# The Question/Title:

“Such things are committed at plays and theatres as cannot be thought upon, much less uttered without sin…there can be no stronger engine to batter the honesty than the hearing of common plays.” – Anthony Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from the Plaies and Theaters*, 1580.

Would you agree with Munday’s claim that **the theatre in early modern England can be seen to encourage spectators to challenge and undermine the social hierarchy**? You should illustrate your answer with appropriate textual and contextual evidence.

The image of early modern England is often found to be of a society set in stone. After all, a certain sermon or homily preached in Elizabethan churches in the 16th century stated thus: ”Every degre of people, in their vocacion, callyng and office, hath appoynted to them their duetie and ordre” (1547). However, a need for such a sermon prepared by the state implies that society had to be reminded of the fact since a plethora of changes were experienced by the same “[e]very degre[e] of people” in the late 16th and early 17th century. Some of those significant changes included shifting royalty, the building of permanent theatres, and theatre becoming a converging centre for the marginalised, while also being an influential platform from both the state and playwrights themselves. Specifically, theatre in Elizabethan and Jacobean England was used both as a voice of the state in order to teach its subjects proper, state-approved virtue and as a representation of and mirror to society in order to encourage spectators to challenge and undermine the social hierarchy. Two key plays exemplify the latter use of theatre as a platform for challenge: Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594), an Elizabethan play which incites the audience to reflect on their rulers and the relationship between the church and the state, and Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* (1609), a Jacobean play which encourages the audience to be flexible with their roles in society.

To understand what kind of society the audience was encouraged to challenge and undermine, one would first need to look at the context of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras. According to the same sermon preached in churches, the societal structure seemed to be set: “kynges and princes, […] inferiors and subjectes, priestes and laimen, masters and servauntes, […], riche and poore” (1547) among other roles were represented in 16th-17th century England. However, all of them experienced rapid changes to their social, economic, and spiritual life, including shifting royalty (Mary I to Elizabeth I to James I) and their fluctuating Reformation policies (Cummings, 2016), social and geographic mobility, population growth, strains on the market economy, etc (Montrose, 1996, p. 21). The building of permanent theatres, such as The Red Lion in 1567 and The Theatre in 1576, in the ‘Liberties’ of London (areas outside London city council jurisdiction which were inhabited mostly by marginalised groups) ensured that these changes could be represented and discussed on stage in a place where a large and diverse part of society converged. Theatre was seen by critics to be influential enough to the status quo to criticise and condemn, for example, a certain anti-theatricalist refuted Thomas Heywood’s argument that theatre taught only virtue by explicitly claiming that theatre could not (or should not) teach anything at all: “God onely gave authority of publique instruction and correction but to two sorts of men: to his Ecclesiasticall Ministers, and temporal Magistrates: hee never instituted a third authority of Players” (G., 1615). The ardent protest against theatre’s authority implies that a significant enough part of society did see it as an authority on matters of social, political, and individual life to warrant such a vehement response.

The specific text “A Refutation of the Apology for Actors”, written by the anonymous I. G. (widely considered as John Greene), was a response to Thomas Heywood’s “An Apology for Actors”, which is a fascinating look into the argument that theatre was used only as a voice of the state. In it, Heywood writes that the point of theatre was “to teach obedience to the King” (1612), displaying the right virtues and manners of proper subjects of England’s rule. This view can easily be supported by considering that early modern theatre, although not under London city council’s jurisdiction, still fell under the heavy quill of the Master of the Revels – the person responsible for censoring and banning plays concerning, as said in a proclamation issued in 1559, “either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the commonweal” (Hughes & Larkin, 1969). Every play having to earn a license to play ensured that there were no plays performed with direct and straightforward revolutionary or otherwise challenging messages. In fact, plays with approved messages were encouraged, as says a minute of City Court of Aldermen in May 20, 1572:

written in the favor of certein persones to haue in there howses, yardes, or back sydes, being overt & open places, such playes, enterludes, commedies, & tragedies as maye tende to represse vyce & extoll vertwe, for the recreacion of the people, & therby to drawe them from sundrye worser exercyses.  
(Chambers, 1923, p. 269)

Furthermore, the theatre became much closer to the crown at the start of James I’s reign as playing companies, such as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the Admiral’s Company, and Worcester’s Men, turned into the King’s Men, Prince Henry’s Men, and Queen Anne’s Men, respectively. To add, Jacobean theatre reintroduced religious representation on stage, particularly a satire often based on puritans, which may have been a way for James I to make the puritans conform or leave the queen’s land (Fitzpatrick, 1946, p. 269). Thus, one could argue that early modern theatre was a device for the state either to solidify the status quo and keep its subjects subservient or to influence society for state gains.

However, censorship and bans invite creativity in the evasion of them. Although (or perhaps because) early modern plays were censored, a significant part challenged the social hierarchy in subtle ways: by symbols, images, and other hidden meanings. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet says: “The purpose of playing […] is, to hold as’t were the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (*Hamlet*, 3.2.20-4). In many ways, theatre in early modern England acted as the mirror mentioned by Hamlet, representing and challenging society on the stage. Specifically, the location of the stage was an important factor in the making of this mirror, as ‘the Liberties’ were “the physical and ideological site of convergence for a panoply of perceived innovations and perversions” (Montrose, 1996, p. 35), meaning that “part of what is manifested in them will be the vulnerability of the social structure itself” (Mullaney, 1988, p. 38). Therefore, permanent theatres were built in the ideal location for the representation of society since performances were seen by the most diverse audience available in contemporary London. Such a convergence of varied roles in society invited Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights to make a concoction of different representations because at least someone in the audience would understand the hidden message of the playwrights’ works. For example, plays about historical figures were often linked with contemporary rulers, especially evident in Queen Elizabeth’s famous remark: “I am Richard II; know ye not that?” (Montrose, 1996, p. 79), meaning that she was aware of the connections Shakespeare’s play *Richard II* (and/or its audience) made to the Queen herself. Thus, history plays were a subtle method of representing contemporaneous events and personae. Furthermore, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* exemplifies the fact that theatre could be used as a device to influence and rouse its audience by the play-within-a-play *The Murder of Gonzago*, which, although it represents the fictional events of *Hamlet* and makes the fictional King Claudius feel guilty about killing his brother (*Hamlet,* 3.2), also demonstrates how much contemporary authors like Shakespeare were aware of their own influence on society. Therefore, early modern theatre was a place of representation for a diverse society, and it certainly challenged its audience’s views of the social hierarchy.

To see how Elizabethan theatre challenged social views, one must not look far but into a famous play by a famous playwright: *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe. The history play, first performed in 1594, tells about a king, Edward II, who is so preoccupied with his lover, Gaveston, that he neglects his duties as a king, so the clergy and other nobles overthrow him. Such a play about power struggles at the highest level can easily be interpreted as a commentary on contemporary monarchy and the state (White, 2004, p. 80). An example can be seen in scene 4, where the Bishop of Canterbury threatens the King by saying that “Remember how the Bishop was abused; / Either banish him that was the cause thereof, / Or I will presently discharge these lords / Of duty and allegiance due to thee” (*Edward II,* 4.59-62), which reminded everyone in the audience of their own Queen being excommunicated by Pope Pius V in 1570 (Wagner, 2000, p. 258). The bishop’s lines were also a device to highlight the power struggles at play between church and state and how society had been divided between Catholics and non-Catholics because of such power plays. However, Marlowe does not just represent society in its faults: *Edward II* has a didactic nature, too. By the king answering the question “Why should you love him [Gaveston] whom the world hates so?” (*Edward II,* 4.76) with “Because he loves me more than all the world” (77), Marlowe displays an ideal world of freedom of romance and of sexuality to his audience without any remorse, emphasised by King Edward II’s dying words “Assist me, sweet God, and receive my soul” (24.108) without any mention of sin (White, 2004, p. 85). However, one might interpret the murder weapon being a “hot spit [rod]” (*Edward II,* 24.109) as a visual metaphor/symbol either for the condemnation of sodomy (Melnikoff, 2020, pp. 10-11) or for the “denial of those socially constructed hierarchies that are taken to be natural” (Goldberg, 2010), thus challenging them and encouraging the audience to do the same.

Another example of the rouse of an audience to undermine social structures can be found in a Jacobean play by another famous playwright: Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman.* First performed in 1609 and banned for some time because of an aristocratic scandal, it is a comedy about a nephew, Dauphine, of a wealthy gentleman, Morose, who arranges for his uncle to marry a quiet woman, Epicoene, who turns out to be a man, all in order to gain his inheritance. It is a play of schemes, a major one in the midst of many being a scheme for Dauphine’s friends, Otter and Cutbeard, to act as a lawyer and a cleric and convince Morose that there are no grounds for him to divorce Epicoene. The apparent donning of different roles in society without any major struggles, highlighted by the phrase “Preferment changes any man” (*Epicoene,* 5.3.4-5), invites the audience to contemplate their respective roles and the changeability of them, since different societal roles can be undertaken by anyone willing to change and adapt. Change and malleability was a topic of interest in early modern culture as there were numerous references to Proteus, the ancient Greek god of the sea with the power to transform his appearance. Examples can be found in plays, e.g. how Gaveston in *Edward II* is likened to “Proteus, god of shapes” (*Edward II,* 4.412), as well as in the praise of players’ ability to play fictional characters on the stage, e.g. how Edward Alleyn was remembered by Thomas Heywood as “Proteus for shapes” (1633) and Richard Burbage was remembered by Richard Flecknoe as “a delightful Proteus” (1664). Just as players and their represented characters were seen jumping between social classes in performances, this may have inspired the audience to do the same: to reject societal norms, to create one’s own place in the world, undefined by others. *Epicoene*, a comedy ending in tragedy, a marriage story ending in divorce, or “plain nullity” (*Epicoene,* 5.4.108), is a play that defies expectations (Holdsworth, 2008), and by doing so forces the audience to analyse the comedy and the drama more closely, i.e. it forces playgoers to look behind the surface meaning and draw something more from it, to look inside the window “when the doors are shut” (1.1.111). The play’s parting address to the audience “Spectators, if you like this comedy, rise cheerfully” (5.4.235) is a powerful connection between the play’s fictive world and its hidden messages and the world of the revealed spectators, again forcing the audience to draw parallels and see society in a different light – the play’s light.

To conclude, one can certainly refute Anthony Munday’s claim that early modern theatre encouraged spectators to challenge the social hierarchy by highlighting the fact that it was a state-approved medium/activity which was significantly censored and sometimes even used by the crown as a propaganda dissemination device. However, one can also argue with evidence that a large number of plays avoided the rules of state theatre and challenged societal views with allegorical messages hidden in the symbols, metaphors, wordplays, and rhetoric performed. Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, the second most popular early modern playwrights after Shakespeare, demonstrated how even highly successful plays could hide messages of critical thinking about the church and the state, of freedom of sexuality and romance, of individual and social freedom, and of societal roles, thereby inciting the audience to oppose social norms and old traditions. Thus, one can argue that early modern theatre was a significant enough challenge to Elizabethan and Jacobean England to warrant the anti-theatricalists’ concerns about theatre representing their idea of ‘sin’.

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