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PURITAN HOSTILITY TO THE THEATRE

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HOSTILITY to the theatre is as old as the theatre itself. Plato banished the theatre from his ideal republic.¹ Church fathers from Tertullian to Augustine denounced it.² Our colonial ancestors did their best to keep it out of America, and when it arrived, they greeted it with the kind of demonstration they usually reserved for British tax collectors. The Stamp Act riots of 1765 in New York were followed in 1766 by a riot against the attempt of a company of traveling players to open a theatre.³ In 1783 a rock-throwing crowd stormed into the pit of a newly opened theatre in Philadelphia.⁴ During the century that followed, as the theatre gradually won a grudging acceptance in the United States, pulpit and press continued to resound with denunciations, not simply of the kind of plays produced or of the acting, but of the very existence of theatres.

Although these diatribes have been the constant accompaniment of theatrical performances—at least until the present century—most of us associate them with Puritanism. And not without reason. The longest, most bitter, and most effective attacks on the theatre came from English Puritans, or at least from Englishmen living in the age of Puritanism.⁵ Beginning with a burst of books and pamphlets about 1579, the literature of denunciation reached its culmination in William Prynne's *Histrio-mastix* in 1633.⁶ Prynne's work,

a learned encyclopedia of invective, totaling more than a thousand pages, was culled from two thousand years of writings against the theatre, seasoned by Prynne's own tedious, repetitious, but often forceful arguments.

Prynne lost his ears for his labors, because the king thought the book reflected on the royal taste for theatrical amusements; but Prynne had his way in 1642, when the Long Parliament closed the English theatres. As long as Puritans ran the government, the theatres stayed closed and arguments over them subsided. Playwrights preferred writing plays to defending them, and throughout history, the champions of the theatre have been notably less articulate than its enemies. When the king was restored in 1660, so was the theatre, and the attacks on it resumed, but somehow with less zest. The fin-de-siècle *Histrio-mastix* was written by Jeremy Collier, a pallid, polite, almost effete opponent, who strove unsuccessfully to match the wit and style of the plays he attacked.⁷ The assault never again gathered the force it had developed under the Puritans.

The theatre thus met with the most intense hostility in England during and immediately after the age of the great English dramatists: the age of Marlowe, Johnson, and Shakespeare. Is this a coincidence? Perhaps, for Prynne himself was ludicrously unfamiliar with the plays he denounced. Instead of supporting his arguments by citing specific passages in either ancient or contemporary dramatists, he told his readers what the theatre was like by quoting what early church fathers such as Chrysostom and Cyprian said about it. But other critics were more familiar with the stage. Stephen Gosson, for example, who published tracts against the theatre in 1579 and 1582, was himself a former playwright.⁸ The possibility suggests itself that some connection existed between the intensity of the Puritan attack and the high dramatic

¹ *The Republic*, Book X.

² E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (2 vols. Oxford, 1903), pp. 1–22, discusses the decline and fall of the Roman theatre under the assaults of “bishops and barbarians.”

³ *New York Mercury*, May 5, 1766; *New York Gazette*, May 12, 1766; Hugh F. Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America* (Chapel Hill, 1965), p. 110.

⁴ John S. Ezell, ed., *The New Democracy in America: Travels of Francisco de Miranda in the United States, 1783–84* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1963), pp. 52–53.

⁵ Hostility to the theatre in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England was not confined to Puritans. See E. N. S. Thompson, *The Controversy Between the Puritans and the Stage* (New York, 1903), *passim*.

⁶ *Histrio-mastix: The Players Scourge or Actors Tragedie* (London, 1633). Hereafter, Prynne.

⁷ Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (London, 1698).

⁸ *The School of Abuse* (London, 1579); *Playes Con-futed in five Actions* (London, [1582]).

achievement of the time. It is not my purpose to demonstrate such a connection, but rather to disclose among the Puritan arguments some clues that may account for the intensity of hostility during a time when the theatre was at its best. Those same clues, I believe, will help to explain the persistence of hostility to the theatre long after the Puritans were in their graves.

To persons for whom Puritanism is simply a synonym of asceticism, it will appear appropriate that Puritans excelled in hostility to the stage. If their stock in trade was killing joy, it was consistent for them to shoot down this form of pleasure. But anyone who has studied the Puritans knows that they were not quite ascetics, that they put a high value on the good things of this world and among them recreation. Prynne himself listed a number of diversions that he thought healthy, namely

Walking, riding, fishing, fowling, hawking, hunting, ringing, leaping, vaulting, wrestling, running, shooting, singing of Psalmes and pious Ditties; playing upon musical instruments, casting of the Barre, tossing the Pike, riding of the great Horse (an exercise fit for men of quality), running at the ring, with a world of such like lawdable, cheape, and harmlesse exercises.⁹

Prynne even approved the reading of poetry and plays as a recreation and for this purpose specifically recommended Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and Menander, along with Piers Plowman, Chaucer, and Skelton.¹⁰

But when a play, even if otherwise inoffensive, reached the stage, it became for Prynne and his cohorts an engine of perdition, violating every commandment of God. There was a multitude of ways in which the enactment of a play angered God and endangered man. To begin with, it was not a suitable recreation for either actors or audience, because it did not fulfill the functions of recreation. In the Puritan view recreation was supposed to benefit the participant by enabling him to return to his work refreshed and invigorated in body and mind.¹¹ A play engaged a man too deeply, so that it left him exhausted and dissipated rather than refreshed. And if he became habituated to it, it rendered him effete and effeminate.¹² Elizabethan Englishmen, even while displaying that burst of physical and spiritual energy that set the world wondering, were continually sighing for

the good old days when men were men. The theatre, like syphilis, was considered a foreign import, an Italian disease, which along with music and dancing would be the death of English vigor. "O what a wonderfull change is this?" lamented Stephen Gosson, six years before the defeat of the Spanish Armada, "Our wrestling at armes, is turned to wallowing in Ladies lappes, our courage to cowardice, our running to riot, our bowes into bolles, and our dartes to dishes. Wee have robbed Greece of gluttony, Italy of wantonnes, Spayne of pride, France of deceite, and Dutchland of quaffing."¹³

The theatre, besides encouraging this foreign degeneracy in the spectators, besides returning them to their work unrefreshed, also endangered the nation by depriving it of the labor of the actors and others who made a living by the stage. These people were making a profession out of a recreation, and this was patently contrary to the rules by which a man should choose his calling. Some thought it lawful for students to enact plays, especially in Latin,¹⁴ but for anyone to be an actor or playwright by trade was no better than idleness. Every calling was supposed to contribute to the common welfare, to produce something. To make a living by the stage was like living by begging. Most actors, according to Gosson, had either forsaken honest occupations or else were common minstrels, "trained up from their childehoods to this abominable exercise and have now no other way to gete their livinge."¹⁵ In either case the commonwealth suffered from the loss of the useful services they would otherwise be performing.¹⁶

But loss in national output and vigor was the least of the evils occasioned by plays. When Gosson and Prynne suggested that the theatre tended to effeminacy, they meant more than a simple taste for wallowing in ladies' laps. The theatre has always attracted homosexuals; and this attraction was doubtless heightened in the sixteenth and

¹³ *School of Abuse*, p. 17; *Playes Confuted*, sig. B.

¹⁴ John Northbrooke, *Spiritus est vicarius Christi in Terra. A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine plaies or Enterludes with other idle pastimes, &c. commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reprooved* . . . (London, 1579), p. 37. But cf. John Rainoldes, *Th' Overthrow of Stage-Playes* (Middleburg, 1599); Prynne, pp. 864-869.

¹⁵ *Playes Confuted*, sig. G.

¹⁶ Prynne, pp. 302-310, 501-508, 905-906; I. G., *A Refutation of the Apology for Actors* (London, 1615) pp. 3-4; Anglo-phile Euthero, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters* ([London], 1580), pp. 74-78; Gosson, *Playes Confuted*, sig. G.

⁹ Prynne, p. 966.

¹⁰ Prynne, pp. 832-835.

¹¹ Prynne, pp. 946-947.

¹² Prynne, pp. 167-173, 546-547.

seventeenth centuries by the fact that women's roles were generally played by men (as in the eighteenth century men's roles were often played by women). The Puritans denounced this practice on the basis of the explicit Biblical injunction against men putting on women's clothing, and then went on to berate the inducement to sodomy.¹⁷

In condemning the acting of women's roles by men, Puritans took care to avoid suggesting that the acting of women's roles by women would be less objectionable. When a play was staged at Black-Friars in 1629, with a French girl taking one of the women's roles, the innovation was denounced as another Italian import, and Prynne was at pains to point out that temptations to whoredom and adultery were no more tolerable than temptations to sodomy.¹⁸

In fact, Puritans believed that the theatre, even with an all-male cast, offered far too many invitations to heterosexual sin. Surveying the subject matter of plays, Prynne found them all to be concerned with adultery or fornication. To be sure, he drew most of his evidence from what the church fathers said about classical drama, where the adulterers and fornicators were gods and goddesses, but he concluded without great risk of contradiction that contemporary plays were occupied with the same theme. It was too much to expect of mortal men, he believed, that they could view without imitating "those immodest gestures, speeches, attires, which inseparably accompany the acting of our Stage-plays; especially where the Bawdes, the Panders, the Lovers, the Wooers, the Adulterers, the Womans, or Love-sicke persons parts are lively represented."¹⁹ "Doe not," he asked his readers, as though speaking from experience

the wanton gestures; the amorous kisses, complements, and salutes; the meretricious songs and speeches; the lascivious whorish Actions; the beautiful faces; the ravishing Musicke, the flexanimous enticements, the witty obscenities, the rhetoricall passages, the adulterous representations, with al the other fomentations of uncleannesse in the Play-house . . . even raise a tempest of unchaste affections; yea kindle a very hell of lusts within your soules?²⁰

¹⁷ Prynne, pp. 178–216; Rainoldes, *Overthrow of Stage-Playes*, pp. 9–19; *Refutation of the Apology for Actors*, p. 61; Phillip Stubbs, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1585), p. 91; Thomas Gainsford, *The Rich Cabinet* (London, 1616), p. 117; William Perkins, *Works* (London, 1631) 2: p. 140; William Ames, *Conscience*, in *Works* (London, 1643) Book V, p. 216.

¹⁸ Prynne, pp. 214–216, 414.

¹⁹ Prynne, p. 166.

²⁰ Prynne, pp. 374–375.

In the face of these temptations any woman who attended the theatre risked her virtue. An ex-playwright who signed himself Anglo-ophile Euthero, warned how unscrupulous young men learned to take advantage of the action on the stage in order to seduce their female companions:

Alas, saie they to their familiar by them, Gentlewoman, is it not pittie this passioned lover should be so martyred. And if he find her inclining to foolish pittie, as commonlie such women are, then he applies the matter to himselfe, and saies that he is likewise caried awaie with the liking of her; craving that pittie to be extended upon him, as she seemed to shoue toward the afflicted amorous stager.²¹

Most women who attended the theatre, however, were as versed in the arts of seduction as the men. In the theatres of England as in those of Rome the galleries were filled with courtesans displaying their wares, young men pressing about them to seek their favors and plying them with apples (in Rome it had been pomegranates) or with pipes of tobacco.²² Prynne related how Roman playhouses had been the nurseries of brothels, "where whores were harboured and trained up at first, till they were confined to the Stewes."²³ He had not been able to determine that this was the case in London, but his investigations did convince him,

that our common Strumpets and Adulteresses after our Stage-playes ended, are oft-times prostituted neere our Play-houses, if not in them: that our Theaters if they are not Bawdy-houses (as they may easily be, since many Players, if reports be true, are common Panders,) yet they are Cosin-germanes, at leastwise neighbours to them.²⁴

And here Prynne was on firm ground, for the theatres of London then and later were surrounded by brothels. Prynne could even name names: "witness the Cock-pit, and Drury-lane: Black-friers Playhouse, and Duke-humfries; the Red-bull, and Turnbull-street; the Globe, and Bank-side Brothel-houses, with others of this nature." If this was guilt by association, the association was a close and continuing one.²⁵

The indictment goes on at length. Plays promote hypocrisy and deceit. What else is acting but deceit, luring people into thinking a man is some-

²¹ *A Second and Third Blast*, pp. 98–99.

²² *A Second and Third Blast*, p. 89; Prynne, pp. 362–363; Gosson, *School of Abuse*, pp. 17–18.

²³ Prynne, p. 390.

²⁴ Prynne, pp. 390–391.

²⁵ Prynne, p. 391. Cf. F. H. Newhall, *The Theater: A Discourse Preached at the Bromfield M. E. Church* (Boston, 1863), p. 23.

one else?²⁶ Plays promote drunkenness, luxury, impudence, theft, murder.²⁷ Most actors are papists.²⁸ Etcetera. Etcetera. The charges are so wholesale, so extravagant, they go so much beyond what the offense seems to warrant, that one begins to suspect something more behind them than meets the eye. The Puritans seem to be searching out every possible argument, plausible and implausible, to destroy the hated institution. One begins to look for hints of some overriding motive to account for the fury of the attack, some indication of a threat that went deeper than the specific charges leveled against the theatre. And once one looks, the hints are everywhere: Puritans looked on the theatre as a rival to the church of Christ.

Overt expressions of this rivalry are sometimes misleading but nevertheless suggestive. They occur in a few defenses of the theatre which claim that it offered a more effective school of virtue than the church, and imply that clergymen therefore resisted it out of jealousy.²⁹ For example, in 1767, when a group of apprentices started acting plays in Boston³⁰ a bill to forbid theatrical entertainments was hastily introduced in the General Court (apparently no such prohibition had hitherto been needed). In the debate on the bill, the theatre was defended by Joseph Tisdale, a bold anticlerical representative from Taunton. Tisdale, who confessed he had never seen a play acted, suggested that the bill was the work of clergymen. "I have observed," he said,

the clergy in general have made it their business to cry down all kinds of *theatrical performances*; and it is not to be wondered at, since there is such a temporal interest depending upon their doing of it; if they had not done it, possibly there might by this time have risen up a set of people, that would have taken a more effectual method to improve the morals, and excite sentiments of virtue and religion, than what they have done.³¹

It was easy to dismiss charges like this. If it had really been a question of which could give the better instruction in virtue, the church or the theatre, the church would carry the day with no trouble. In the course of centuries churchmen had assembled an overwhelming battery of arguments,

some of which I have mentioned, to demonstrate that the theatre was more likely to teach vice than virtue. It was not a rivalry in virtue that Puritans saw behind the contest of their churches with the stage, but a rivalry of vice against virtue, of Satan against Christ.

The church fathers of the third and fourth centuries had already identified the theatre as a kind of anti-church, originating in the worship of pagan deities. And an anonymous *Treatise against Stage-Playes*, printed in 1625, drew upon Dionysius Halicarnassus, Arnobius, and Augustine to show "that as Christians by direction out of Gods word use prayer and fasting to turne away the Lords provoked anger: so heathens instructed by the Divell their master thought to remove their afflictions by Playes."³² Prynne labored the point with many more citations. "The chiefe and primarie end of inventing, instituting or personating Stage-Playes," Prynne assured his readers, "was the superstitious worship, or at least Wise, the pacification, or atonement, of Jupiter, Bacchus, Neptune, the Muses, Flora, Apollo, Diana, Venus, Victoria, or some such Devill-gods, or goddesses, which the Idolatrous Pagans did adore."³³ All these gods and goddesses were so many manifestations of the devil, and with the coming of Christianity the devil did not cease to have his worshippers. Theatres were the synagogues of Satan, where the audience paid him homage according to the rites that he himself had specified. Stephen Gosson explained the parallel in 1582:

as in the Church singing and praying the Lorde together as hee him selfe instructed us in his worde, is a signe by whiche the true God is assured that we sacrifice our hearts unto him with the Calves of our lippes: So the Divell perceiving us to advance the offrings or sacrifices of the Gentiles, after the same manner of houses, of apparell, of Stages, of Plaies, that he instructed the Gentiles by his Oracles, hath greate cause to bee merrie, and to holde him selfe honoured thereby.³⁴

³² *A Shorte Treatise against Stage-Playes* ([London], 1625), p. 10.

³³ Prynne, p. 28. See also *Refutation of the Apology for Actors*, pp. 21, 38, 54.

³⁴ *Playes confuted*, sig. C. Cf. William Law, *The Absolute Unlawfulness of the Stage-Entertainment Fully Demonstrated* (second ed., London, 1726), p. 12: "... the Play-House, not only when some very prophane Play is on the Stage, but in its daily, common Entertainments, is as certainly the House of the Devil, as the Church is the House of God. For though the Devil be not professedly worshipp'd by Hymns directed to him, yet most that is there sung is to his Service; he is there obey'd and pleas'd in as certain a manner, as God is worshipped and honoured in the Church."

²⁶ Prynne, pp. 155-160; Gosson, *Playes Confuted*, sig. E.

²⁷ Prynne, pp. 508-520.

²⁸ Prynne, p. 142.

²⁹ Prynne, pp. 101-102; Northbrooke, *Spiritus est*, p. 33.

³⁰ *Boston Evening Post*, March 9, April 6, 1767.

³¹ *The Speech of Joseph Tisdale, Esq. . . .* (Boston, 1767) Broadside.

In the eyes of the Puritans the parallel was much more than a figure of speech. They regarded the act of attending the theatre as a form of communion with the damned in forbidden rites. "Stage playes," Prynne explained, "are the very Devils owne peculiar pompes, Play-houses his Synagogues; Players, his professed Masse-priests and Choristers; Play haunters his devoted servants, as himselfe professeth, and Origen, with others, largely prove."³⁵ And just as Puritans sought to exclude the unregenerate from the sacraments in their own churches, so they sought to exclude the regenerate from the devil's church. Prynne was affirming an accepted principle resting on scripture when he said that "Christians must not bee unequally yoked with unbelievers, with whom they have no part nor fellowship." This was the premise from which Puritans argued for confining church membership to visible saints. Prynne could argue from it with equal cogency against membership of Christians in the audience of a theatre: if Christians, he said, "should communicate with the Gentiles in Stage-Playes, or things consecrated to their Idoles: they should bee unequally yoked, they should have part, and fellowship with Infidels, in this respect: which God will not allow of."³⁶ "Those therefore who thus serve the Devill in Playes and Play-houses; its impossible for them to serve the Lord sincerely in prayers and Churches."³⁷

It was no use suggesting that the presence of Christians in an evil company might somehow redeem it, for "evill things are farre more apt to defile that which is good, than good things to rectifie that which is evill."³⁸ Therefore "when good and bad confederate themselves together in any delights of sinne, God lookes not on the goodnesse of the good, but upon the wickednesse of good and bad, condemning all for a Congregation of evill doers, because the object, the end of these their conventicles are unlawfull. When gracious and gracelesse persons shall sit promiscuously together in a Play-house, beholding some prophane lascivious Enterlude with delight; not onely God himselfe, but even Saints and Angels frowne upon them, as a fraternitie of evill doers; and a Satanicall unchristian assembly (as the Fathers testifie)."³⁹

³⁵ Prynne, p. 529.

³⁶ Prynne, p. 33-34; *A Second and Third Blast*, pp. 12-13; Stubbs, *Anatomie of Abuses*, p. 92.

³⁷ Prynne, p. 529.

³⁸ Prynne, p. 152.

³⁹ Prynne, p. 154.

Since the theatre was the church of infidelity, it followed not only that Christians must stay out of it but also that the true church must engage it in battle for men's souls. The church, besides being an association of those whom God had already saved, was the means of bringing salvation to those for whom He intended it. The church, therefore, must strive unrelentingly for the allegiance of fallen men, in order to win as many as possible from Satan.

The battle was unfortunately one-sided, because it was *fallen* men whom the church must win, and to fallen men vice was far more appealing than virtue. The initial advantage thus held by the theatre was compounded by the sensual attractions which the theatre could offer. Where the church exhorted its adherents to virtue in sermons and prayers, the theatre could present a lively representation of vice in the flesh. The enemies of the stage recognized that "Nothing entereth in more effectualie into the memorie, than that which commeth by seeing,"⁴⁰ and they also knew that the very sight of sin was enough to beget imitation. Prynne recalled that "the casuall sight of Bathsheba was sufficient to provoke even regenerate David to an adulterous act: And will not then the premediated voluntary delightfull beholding of an unchast adulterous Play, much more contaminate a voluptuous, carnall, gracelesse Playhaunter, who lies rotting in the sinke of his most beastly lusts?"⁴¹

In combating these beastly lusts, the church had to rely on the feeblest ingredient in the soul of fallen man, the reason. And in order to understand the Puritans' special anger at the theatre, one must bear in mind their view of reason and its relations to the emotions.

Man, as created, the Puritans believed, had been endowed with a commanding reason, to which his emotions naturally acquiesced. Reason acknowledged God as the proper object of man's adoration, and the emotions—or affections as the Puritans called them—accordingly had found fulfillment in loving God. But with Adam's fall, the affections overthrew the rule of reason and fastened themselves wholly on the creatures instead of the Creator, taking delight only in the things of this world, and subduing the reason in pursuit of them. To the affections the theatre paid court and plunged the soul ever deeper into corruption. To arrest the plunge this side of hell, it was necessary

⁴⁰ *A Second and Third Blast*, p. 96.

⁴¹ Prynne, p. 962.

to wean the soul's affections from preoccupation with worldly pleasure and restore them to God and to the dominion of reason.⁴²

In an effort to capture the affections for God the Catholic church had learned to use Satan's own weapons. If the devil sought men's souls through the drama, the church might also have its drama and make its own visual, audible, and even olfactory assault on the senses and through them on the affections. Images of the crucifixion, paintings, carvings, vestments, passion plays, pageants, and the culminating drama of the mass itself offered a formidable competition to the stage. But in the eyes of the Puritans, the Catholics by using these devices had surrendered to Satan in the very act of combating him. In making images of God, in turning the sacrament into a "masse-play," the Catholic church became no better than a theatre, a church of Antichrist.⁴³ To appeal directly to the senses through images and ceremonies was simply to strengthen further the infatuation of the affections with things and to tighten the chains by which the affections bound the reason. True regeneration of the soul, with the redirection of the affections toward the Creator, required the restoration of reason to its sovereign position. As long as man remained in the flesh, that sovereignty must remain imperfect, but only in so far as the affections were subdued to the authority of reason could they be genuinely turned toward the God whom no man could ever picture.

God did not require that man should neglect the good things of this world, which He had made to serve man; but He did require that man's enjoyment of the creatures be governed by reason, which would moderate the affections in favor of a higher, holy love for the Creator. When a man married a woman, for example, reason directed him to fasten his affections upon her, to love her—though not necessarily before he married her—but reason also required him to maintain a proper proportion in his love: his affections must always adhere more strongly to God than to a wife or to any other thing or person in the world.⁴⁴ This rational orientation and control of affections could be achieved only with the assistance of God himself. And God gave his assistance, in the process

known as conversion, to all men whom he chose to save from damnation. The role of the church in conversion was crucial, and it did not consist in ceremonies or images appealing to the senses. The church awakened fallen men and prepared them to receive the holy spirit by addressing the reason.⁴⁵

The manner of address was the sermon. No conversion could be genuine that did not originate in the preaching of the word. One sometimes gets the impression that Puritans would have been content to eliminate everything but the sermon from church services. New England congregations were not content with one each Sunday morning, but reassembled in the afternoon for another, and demanded lectures in addition, lectures being simply sermons preached on weekdays. Some small appeal to the senses remained in the singing of Psalms, but even in this exercise Puritans took care to place the emphasis on reason. They retranslated the psalms from the Hebrew in order to correct the sacrifice of meaning to meter that occurred in existing editions; they insisted on a literal adherence to the original; and they would allow no musical accompaniment. The sacrament of communion they renamed the Lord's Supper and reduced it to a simple eating and drinking around a table.

In Puritan New England, where neither the mass nor the theatre was so much as dreamt of in the first century of settlement, these austere services undoubtedly assisted many a hot-blooded individual to yoke his passions to the control of his reason. Church attendance was enjoined by law so that even the non-Puritan inhabitants were exposed to the power of the word. Ministers could count on an audience trained in the subtleties of theology, and disposed to respond favorably to rational argument. But in England, Puritanical ministers had run into difficulties when they tried to instruct Englishmen in the Puritan manner.

As early as 1550 Bishop Hooper was worried by the fact that the newly purified Church of England was proving less attractive to the people than the old corrupt Roman model. Before the Reformation he recalled:

There was neither labours, cares, needs, necessity, nor any things else, that heretofore could keepe them from hearing of Masse, though it had been said at 4 a clocke in the morning . . . people were content to lose

⁴² E. S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York, 1966), pp. 12-17 and sources cited there.

⁴³ Prynne, pp. 112-119. For a modern, scholarly discussion of the role of drama in the Mediaeval Church, see Karl Young, *The Drama of the Mediaeval Church* (2 vols. Oxford, 1933).

⁴⁴ Morgan, *Puritan Family*, pp. 29-64.

⁴⁵ See in general Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1939).

more labour, and spent more time then to goe to the Devill, then now to come to God.⁴⁶

Ministers who favored a high-church variety of Anglican service could still offer some popular appeal through music and ceremony. But Puritans scorned such inducements. If Christians ran to the church "as to a Stage playe, where they may be delighted with piping and singing (and doe thereby absent themselves from hearing the worde of God preached)" they did but "suffer their pleasures to be cockered with the destruction of their soules."⁴⁷ But the remnants of Roman ceremonies and music were not all that threatened the souls of Englishmen. With the suppression of the mass and the substitution of sermons for ceremony, Englishmen turned to the theatre itself, the devil's own church, for excitement. "God be merciful to the Realme of England," exclaimed John Northbrooke in 1579, "for wee beginne to have ytching eares, and loath that heavenly Manna, as appeareth by their slowe and negligent comming unto Sermons, and running so fast, and so many continually unto Plaies."⁴⁸ Six years later Phillip Stubbs in *The Anatomie of Abuses* blamed the theatre for drawing people away from church. "For," said he, "you shall have them flocke thether thicke and threefolde, when the Church of God shall be bare and emptie. And those that will never come at Sermons will flow thether apace."⁴⁹ As might be expected, things had not improved by Prynne's time.

Are not our Play-houses, [he asked] oft-times more crowded, more coached and frequented then many of our Churches? and are they not full oft-times, when our Churches are but empty? Are there not many hundreds serving the Devill daily in our Theaters, even then when as they should be serving God in his Temples? Doe not more commonly resort to Playes, then Lectures, which is ill? yea doe not too too many neglect to come to Sermons, that they may runne to Stage-playes?⁵⁰

Here, then, was the rub. Protestants had overthrown the mass and restored the preaching of the word. And among Protestants the Puritans distinguished themselves by demanding that every remnant of Roman idolatry be banished from the church, so that the affections might be freed from their delusive attachment to the gods of the world.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Prynne, p. 532.

⁴⁷ Northbrooke, *Spiritus est*, p. 42.

⁴⁸ *Spiritus est*, p. 33.

⁴⁹ p. 91. Cf. *Refutation of the Apology for Actors*, p. 60.

⁵⁰ Prynne, p. 530.

What remained for the church-goer was a stark confrontation of reason with holy truth, delivered in sermons, prayers, and the reading and singing of the word. Fallen men at last had been given the opportunity to prepare their hearts for the spirit. And instead they had only left their pews for the pit. They preferred *Hamlet* or *Tamburlaine* or even *Gammer Gurton's Needle* to the word of God, whether preached, prayed, or sung.

Hence the special fury of the Puritans' assault on the stage. They should have known, for they were forever telling themselves, that human corruption would find an outlet, that Satan, driven from one church, would find another. But it was maddening to have these truths so quickly exemplified. Puritans were always defeating Satan only to find that they had not.

The Puritans' hostility to the stage was more intense and more articulate than that of other men who denounced the stage before and after them. But the difference was more in degree than in kind. Men engaged in any cause that demands whole-hearted devotion have often identified the theatre as a rival. When the Sons of Liberty attacked the theatre in New York in 1766, it was probably because they felt a threat to the high resolution with which Americans were resisting taxation by Parliament. The Continental Congress in 1774 condemned theatrical entertainments, probably for the same reasons.⁵¹ And when the theatre later became popular in the independent United States, churchmen continued to see in it a rival for the allegiance of human souls.

The rivalry, if less intense than that of the seventeenth century, was nevertheless clearly discernible in the nineteenth century when attempts were made to purify and reform the theatre. By this time some Christians were arguing that since it was impossible to suppress the theatre, the best thing was to accept it, reform it, and make it truly a school of virtue. A Philadelphia minister in 1840 responded to this proposal by explaining why reform was impossible; a reformed theatre was a contradiction in terms, because the theatre existed to cater to that "taste for licentiousness" which was "one of the developments of depraved human nature."⁵² Since dramatic excellence lay in representing human nature, and since human nature was depraved, it followed "that vice, in all its forms,

⁵¹ W. C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress* 1: p. 78.

⁵² S. G. Winchester, *The Theatre* (Philadelphia, 1840), p. 24.

comes in for a large share of notoriety and representation. The vices of men must be portrayed as well as their virtues, else it is a misrepresentation of human nature."⁵³ And the portrayal of vice inevitably made it attractive.

It was therefore impossible for the theatre to become a means of instruction in virtue:

If the theatre should become the ally of the pulpit, and be made the vehicle of the same sober and pious sentiments, it must become as grave and solemn as the pulpit. In this case it would cease to be an amusement. It would only be another mode of preaching and enforcing the same gospel truths. He that goes to church for the sake of amusement cannot expect to be profited. The truths of the Bible were never intended, nor are they calculated to afford merriment. They were not inspired for this object, but rather to induce a godly sorrow for sin, and an humble reliance on Christ for salvation. To pervert them to purposes of sport and amusement is a gross sacrilege. And unless they be thus perverted, they cannot answer the ends of the drama, and the theatre in which they are exhibited will be forsaken by all the lovers of pleasure, and must fail of support.⁵⁴

Two hundred years after Prynne, ministers thus discerned the same antithesis between church and theatre that he and his contemporaries did. In our own time church and theatre have both survived and continue to thrive side by side, with relatively little of the old rivalry showing. It is doubtful, however, that Prynne or his successors

would regard this fact as a sign that the conflict was over. In the 1880's, as it was beginning to subside, another Philadelphian explained the new ecclesiastical tolerance. Reviewing the Catholic church's adoption of theatrical devices during the period before the Reformation, he observed that the Protestant churches of his own time were moving in the same direction, "making alarming approaches in the direction of ritualism, sacerdotalism, and ceremonialism." The insidious devices by which these forces were making their way included the decoration of churches for Christmas, church theatricals, and church sociables. The conflict between church and theatre was dying away, because the church was ceasing to be a church:

Its chief force or vitality, [he insisted,] is no longer religious. . . . For a very large class the Church furnishes opportunity for a pleasant social life, which is no way different from the social life of amiable, intelligent people out of the Church . . . there is nothing distinctively religious about it.⁵⁵

It is perhaps too early to say whether the epitaph was premature. The content of modern drama does not suggest that the stage has been subdued by the church. On the other hand, the church in recent years has shown a considerable renewal of religious vitality. The ghost of William Prynne will be watching for the church to strip itself of wordly enticements, abandon church suppers, and resume the attack on the synagogues of Satan.

⁵³ P. 118. Cf. J. M. Buckley, *Christians and the Theater* (New York and Cincinnati, 1875).

⁵⁴ P. 123. Cf. *A Refutation of the Apology for Actors*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Josiah W. Leeds, *The Theatre: An Essay upon the Non-Accordancy of Stage-Plays with the Christian Profession* (Philadelphia, 1884), pp. 73, 79.