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► **To cite this version:**

Clotilde Thouret. Between Jest and Earnest: Ironic Defenses of Theatre in Seventeenth- Century England and France. *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research*, 2015, Writing against the stage, 29/1, pp.35-55. hal-02903462

**HAL Id: hal-02903462**

**<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-02903462>**

Submitted on 21 Jul 2020

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## Between Jest and Earnest: Ironic Defenses of Theatre in Seventeenth-Century England and France

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In *His Supplication to the Divell* (1592), Pierce Penniless defies the members of the Council of London who want to suppress the playhouses: “I will defend it against any cullion, or club-fisted usurer of them all, there is no immortality can be given a man on earth like unto plays” (Nashe, “The Defence of Plays” 129). Two decades later, on the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, Bruscombille, quoting an accusation against the players, replies to it immediately in one of his prologues: “Damn those actors, may canker strike them, no-one has ever seen such money-grabbers, these people only wipe their arses with gold coins, *Nego majorem* [I deny the premise], since as far as I’m concerned that type of money is as rare in my pockets as the shit of a phoenix.” [“Au Diable soient donnés les Comédiens, le Cancre les accueille, on ne vit jamais tant d’attrapeurs d’argent, telles gens ne se torchent le cul que de pistoles, *Nego maiorem*, pour mon regard car cette monnaie-là est rare chez moi comme merde de Phénix”] (Bruscambille, “En faveur de la Comédie du Monde” 549).<sup>2</sup> With their parody of high style, and with the gap between the apparent noble posture of the speaker and the colloquial register, these utterances appear to be rather comical and satirical—and even deeply ironical, given that smut and abuse were some of the more frequent grievances against theatre at the time. The English satirist and the French comic actor were nevertheless real advocates of the theatre, claiming its utility as “a rare exercise of virtue” (Nashe 128) and proclaiming the honesty of the acting trade.<sup>3</sup> Defending the theatre in this way may seem quite strange and unusual, especially to modern readers, accustomed to the imprecations of the violent pamphlets of the anti-theatricalists or to the seriousness of the apologies. Yet Thomas Nashe and Bruscombille are not the only ones to have chosen this satirical or somewhat ironical discourse in the polemics on theatre.

It is to this particular vein of texts, which have been largely overlooked by the critics, that my essay is devoted. In fact, even the corpus of the defenses as a whole is studied far less than the attacks. The majority of the studies on the controversies over theatre in early modern Europe are devoted to the anti-theatrical discourses.<sup>4</sup> This may be explained by the fact that not only are there more texts against theatre than there are apologies for it, but also that they provoke more evident interest. The verve of the style, the curses against the disorder caused by the playhouses, the entertaining stories of desires aroused by the performance, the power of theatre that they denounce but prove at the same time—all this seems more interesting to modern readers than the defenders’ justifications of utility or morality, repeating the same general arguments and the same humanist *topoi* taken from Horace and Cicero. When apologies or vindications are considered, most of the time they are qualified as clumsy or lame by today’s scholars (Clare 64). The three “Caroline defenses” studied by Jonas Barish are judged so unconvincing that they can barely be called defenses (Barish 1986); and, to the

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<sup>1</sup> This work stems from the LABEX OBVIL project. It has received state aid through the Agence Nationale de la Recherche, as part of the “Investissements d’avenir” initiative (ANR-11-IDEX-0004-02). It has also benefited from a fellowship at the Folger Shakespeare Library: the research I did there was invaluable, as was the help I received from the staff.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. I am thankful to Hugh Roberts for his help on the translations of Bruscombille and Guillot-Gorju.

<sup>3</sup> See Roberts and Tomarken’s introduction to their edition of Bruscombille (38-46).

<sup>4</sup> See Barish 1981, Thirouin, Leoni. On the institutionalization and the legitimation of theatre in France under Louis XIII, see Blocker.

attempt of Aubrey Williams to re-evaluate the defenses of the Jeremy Collier controversy (1698), Michael Cordner opposes the “dubious arguments” (214) of William Congreve and the irrelevant defense of John Vanbrugh.

I would like to argue that, at least to some extent, the unfavorable disposition toward the defense of theatre in seventeenth-century England and France is due to the fact that the (sometimes partly) satirical and ironical apologies are disregarded by recent scholars. A whole series of texts use satire and/or irony to defend the theatre, and they do so from the beginning of the polemics (i.e., the end of the sixteenth century in England and the beginning of the seventeenth century in France). These treatises, prologues, tracts, prefaces, and even plays, encapsulate a specific polemical effectiveness and bear witness to a real inventiveness on the defenders’ side. As listing them would be rather tedious, I have gathered them in a table (see appendix 1) about which I will make a few general remarks before distinguishing and analyzing the main ironical devices. I hope to reveal a particular dynamic of the controversies surrounding theatre, which refers to some of their essential features.

### 1. The Corpus of Ironical Defenses

As is often the case when dealing with polemical texts or irony, it is difficult to define a unique formal criterion which marks these texts and distinguishes them from other apologies. It is well known that polemical texts are fundamentally dialogic since every discourse is always a counter-discourse (*contre-discours*) and takes place in a debating field organized around two antagonists’ positions; the strong presence of the opponent and of his discourse is a dominant and particular feature of this kind of corpus (Kerbrat 5; Angenot 33-34). In the texts considered here, this presence is treated more or less overtly with irony, at least in some parts of them. The dramatists or polemicists do not duel with the anti-theatricalist by opposing serious arguments with serious arguments; but rather, they weave and dodge, leaving the common battleground (which supposes a common topic, in the rhetorical sense of the word) to more playful areas of discourse. This satirical attitude does not imply, of course, that the issue is not serious anymore. The irony consists in the way they answer the attacks: the satire or humor which characterizes the figure of the enemy (“cullion, or club-fister”); the scoffing posture they adopt towards the controversy (using foul words in the defense of actors), and the parody or burlesque treatment they apply to the arguments of the opposite side.

Although satire and mockery are usually quite frequent in polemical texts, this attitude and these devices are scarce if not absent in the corpus of the attacks against theatre. The Calvinist of Lyon may briefly adopt a slightly mocking tone, for example when he accuses the Jesuits, for their blasphemous spectacle of the Last Judgement, of having set different seat prices according to the role of the students (*Récit* 4);<sup>5</sup> but the overwhelming majority of anti-theatrical authors are inclined to choose a grave and severe ethos. And most of the defenders, like Georges de Scudéry (*L’Apologie du théâtre*, 1639), l’Abbé d’Aubignac (*Dissertation sur la condamnation des théâtres*, 1666), Sir Philip Sidney (*An Apology for Poetry*, 1595) or John Dennis (*The Usefulness of the Stage*, 1698), adopt the same kind of discursive posture when trying to demonstrate the usefulness or the morality of the theatre.

For Marc Angenot, the “agonic discourses” (“discours agoniques,” as opposed to discourses of knowledge or of science), which aim to demonstrate one thesis and refute the opposite position, can be divided between two polarities, the polemical and the satirical; the latter is characterized by a distant position looking down on the opposite point of view, stressing its absurd nature, and relying on laughter to get the reader to join the author’s side. The apologetical texts registered here tend to mix the satirical style with the more canonical

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<sup>5</sup> The Jesuit’s response points out this ironic tone and its lucianesque inspiration (*Conviction véritable* 6-7).

polemical style in varying degrees, hence their position on a continuum spreading from earnest to jest, from the serious to the facetious or completely ironical defenses which can be very close to paradoxical eulogies or lucianesque satires (see Appendix 1). Similar to these last genres, some of the ironical defenses have a fictional dimension, as in the *Apologie de Guillot-Gorju, adressée à tous les beaux esprits* (1634), where the author invents a reason of State to explain the actors' infamy, or the dedication of *The Bird in a Cage* (1633), where James Shirley pretends that William Prynne has become a fervent supporter of the playhouses (Shirley).<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the only plays taken into account were those which explicitly participated in the controversies over theatre, thus belonging to the polemical corpus as much as to the dramatic one.

The corpus of satirical vindications suggests a few remarks as to where and when, and who and what. The table shows only English and French texts: to my knowledge, there is no equivalent of this satirical trend in Spain or Italy, even though the controversies over theatre were very important in cultural and political debates of the same period.<sup>7</sup> The corpus is circumscribed by the end of the sixteenth and the very beginning of the eighteenth century because my research does not go beyond this period, but similar texts are to be found later in the century. *Tony Aston's Petition and Speech (with his Department) before the Honorable House of Commons, in Behalf of Himself and the Actors in Town and Country* (1735), and Voltaire's article "Police des spectacles" in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) bear witness to the continuing ironical inspiration in the debates.<sup>8</sup> The distribution of the texts reflects the moments of intensity in the controversy in each country: the starting points, in England at the end of the sixteenth century, in France at the beginning of the seventeenth; the 1630s and 1640s with the publication of Prynne's treatise and the Puritan offensive against theatre and the playhouses; the religious attacks (some of them from the Jansenists) in France in the 1660s; and the Collier controversy in 1698.

All the known authors of satirical defenses are of course poets and playwrights; there is no surprise here but there is obviously a link to be made between this satiric vein and the diversity of genres involved in the defense of theatre: letters, plays, prologues, fables, petitions, fake retractions, etc. With this perspective, the relatively high number of ironical defenses at the beginning of the period may also be explained by the humanist satirical tradition still very lively at the time—the influence of Rabelais, for example, is a distinctive feature of Bruscabille's prologues.<sup>9</sup> The figure of Prynne as a favorite target is worth noting (Shirley; Baker; *Mr William Prynne, His Defence*): his militant and accumulative style is easy to parody and having been arraigned and condemned by the Star Chamber to have his ears cropped made the Puritan polemicist an ideal subject for satire.<sup>10</sup> As to the imbalance between the number of French and English texts, it may be explained by a combination of poetical and political factors: the importance of wit in English theatre (satire and burlesque are much more common in libertine and "galant" literature in France) and the strong relationship between the monarchy and the theatre, which was reinforced by the Interregnum and the Restoration, and which gave the defenders a position of strength that even a French actor and playwright like

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<sup>6</sup> See also *Mr William Prynne, His Defence of Stage-Plays*.

<sup>7</sup> In Spain, the polemic which develops in 1682 and 1683 around Guerra's *Aprobación de las Comedias de D. Pedro Calderón* is an exception, with two anonymous satirical texts, even though they belong to the detractor's side: *Dudas curiosas sobre la aprobación del P. Guerra* and the *Arbitraje político militar contra el P. Guerra*.

<sup>8</sup> A facetious dialogue can be read under the title *Thespis on tryal*, by a mysterious John Geier. It is visibly a forgery, yet proving retrospectively the existence of a tradition.

<sup>9</sup> See Roberts and Tomarken's introduction to their edition of Bruscabille (passim).

<sup>10</sup> Prynne's denunciation of women actors as "notorious whores" in the index of his *Histrion-Mastix* was regarded as a personal attack on the Queen. He was brought before Star Chamber and found guilty of sedition, for which he was sentenced to have his ears cropped, fined £5,000 and imprisoned for life.

Molière did not have. More generally, the French defenses do not satirize explicitly named opponents and use a far less biting irony than the English ones.

## 2. Oblique Polemics

Four main ironical forms are identified in this corpus: the satire of the opponent, the parody of the polemic, the use of paradoxical arguments, and deceitful vindication.

The satire of the anti-theatricalist is of course the most frequent and the most obvious form: holding up the opponent to the ridicule by *ad personam* attack is one of the most efficient ways to disqualify his discourse.<sup>11</sup> It is a well-known strategy, used in almost every polemical field, but it is particularly developed in the controversies over theatre and especially in the defenses. As a whole, the satirical defenses draw a coherent picture of the enemy, who gradually becomes a recurrent character close to a fictional type: hypocritical, melancholic, avaricious, cantankerous, obsessed with obscenities in the plays because he is himself lecherous, and most of all resentful: his hatred of the theatre is rooted in the comical denunciations of his own vices.

Thomas Lodge's *Reply to Stephen Gosson's School of Abuse, in Defence of Poetry, Music, and Stage Plays* (1579) is very interesting in this regard, all the more so since it is the first English apologetic treatise. Lodge constantly addresses Gosson by name in his defense. He incorporates the repentant actor and playwright—soon to become an Anglican priest—into his demonstration while satirizing him at the same time. He starts by claiming mistakes in Gosson's use of philosophical, historical, or literary authorities and after a few examples, alludes with superiority to his not having received a college degree:

Alas simple Irus, beg at knowledge's gate awhile; thou hast not won the mastery of learning. Wean thy self to wisdom, and use thy talent in zeal not for envy; abuse not thy knowledge in dispraising that which is peerless. I should blush, from a player to become an envious preacher, if thou had zeal to preach. (8)

Later in the text, when it comes to the abuses of the "pipers" that Lodge thinks could be reformed, he follows the same tune: "I fear me you will be politick with Machiavel, not zealous as a prophet" (32).

These accusations of hypocrisy turn back on the enemies of theatre the reproaches that they often formulate against actors. In particular, combined with the lack of knowledge, they contribute to depriving Gosson's discourse of all legitimacy. Other passages present more explicit and witty invective when Lodge turns again to the figure of his adversary to show the moral usefulness of comedy: "How bravely discovereth Terence our imperfection in his *Eunuch*? How neatly deciphereth he Davus? How pleasantly painteth he out Gnatho? Whom, if we should seek in our days, I suppose he would not be far from your person" (4). By his faithful mimetic representation, Terence's theatre offers his readers-spectators a tool for deciphering the world and men, vices, and virtues. The best proof of this is the character of Gnatho, the parasitical flatterer of a braggart soldier in whom one can see Gosson himself. At the end of the treatise, Lodge returns to the idea of antique comedy as a moral censure: "[...] there was no abuse but these men reprehended it. A thief was loath to be seen on their spectacles; a coward was never present at their assemblies; a backbiter abhorred that company; and I myself could not have blamed you (Gosson) for exempting your self from this theatre" (37). Without being fully formulated, the attack is clear: Gosson hates the theatre

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<sup>11</sup> On the difference between the argument *ad hominem* and the argument *ad personam*, see Declercq.

because it denounces the vices and failings of which he himself is guilty. His criticism is just a disguised form of vengeance against this effective tool of moral reform.

This principle of defense is also found in Bruscambille's work ("En faveur de la scène"), and the clearest formulation, although more serious, is found in the preface to *Tartuffe* (1669): the hypocrites will not tolerate being publicly mocked and denounced and, under the cover of religion, have launched an unprecedented offensive against this comedy in particular and against the theatre in general (2: 91). It is not surprising that Thomas Brown takes up the same idea when he transposes *La Critique de l'École des femmes* (1663) onto the English controversy in *The Stage-Beaux Toss'd in a Blanket, or Hypocrisie Alamode; Expos'd in a True Picture of Jerry -- A Pretending Scourge to the English Stage* (1704).<sup>12</sup> Brown's "Epistle Dedicatory to Christopher Rich, esq. Patentee of the Theater-Royal" makes very explicit that the anti-theatricalist is taking revenge over the exposition of his vices,<sup>13</sup> and the idea is embodied in the character of Sir Jerry Witwoud, in whom the anti-theatre discourse of Collier is combined with the character of Tartuffe. Fulminating against the smut, profaneness, and blasphemy of the stage and arguing for the suppression of all sources of pleasure (even lavatories), he seeks to seduce the prude Clemene, and gets carried away to the point of violence, before being surprised by the whole company in the last act (Brown 58). While he asks that his madness should not be revealed to the poets, Urania and Dorimant resolve on the contrary to disclose it to them in order to expose this vice.

With the character of Witwoud, Brown continues a satirical vein often developed by the defenders in the second half of the century to respond to attacks against the immorality—and more particularly the obscenity—of comedy: the *theatrophobe's* obsession with filth and sex. The reasoning is the following: comedy is honest and innocent—it is its enemies that see evil in it where there is none, since they have dirty minds. Baker had already underlined Prynne's complacency in recounting the baseness of Elagabalus and Tiberus (55), but it is Molière who gives the argument all its force with the character of Climène in *La Critique de l'École des femmes*.<sup>14</sup> She arrives in Uranie's salon, having come out of the theatre where she saw *L'École des femmes* (1663). She is scandalized by the play, in particular by the obscenity of Agnès's "le." Her violent and very physical reaction (she can hardly stand, uttering constant exclamations, and surprised that Uranie is not having "convulsions")—but in fact her repeated indignation betrays her obsession. Softening the force of the attack by using a conditional, Uranie says: "Elle [Agnès] ne dit pas un mot qui de soi ne soit fort honnête; et si vous voulez entendre dessous quelque autre chose, c'est vous qui faites l'ordure, et non pas elle, puisqu'elle parle seulement d'un ruban qu'on lui a pris" [She does not say one word that is not thoroughly honest; and if you want to hear something else underneath her discourse, you are the one that makes it filth, since she only speaks of a ribbon that has been taken away] (Molière 3.493). Brown's denunciation is more explicit. Witwoud is described in the cast list as having "a sagacious nose in finding out smut or obscenity"—besides, during the discussions about Collier's treatises, characters denounce, several times, the propensity of the former clergyman to see obscenities everywhere, something that tends to pervert the mind of his readers (17, 26, 44-46).

The attack was not new, and Vanbrugh had already used the argument. An article does not provide enough space to pick up all the mocking insinuations about Collier that are to be

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<sup>12</sup> The play, performed in 1704, repeats the characters and the dialogues of *La Critique de l'École des femmes* almost exactly (act 1), while amplifying the text and the action (acts 2 and 3).

<sup>13</sup> "But indeed the Stage has no Enemies but such as are hypocrites and real enemies to vertue, because the stage is a profess'd enemy to them and their darling vices" (a1v°).

<sup>14</sup> On obscenity in the play and the quarrel, in particular its provocative and accusing aspect, see Lecercle, and also Dejean (84-121). On the quarrel of *L'École des femmes* as an episode in the controversy over theatre, see Thouret.

found throughout his *Short Vindication* (1698), which is one of the wittiest defenses in the corpus. On the subject of *The Relapse* (1696), Vanbrugh declares (or rather pretends) that he cannot see where the profaneness lies in the comparison between the way a priest examines the Biblical text and the way in which Worthy praises Berinthia's body. He adds:

I refer myself to the reader here again, whether this gentleman [the author of *The Short View*] does not give us another instance of his having a very quick nose, when some certain things are in the wind. I believe had the obscenity he has routed up here been buried as deep in his churchyard, the yarest boar in his parish wou'd hardly have tost up his snout at it. (26)

As Vanbrugh argues, the vigilance of the former priest and his readiness to accuse an author of profanity or immorality say much more about the polemicists than about the plays that he condemns. In fact, they demonstrate the condemner's constant preoccupation with the most trivial and dirty things, and even his instinctive, bestial obsession, since his intuition in these matters is more developed than a boar's sense of smell.<sup>15</sup>

This accusation is made more frequently in the second half of the century, and this is no doubt because the polemics are focused more often than before on specific, quoted texts. This allegation does, however, carry a similar weight to other satirical observations by the defenders of the theatre. Confronting them about their avarice (Nashe, Guillot-Gorju, Brown) or their melancholy (Guillot-Gorju), their resentment, or their hypocrisy, is a way of psychologizing their offensive against the theatre, reducing it to a settling of personal scores. From this point of view, plays that transfer the polemic onto the stage are particularly effective, since the ridiculous nature of the opponent is not only an insinuation or an interpretation of his behavior, it is fully embodied in the character and his actions. What fiction can lose in reality, it regains in the strength of portrayal.

Finding inspiration in Molière, who had neutralized the accusations of vulgarity and obscenity by putting them in the mouths of a ridiculous Marquis and a "Précieuse," Brown forestalls some of Collier's criticisms through the character of Lord Vaunt-Title. He combines the characteristics of the Marquis and the poet Lysidas (both characters of the *Critique*), explicitly evoking the grievances found in Collier's treatise. Returning from the playhouse where he has been with Clemene, Lord Vaunt-Title launches into an indictment with varied arguments (8-9): he complains of promiscuity and the way in which the theatre gives equal weight to the judgment of common people ("the very Footmen in the Upper Gallery") and that of the nobility; he stigmatizes actors, these "saucy rogues," who have not wanted to take his play, and finally he condemns the impudent playwrights who make "fools" of their characters who belong to the nobility.<sup>16</sup> These criticisms may refer back to one of these models, but they all have the same underlying motive: narcissism. Far from being based on reason, their only reason is the vanity of Lord Vaunt-Title, so that in the end, through the intervention of *theatrophobes*, *The Stage-Beaux* discredits the discourse of those opposed to the theatre or even the polemic itself, which then becomes an ideal subject for comedy.

Several decades earlier, Ben Jonson had also transferred the controversy onto the theatre stage and used dramatic fiction to respond to the attacks of the Puritans. In *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), the dispute that pits Zeal-of-the-Land Busy against Leatherhead's puppet Dionysus is a transfer of the polemic that is both fairly literal and totally parodic.

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<sup>15</sup> A similar accusation is found on p. 7 and p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Collier extensively criticizes this tendency of comedy to give noble characters libertine, debauched, or foolish characteristics (*Short View* 140-75) and gives it a clear political intent: "I hope the poets don't intend to revive the old project of levelling, and vote down the house of peers" (175).

Pretending to fulfill the needs of a pregnant woman (his protégé's daughter) and on the pretext of demonstrating his hatred for Judaism (and so distancing himself from this religion to which he and his brothers are accused of belonging), the Puritan goes to the fair to eat pork. When Leatherhead, the puppeteer, begins his performance, the show is interrupted by Busy, who comes onstage shouting "Down with Dagon!" (Jonson 5.5.1), and tries to fight with the puppets. To make this violent outbreak more civilized, Edgworth the robber suggests a "disputation" (5.5.28). Leatherhead delegates the defense to the puppet Dionysus, since he says that, "I am not well studied in these controversies between the hypocrites and us" (5.5.30-31). There follows an exchange of arguments, in which the puppet defends himself against the Puritans' accusations, asserting the legal authorization of the Master of Revels, his involvement with the commonwealth, the absence of profanity in his acting, and, in particular, the fact that he does not dress as a woman, for he has no sex, which he proves by lifting up his clothes. Busy accepts defeat ("I am confuted" [5.5.101]) and takes his place in the audience.

With this scene, Jonson implements a triple polemical strategy. First, he reformulates the debate to control the arguments, and to give it a largely political and sociological orientation.<sup>17</sup> Then, by satirizing an enemy of the theatre, he disqualifies his attack: on the one hand he is a ridiculous character and on the other hand, he is in fact guilty of what he accuses the theatre of being—Busy is a hypocrite, he is profane, and he abandons himself to the pleasures of the flesh, behaving like a parasite who has no place in the commonwealth. Finally, Jonson inserts a comic and parodic transposition of the controversy. This scene is the real climax of the play, marked by its hysterical character and its excess of insults. The parody rests mainly on two aspects: the opponents, and the location of the dispute itself. Busy is disqualified from the start of the play, and as for his opponent, after all he is just a puppet. This can be interpreted in two ways: either the arguments of the opponents of theatre are worthless because even a puppet can answer them, or the Puritans are also puppets. In addition, Jonson sets the controversy at a fair, with all its licentiousness and carnivalesque associations. This is a way of debasing the debate by reducing it to a dispute no more significant than all the others that take place at a fair, that is, to outbursts from men in varying states of drunkenness, to a form of *nonsense*.

Other defenses play with *nonsense* more directly, and have no hesitation in going as far as a paradoxical repetition of the *theatrophobic* accusations or arguments, thus adopting a clearly provocative attitude. Nashe, for example, put himself in a place similar to the opponents of the theatre when he defends "plays" as lesser evil—a pastime without any particular dignity. Their primary use is to occupy the minds so as to avoid rebellion; their second use is to be the least harmful of pleasures enjoyed by gentlemen of the court and the Inns of Court, captains, and soldiers ("gaming, following of harlots, drinking, seeing a play" (127-28)).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, those who seek to close the theatres are none other than the managers who want to see spectators return to their taverns ("The Confutation of Citizens' Objections against Players" 130). However, these arguments, which arise from a statement between jest and earnest, are not the only ones put forward by Nashe: they are mixed with other, more serious arguments about the power of the exemplary nature of the military exploits portrayed, the moral usefulness of the theatre, or even the honesty of the actors.

The tone of Bruscombille's prologues is in fact fairly close to Nashe's. Besides the topical arguments, Bruscombille employs an absurd reasoning, for example, when he justifies the profession of actor with the idea of the *theatrum mundi* ("Les Pithagoriens"); other lines

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<sup>17</sup> Jonson therefore ignores the arguments that he might have formulated against a certain use of theatre: personal satire, and the immorality of intrigues, in particular through abandon to love poetry likely to arouse a guilty concupiscence. It is from this perspective that one can understand the play with the *theatrophobic* argument against cross-dressing.

<sup>18</sup> See also *The Stage-Players Complaint*.



of reasoning border on an almost blasphemous exaggeration, for example, when he evokes the great characters and the famous poets who have trodden the boards, pastiching the style of the *theatrophobes*' curses ("En faveur de la scène"):

Or puisque les passés et les présents vont défendant notre cause, retirez-vous sacrilèges scandaleux, fuyez de ce lieu sacré, allez esprits farouches, hommes satyriques, n'entrez dans ce temple: car vous y êtes déjà assez sacrilèges; si d'aventure vous y venez, les Muses toutes puissantes feront paraître vos actions autant éloignées de la vertu, que les nôtres nous élèvent près d'icelles.<sup>19</sup> (504)

But the most remarkable prologue from this point of view is undoubtedly "Des accidents comiques," in which Bruscombille proposes to show that comedy must occupy the top place ("comédie doit tenir le premier rang") among all the "vacations," that is, all the occupations or responsibilities (420). The project announces its burlesque character straightaway, and most of the text arises out of the paradoxical praise. In fact, the acting profession is commended, with its wandering life, stage names that reveal the absence of social status, brawls and saucy conversations in taverns, and so on—so many aspects of the trade's condemnation. These practices that border on the absurd, the twists and surprises, are not without polemical effectiveness, since they fend off the opposite argument which is therefore turned upside down.

In his defense of the actor's status, Guillot-Gorju reveals witty eloquence of the same masterly and facetious order. He emphasizes the usefulness of the trade in a republic, arguing that actors deserve a fair salary equal to other trades (perfumers, pastrycooks, silver- and goldsmiths). He legitimizes acting by underlining the glory that it gives to French poetry or quoting examples from ancient times. Bit-by-bit, however, his assertion veers off course, and the principal justification that he puts forward is the pleasure that acting gives to the public. He knows about Plato's objection, he says, but who would want to follow a philosopher who wanted to introduce the community of women into his Republic ("introduire la communauté des femmes dans sa République")?

Bannir les Comédiens de la vie civile et commune, ce serait ôter les histoires des livres, les belles femmes du monde, la foire Saint Germain du cours de l'année, les confitures des galeries de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne, et le Gros-Guillaume de la comédie même. En un mot, ce serait faire un affront à la nature qui nous inspire insensiblement ces desseins.<sup>20</sup>  
(Guillot-Gorju 8)

Fair, farce, women, jam:<sup>21</sup> the continuation of the apology prolongs this idea of comedy as one of the greatest pleasures of life, the place from which one emerges happiest. Certainly, it is a pleasure that should not be abused, but one justified by nature (which gave pleasure to

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<sup>19</sup> "Now, since past and present [statesmen and poets] are defending our cause, be gone, scandalous defilers, flee this holy place, go away savage minds and satyrs, do not enter this temple, because you already defile it enough; if by chance you come here, the all-powerful Muses will reveal your actions that are as far removed from virtue as ours raise us close to them."

<sup>20</sup> "To banish actors from the commonwealth would be like removing the stories from books, beautiful women from the world, the foire Saint-Germain from the calendar, sweet-meats from the Hôtel de Bourgogne galleries, and Gros-Guillaume from comedy itself. In a word, it would be an affront to nature, which imperceptibly inspires us to these purposes."

<sup>21</sup> Robert Guérin (1554-34), said Gros-Guillaume, was a very popular comic actor who performed in farces at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where jam was sold to spectators for them to eat during performances.

animals for the perpetuation of the species), medicine, rhetoric (which suggests an honest mockery to make judges laugh on occasion), and politics (which teaches that princes need to enjoy themselves). Such a claim for pleasure, and for a sensory pleasure, is a little surprising if one remembers that the opponents of theatre choose precisely that as one of their principal targets and that the apologists generally seek to challenge this. The suggestion is obviously ironic, and the discourse arises out of a comic register, but the real part of the theatrical experience evoked in this prologue cannot be ignored.

Guillot-Gorju's apology also alludes to the performance being a place where men and women meet and seduce each other, another major grievance in the discourse condemning the theatre. At the end of the century, Jean-François Regnard also emphasizes this topical criticism to increase the comic content of his prologue to *Les Chinois*, performed at the Théâtre-Italien in 1692. A very young girl (played by Pierrot) comes to complain to Apollo and Thalia that her mother refuses to take her to "Les Italiens" because of the obscene jokes and the immorality of the plays. Apollo (whose role is given to Columbine) recites the arguments expected from the apology like a boring lesson, but Thalia (played by Arlequin) encourages her to go to the theatre without her mother knowing: the Muse recognizes that pretty girls attract boys at the theatre, and thinks that to suppress the obscene words ("mots éveillés") would chase the customers away ("désachalander le théâtre"; Prologue 2.601-04). The text therefore rests on an ironic and playful mixing up of speeches and positions, which corresponds to the cross-dressing in the distribution of roles. The ironic joke that consists of exploiting the more-or-less real fantasy of a hyper-eroticism of the theatre, involving the actors and the intrigues as much as the audience, is found at the heart of other texts that arise from the defense of the theatre: the epilogue to *As You Like It* (1599), *The Bird in a Cage*, and *The Actors Remonstrance* (1643). This last text makes the case for actors, for example, while deploring the fact that, deprived of income, they are no longer appreciated by their tavern companions and their mistresses can no longer maintain them.<sup>22</sup> In all these cases, one can see that certain accusations from the *theatrophobes* are repeated, then reversed in justification, or claimed as comprising all the interest of the theatrical phenomenon, with the constant risk of heterodoxy. There is fairly flagrant provocation—it is sometimes more hidden and it is this form of irony which I will dwell upon before my conclusion.

Some defenses are presented as serious discourses, but although they are not entirely facetious, they present nonetheless a form of double-speak. They answer the question of the legitimacy and morality of the theatre by adopting a consensual system of values and the same moral *doxa* as the enemies—at least in appearance, since the argumentation is trapping and the discourse is misleading. Despite everything, authors remain real supporters of the theatre, but their apologies are in fact based on principles beyond those they state. Two texts come from this type of discourse: *La Lettre sur la comédie de l'imposteur* (1667), published anonymously during the quarrel of *Tartuffe*, and *A Short Vindication of the Relapse and the Provok'd Wife from Immorality and Prophaneness* by Vanbrugh (1698). The misleading character of the first arises from the libertine dissimulation, while that of the second, from the libertine wit of its author.

I will not go into detail about *La Lettre sur la comédie de l'imposteur*, since Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, who renewed the reading of the text, considers at length the subversive aspects of the text. To defend Molière, the author begins by narrating in detail the hitherto-prohibited play, which is in itself a form of challenge to the censure. Then, in the second part, he defends the possibility of theatre portraying religion and endeavors to show the moralizing effect of comedy, notably insofar as it moves spectators away from seduction or licentiousness ("galanterie"). As Cavaillé shows, the arguments skillfully introduce a concept

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<sup>22</sup> For the epilogue to *As You Like It*, see Lecercle.

of religion and morality that is irreconcilable with Christianity (§24). The anonymous author in fact justifies the theatre by a moral philosophy of reason and nature, grounded in epicurean and libertine traditions. For example, he makes ridicule, and the pleasure that accompanies its perception, the source of the moral effect of comedy, explaining that the laughter aroused by comedy is a sensible reaction of moral reason, when faced with indecency, considered as a mark of unsuitability (§44).

In his treatise, Vanbrugh proclaims that he is in agreement with Collier on the moral standpoint of comedy, which should be “a discouragement to vice and folly” (4), and he claims to want to shed light on the polemicist’s error regarding the theatre in general and his plays in particular. But far from being on the defensive or delivering a “genial and good-natured” defense (as George Coleman says in his edition of the play), the flamboyant member of the Kit-Kat Club presents a text full of wit, whose concessions to morality are in the end fairly slight, or even non-existent. The venomous insinuations about his adversary that I have highlighted above were already in this vein. His precise answers on the subject of his own plays go further again: falsely orthodox justifications, revealing a playwright who handles provocation with an accomplished wit.

Collier reproached the playwright for the profaneness of his plays and particularly condemned the impiety of *The Provok’d Wife*:

In the last act, Razor makes his discovery of the plot against Bellinda in Scripture phrase:

“Bellinda—I must know who put you upon all this mischief.

Razor—Satan and his equipage. Woman tempted me, Lust weakened,—and the Devil overcame me: as fell Adam, so fell I.

Bellinda—Then pray, Mr Adam, will you make us acquainted with your Eve?

Razor, unmasks Mademoiselle, and says—This is the Woman that tempted me. But this is the Serpent (meaning lady Fanciful) that tempted the woman.” (77)

To which Vanbrugh responds: “How the Scripture is affronted by this, I can’t tell; here’s nothing that reflects upon the Truth of the Story; it may indeed put the audience in mind of their forefather’s crime, and his folly, which in my opinion, like the *gunpowder-treason* ought never to be forgot” (14).

It is difficult to see a response in completely good faith here—unless one supposes some kind of stupidity on the part of the playwright. He pretends not to see the blasphemy and to be blind to the comic debasement wrought by the comparison between Adam and a valet who has given in to his concupiscence. Then he invents a totally improbable effect on the public (the reminder of original sin), before adding another blasphemy: the parallel between original sin and the Gunpowder Plot. This last addition obviously refers to Collier being a non-juror, and an outlawed priest, for having absolved two men implicated in the Assassination plot—and through the allusion to the Jesuit Treason, Vanbrugh nearly accuses him of being a Catholic, hence a hypocrite.

On the subject of the immodesty of the same play, Vanbrugh also has recourse to a misleading and ironic defense. This occurs in one of the scenes where Lady Brute and her cousin Bellinda exchange secrets: in the evening, in Lady Brute’s bedroom, they raise the subject of the obscene jokes in comedy that place women in a double-bind. If women laugh, they show that they understand; if they do not laugh, they also reveal that they understand, because if they did not, they would laugh anyway as one does in company. And they deplore the demand for modesty to which they are subject:

Bellinda—*Yes, Mens Fantasque, that obliges us to it: If we quit our Modesty, they say we lose our Charms; and yet they know that very Modesty is Affectation, and rail at our Hypocrisy.*

Now which way this Gentleman will extract any thing from hence, to the Discouragement of Modesty, is beyond my Chemistry: 'Tis plainly and directly the contrary. Here are two Women (not over Virtuous, as their whole Character shews), who being alone, and upon the rallying Pin, let fall a Word between Jest and Earnest, as if now and then they found themselves cramp'd by their Modesty. But lest this shou'd possibly be mistaken by some part of the Audience, less apprehensive of Right and Wrong than the rest, they are put in mind at the same Instant, That (with the Men) if they quit their Modesty, they lose their Charms: Now I thought 'twas impossible to put the Ladies in mind of any thing more likely to make 'em preserve it. (8-9)

Once again, the playwright plays the innocent and pretends not to see the dishonesty of these replies. Collier interprets simple jokes as serious words that, moreover, are uttered by characters who are not altogether virtuous. The scene encourages women to be honest, since Bellinda says that a woman without modesty would no longer be found charming by men.

In addition to the dialogue between the two characters, it is Vanbrugh's justification that is "between jest and earnest." He pretends not to see the ambiguities in his text, and is careful not to spell them out. He quotes his own text, whereas Collier only gives the page—through intellectual honesty, he claims, but also to show the wit and comic quality of his play. Finally, the reason that he gives for women affecting modesty (which charms men) is obviously ironic: first, he makes gallantry the guiding principle for women's actions, and second, what should preserve honesty is in fact the principle of losing it (seduction of/by men). For Cordner, Vanbrugh's defense is not very convincing and the playwright does not see the flaw in his argument. But the contradiction is blatant and can only be intended as witty.

As Robert Hume has shown, if Collier's tracts had practically no impact on Restoration drama, his views "were probably more or less representative of the predominant public opinion" (508)—hence the violent reaction of the playwrights indicating their cultural marginalization. Roger Lund shares a similar view when he suggests that Collier's offensives against wit and the theatre need to be placed in a wider context of moral reformation, which saw in irony the mark of licentiousness and a dangerous form of subversion.<sup>23</sup> There were many who, at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, wished to suppress rhetoric that defied open and direct refutation; in their eyes, the problem was one of public order and the authorities should intervene against speech acts they considered as "inimical to the public good" (Lund 72). In this context, and in light of extracts analyzed above, it seems to me to be difficult to see—as Cordner does<sup>24</sup>—the *Short Vindication* as a denial of the comic quality of the play and an obligatory renunciation of rebellion, identical to that of Lady Brute at the denouement of the comedy (Cordner 222). At a time when taking a heterodox position is practically inconceivable, the avowed orthodoxy of the play as of the

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<sup>23</sup> "Like the witty and blasphemous conversations to be encountered in the coffee houses and clubs, the rhetoric of the theater was regarded as part of a larger attempt, through the exploitation of literary and cultural surrogates, to undermine the power of establishment by the use of various forms of witty and subversive rhetoric" (Lund 90).

<sup>24</sup> I disagree with Cordner only on some of his reading of the *Short Vindication*; I am otherwise indebted to the rest of his analysis of *The Provok'd Wife* and the Collier controversy.

treatise seems rather to be a red herring that permits Vanbrugh to continue to use wit and its enjoyable and troubling effects.

This brief review of satirical defenses and their recurrent ironical devices leads me to formulate several remarks on the way in which they take part in the controversy. These texts are not placed in what one might call the “polemical field,” at least not completely; they do not really enter in a dialogue with the propositions of the opponents of theatre. As Angenot underlines (34), a polemical text has two recipients (*allocutaires*): the opponent at which it is aimed, who needs to be alternatively convinced or refuted, and a neutral witness to the debate, more or less identified with the universal audience. Most of these texts, with their satirical points, their light-hearted treatment of the debate, or even their provocative attitude, do not seek in any way to convince the opponent and only appear to be addressed to him. They are rather openly intended for the neutral witness or a third party—who can be identified with the authorities who can prohibit or authorize theatrical performance—or even at their own party. Appealing to the comic qualities that aim to get those who are laughing on their side clearly goes along these lines.

However, despite this ultimately marginal position in the debates, the defenses are undeniably effective as polemical tools. This effectiveness arises first of all from the disarming power of satire; then, from the strength of the representation found in the fictionalization of polemical exchanges, and finally, from the effects of the paradox and the provocative posturing. Ironically mimicking the *theatrophobic* discourses, restating some of their arguments in a frivolous way, these defenders make a heterodox voice heard which, in a society of consensus like that of the seventeenth century, will in fact only be heard if it is promoted in a light-hearted and ironic way. The situation of actors on the fringes of society, the erotic power of theatre, and the pleasure that it arouses are thus claimed here and there. Thus, these defenses make more visible the underlying issues of the debates, showing that theatre is also the battleground for social, moral, and political conflicts.

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