playing places and the persons in control of them were to be licensed by the Lord Mayor and Aldermen” (p.283). However, the magistrates were often not powerful enough to exercise their power over the players because of the interference of the Court and the Privy Council. Actually the Council were also concerned with the safety of the city. They also feared that the assembled people in the playing places could be stirred to riots. However, the Council were hesitant to take abrupt action because they realized the Queen loved theaters. There is no evidence that Elizabeth took any personal interest in the controversy of the stage in general. But she was said to have interfered the Council meetings in the interest of one or two favored companies. According to Chambers, “a patent under the Great Seal was issued to the Earl Leicester’s men which overruled the proclamation of 1559 and ignored the position of the Corporation altogether” (p.281).

After numerous conflicts, the stage opponents won a temporary victory as plays were driven from the city in 1575. As recorded by Chambers(1973), the Corporation of the City managed to issue a decree to banish players totally and finally from the confines of the city. This decree seemed to quiten the controversy of the stage for a while. Within a year, however, the first permanent playhouse, the *Theater*, was built in the suburbs. Not long afterwards, other playhouses appeared as the players turned to the easier conditons set by the local governments in the suburban areas. Although these suburban theaters were not as convenient, especially in the winter, as the London inns, the main locality of the popular drama was shifted from the inn yards of London to the suburban areas of Middlesex and Surrey. The greater distance did not keep the young people of the city from crowding the theaters. Due to the short evenings and dirty lanes in the winter, writes Chambers, “it was still a matter of importance for the companies to maintain their footing in the city, even if this meant compliance with harassing restrictions,” (p.284). The players were ready to use the protection of the Lord Chamberlain and the Privy Council, in opposition to any further limitation of their privileges, either from the city authorities or from the puritan moralists.

The players still performed plays even on Sundays and holy days. The trumpets led the crowd to throng to the theaters while the bells were ringing in the unattended churches. The steady rise of the theaters enraged the puritan stage opponents. As the city magistrates did not make any firm stand against the stage, the moralists were dissatisfied with the authorities’ attitude and upset by the fast growth of the theaters. With Thomas White’s sermon at Paul’s Cross in 1576 and John Northbrooke’s *A Treatise* in 1577, the anti-stage clergy started their active combat against the state through the pulpits and pamphlets.

The anti-theatricality of the church, however, was not unanimous. As Paul White (1988) suggests, “the English Calvinists, Puritans as well as non-Puritans, varied considerably in their attitudes towards the stage. Some ... were its strongest supporters, others its most hostile opponents” (p.42). Some stage supporters such as the theologian

Martin Bucer, the Earl of Leicester, Thomas Heywood, and the minister Lewis Wager had Calvinist views.

At first the puritan moralists distinguished the religious drama from the secular one. It was argued that the purpose of art was to teach, to delight, and to elevate. A large number of early reformers including Luther and Calvin believed that Biblical plays could be a power for good. Following their Reformation models, the early English reformers used drama for their anti-Catholic propaganda. However, as the opposition to the stage was growing, they discouraged theatrical exhibitions of all sorts and disapproved of the use of Biblical material for the stage. Ruth Blackburn (1971) writes that “[while] in the early days of the Reformation, the leftwing Protestants had some stake in the Biblical drama as a vehicle for their ideas, their early seventeenth century [and the late sixteenth century] counterparts, in contrast, were trying to get the theaters closed” (p.194).

The past alliance between the Church and the stage was dissolved as the theater grew more and more popular and people gradually ignored the church. The church then saw the theater as a rival that robbed them of the people’s soul as well as of their collection money. Thompson (1966) mentions about a complaint of “the expenditure of money on the theater more because it lessened the contributions for the repair of Paul’s steeple than for any more pious motive” (p.109).

Another possible reason of the church’s hostility to the theater was the development of stage censorship. The church had been the traditional authority to censor. However, after the appointment of the Master of the Revels to whom plays should be submitted for licensing, Crown, Church, and City all based their official pronouncements on those grounds which established best their respective claims to supremacy. The controversy culminates in the establishment of a licensing commission on which City, Church, and Crown were equally represented. But “the fifteen-nineties,” writes Glynn Wickham (1971), “mark the virtual elimination of the church from active control of the drama, leaving a precarious balance between City and crown and inviting a final duel for the ultimate authority” (p.79).

To fight for a common cause, the anti-stage clergy worked hand in hand with the puritan pamphleteers such as Stephen Gosson and Philip Stubbes. Their arguments were pretty much the same: the social objections against idleness, the economic objections against the danger of depraving the nation of the labor of the players and others who made a living by the stage, the religious objections against the violation of the Sabbath, and finally the moral objections against the soul corruption.

In the beginning their criticism were quite mild; what they attacked were not the play as an art but the abuses caused by the play. They could still value the true art and see the possibility of using the stage as a means to achieve a good end. Gosson (1841), for example, writes in *The School of Abuse* that some plays are “good playes and sweete playes, and of all playes the best playes, and most to be liked, woorthy to be soung of the Muses, ...” (p.30). However, as they received counter-attack from the stage supporters and as the debate grew more satirical and bitter, the puritan anti-stage writers gradually went one extreme in condemning all plays as the devil’s invention and the source of sins. At first each side could still see good in the other. But as they tried to confirm each other of their position, they overlooked the truth in the other’s argument. Thompson (1966) writes that “the fundamental discordance between the puritan hostility to an art from which evil came, and the willingness of their opponents to endure it in the hope of better days was nmade so great that all compromise was forbidden” (p.79). The puritan stage opponents went as extreme as arousing people’s fears



by declaring the fall of the scaffold in the Paris Garden on January 13, 1583 as God's wrath to the theater-goers. John Field describes the incident and attacks the playhouses in his pamphlet entitled *A godly exhortation, by occasion of the late judgement of God, shewed at Parris-garden, the thirteenth day of Ianuarie: where were assembled by estimation aboue a thousnad persons, whereof crediblie reported, the thirde person maimed and hurt.*

Like the puritan moralists, the city authorities also took advantage of the Paris Garden incident to suppress plays. The day after the incident the Lord Mayor wrote a letter attributing the disaster to "the hande of god for suche abuse of the sabbboth daie." Wickham (1971) writes that "this victory for the city was followed up in the summer of 1584 by a request to the Privy Council to pull down the *Theater* and the *Curtain*." This request was granted but never carried out, probably because of "the intervention of the Lord Chamberlain on behalf of his own company of players who performed at the *Theater*" (pp.85-6).

Some critics suggest that in their attempt to suppress plays, the city authorities hired pamphleteers to attack the stage. Anthony Munday was obviously engaged to write his anonymous *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Thetters* which was published in 1580 with the arms of the city on the back of the title page. The year before, Gosson wrote the *The School of Abuse* which Munday referred to as the "first blast." Gosson was [also] hired to write *The School of Abuse* and proposes a few reasons for his speculation. Some of the reasons were that the pamphlet was first published in a very big quantity and it was protected from the counter-attacks. Thomas Lodge had a hard time publishing his *Reply to the School of Abuse*. Then, "the publication of the school of Abuse marked the turn of Gosson's fortunes" (26-28).

As had been illustrated above, the City, aided by the Church, lauched vigorous reaction against the addiction of the people to the dramatic entertainment and against the Crown's steady accretion of licensing power. This occurred particularly in London or in the South of England. It was a different matter in another part of England. In the North, writes Wickham (1971), "Crown and Church combine[d] against the City Fathers to suppress the last of the Moracle Cycles and popular Moralities" (p.82).

The controversy of the stage also arose in university circles. Reechoing London sentiment against the common players, several complaints were heard from Cambridge. Thompson (1966) describes, the dread that the London plague might be carried to Cambridge by the players made the Council remind the Vice-Chancellor to forbid "all plays, or enterludes of common players either in the college itself or in any adjacent town" (pp.93-4). While Cambridge attacked common players, sentiment against private plays grew in Oxford. As the main seat of the academic dispute, Oxford elaborated the controversy of the English stage with more moral and theological arguments, as seen in the dispute between John Rainoldes, a learned theologian and William Gager, a Latin dramatist of Christ's College.

As far as the stage controversy was concerned, the Clergy, the City Fathers, the pamphleteers, and the academic people were the stage opponents frequently discuss. These critics were men of relatively high rank and status. The attack, as a matter of fact, came also from all classes of the laity. Wickham (1971) reveals that "in the capital, the theater was under constant attack from merchants who disliked their apprentices taking time off to patronize it, ..." (p.89). The merchants also complained that their apprentices spent more money than they could afford on the theater. In the meantime, the actors prospered. Edwards Alleyn, for instance, as recorded by Chambers, "retire[d] from the stage before he was forty, to purchase the manor of Dulwich for £ 1,700 a year"

(p.349). The drones sucked the honey stored by London's laborious citizens. This fact aggravated the critics even more.

The social abuses of the theater were felt by people of all classes, even from the circle of the dramatic leaders themselves. Thompson (1966) observes that Alleyn, the owner of the *Theater*, was aware of the inconveniences and abuses which grew there. Around 1596 he leased the building to Burbage for twenty-one years but then decided that "it should be used for the theatrical purposes for only five years more" (p.110). Even Robert Greene who turned to defend his acting profession, admitted some of the puritan accusations against it. He recognized "the dangerous social atmosphere of the playhouse" (p.111).

The stage did have supporters. Lodge, Nashe, Jonson, and Heywood pleaded for their profession in quite convincing arguments. However, these champions of the theater were notably less articulate than its enemies. Besides, as Morgan (1966) suggests, "playwrights preferred writing plays to defending them" (p.340), certainly because the former was more profitable.

Despite the hostile attacks and the inarticulateness of the supporters, theatrical practice survived and triumphed. The anti-stage leaders could never really suppress plays totally during the reign of Elizabeth I. This was due to its own resources and strength. Its resources were the Court's favor and the government's support. The grant of a special patent to the Earl of Leicester's players and the interference of the central government in the City magistrates' regulations indicate that the Court was indeed an obstacle in the puritan attempts to suppress plays in England during the Elizabethan period. The strength of the theater was its great popularity. The stage lovers seemed so deeply addicted to the dramatic entertainment that only a thoroughly grounded and widely supported opposition could have kept them from their theater-going habit.

Severe opposition to the stage was not the only one that happened in the history of the world's drama. But the remarkable thing about the English sentiment against the stage was its popular character. The anti-stage leaders came up from different strata of society; the anti-stage attacks were launched by the clergy, the legal profession, the academic circles, and the laity. Even some of the stage leaders themselves could see the truth in their enemies arguments. This reflects that the anti-stage movement was not merely an outburst of antitheatrical prejudice. Some of the puritan anti-stage opponents may have associated theatrical performances with the Catholic practices of ceremonies, rituals, images. And in their attempts to elaborate their arguments, they may have used puritan theological bases. Nevertheless, the anti-stage movement in the Elizabethan period was founded on solid ground. The theater early proved itself a source of civil disorder. This aroused early sentiment against the stage. And the plague, too, gave great impetus to the feeling.

This sentiment was soon colored by the conflict of power among the Church, the City and the Court. Each felt that they had the rights to interfere with the stage performances and the authority to decide what was the best for the English people. No one questioned the need for censorship. But when it came to the question of *who* should exercise the ultimate right to control the English theater, conflict among these three parties emerged. The quarrel then added political color to the sentiment and heated the controversy of the stage. The intensity of the attack spread steadily and rapidly throughout the sixteenth century. However, the dispute was never resolved in the Elizabethan period. In spite of the severity of the continuing opposition from all classes of society, the English remained open to the Elizabethan public. This triumph was due to two factors: the Court's favor and the great popularity of the theater.



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