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Laura Levine
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Introduction

> That time? O times!
> I laugh'd him out of patience; and that night
> I laugh'd him into patience; and next morn,
> Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed;
> Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
> I wore his sword Philippan.
>
> (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.v.18–23)

This book quite literally began with the passage quoted above, the moment in *Antony and Cleopatra* in which Cleopatra reminisces about dressing Antony in her tires and mantles. The moment alludes outward to a particular stage practice, the practice of boy actors wearing women's clothing, but more than that, it alludes to the point at which one might think Renaissance drama would imagine itself most vulnerable: for six decades, three before and three after *Antony and Cleopatra*, the charge that theatre effeminized the boy actors who played women's parts by dressing them in women's costume was the hallmark of Renaissance anti-theatricality. Cleopatra happily rhapsodizing about dressing the passive, drunken Antony in her women's clothing presents, in distilled form, everything that would have horrified those who attacked the stage. Why would a dramatist invoke such a moment? Not merely "invoke" but embody and heighten precisely the attack launched against his own craft? Of course there are other traditions than Renaissance stagecraft encapsulated in the moment; the effeminized Hercules, whose sexual play with Omphale consisted in the exchange of his hairy mantle for her "dainty" girdle; the same Hercules destroyed by another piece of clothing given to him by a woman, the poisoned shirt dipped in centaur's blood; *The Arcadia's* Pyrocles dressed as a woman, complaining that love of a woman has turned him into one. But that Shakespeare invokes these literary traditions of effeminization to characterize Renaissance stage practice itself only makes the passage more problematic. Why should a playwright invoke the very accusations used against him?

In fact, *Antony and Cleopatra* contains other such moments, moments

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which only intensify the problem. In IV.xiii Cleopatra, locking herself in her monument and sending word she is dead, scripts a scene of theatre which sends her audience, Antony, to *his* suicide. And there is evidence that this is precisely the effect she has anticipated. "She had a prophesying fear," says Diomedes, "of what hath come to pass" (IV.xiv.120–1).[1] Such a moment seems to cast theatre itself as something so potent and so dangerous it has the capacity to make its spectator go home and kill himself. It casts theatre, in other words, in terms much more bleak than the terms of the attacks. What does it mean for a dramatist to advance such an argument?

As I turned to other plays, in an attempt to determine to what extent such impulses were idiosyncratic to *Antony and Cleopatra*, I was struck by what seemed an even more disturbing instance of theatre validating the attacks of its attackers in *Troilus and Cressida*, although now these attacks had to do with the sexual charges that anti-theatricalists during the period tended to make about theatre, the accusation that it could "whette desire to inordinate lust" and make the "affections" of the spectator "overflow."[2] In V.ii, in the scene on the walls, Ulysses seems to orchestrate just such a scene of theatre, which engenders in its primary spectator, Troilus, precisely those impulses that attacks against the stage accused theatre of engendering. Hidden in the darkness, Troilus watches Cressida, who is in the process of betraying him, depict for him what is practically a masturbatory fantasy, a rendition of Troilus himself in bed substituting the glove Cressida has given him for herself. What does it mean for a playwright to stage such a moment? Not to "defend" his practice from the attacks lodged against it, but to embody and rehearse precisely those attacks? What would it mean for a playwright to "defend" his work in the first place? In fact, the question is misconceived, for it assumes that pamphleteers attack while playwrights "defend." Both halves of the assumption are faulty, it turns out, for attacks against the stage regularly seem to conceive of themselves *as* plays, as both their structures (divided into acts and scenes) and titles indicate – *Playes Confuted in five Actions*, Gosson calls his second and longest attack. In this confused context, what does it mean for a playwright to rehearse the arguments of his attackers? Clearly one possibility is that the playwright is as "contaminated" by the anxieties of the attacks which we think of him as "defending" against as the attackers are themselves. At any rate, this turned out to be the case in *Troilus and Cressida*, which in certain peculiar ways *behaves* like the anti-theatricality it also anatomizes.

Was such "contamination" peculiar to Shakespeare or somehow built into the nature of Renaissance drama itself? In a sense Jonson seemed a likely place to turn to answer such a question, since his anti-theatricality

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has long been noted, although in terms that have never seemed to me to be terribly satisfying. This is first because descriptions of his anti-theatricality have always been based on *Volpone* and on the poems, and have consequently missed the ways that plays like *Epicoene* and *Bartholomew Fair* actually replicate the specific sexual anxieties that animate pamphlet attacks against the stage.[3] But it is also because of the way accounts of Jonson's anti-theatricality try to salvage Jonson's investment in theatre. In their attempts to try to deal with the problem of Jonson's anti-theatricality (the "problem" being that he wrote plays), critics have always salvaged a coherent Jonson by arguing that Jonson's anti-theatricality was only superficial, directed merely towards the institution of theatre as it was practiced, and not towards that rarified ontological entity, the "essential" play, Jonson's own written text before the industry of the stage compromised it.[4] What such explanations have missed are the actual critiques of anti-theatricality which emerge in Jonson's late plays and which constitute a kind of *anti*-anti-theatricality (a vantage point from which the "logic" of the tracts is rendered absurd and untenable, but from which the fears that motivate that logic are still quite volatile in the playwright himself). This *anti*-anti-theatricality, as it appears both in Jonson and in Shakespeare, provides the beginnings of an answer to why a playwright would rehearse and even heighten or embody the arguments of his attackers.[5] For in rehearsal lies the possibility of a kind of "working out." Playwrights like Shakespeare and Jonson are both contaminated by the anxieties of the attacks they defend against and obsessively bent on coming to terms with them.

If our first expectation coming to this material is that pamphleteers attack and playwrights "defend," and if Shakespeare presents a profound challenge to such an expectation by rehearsing the arguments of his attackers, the second surprise lay for me in the way that Jonson, traditionally assumed to share affinities with anti-theatricality, actually offered a critique of anti-theatricality on just those points on which he might have been assumed to be the most sympathetic, i.e. on the anti-theatrical fantasy that a one-to-one correspondence exists between each "sign" and the "thing" it stands for. To understand this, though, we need to understand more exactly the contradictions built into anti-theatricality itself and the precise role the fantasy of a one-to-one correspondence between sign and thing played in these contradictions.

In fact, at the heart of Renaissance anti-theatricality lay a glaring contradiction. For at the root of pamphlet attacks lay the fear that costume could actually alter the gender of the male body beneath the costume. Theatre "effeminates" the mind, says Stephen Gosson somewhat cryptically in 1579, and four years later Phillip Stubbes makes

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explicit what Gosson has hinted at: that boy actors who wear women's clothing can literally "adulterate" male gender.[6] In the years of mounting pamphlet war this evolves into a full-fledged fear of dissolution, expressed in virtually biological terms, that costume can structurally transform men into women.

But even as they betray this fear, those who attacked the stage proclaim something very different indeed: "garments are set down for signes distinctive betwene sexe and sexe," says Stephen Gosson.[7] Anti-theatricalists claimed (over and over again, in many places using many citations) that costume was the "sign" of gender, even as they betrayed the deeper and more irrational fear that costume could actually alter the gender beneath. Thus at the heart of Renaissance anti-theatricality lay a contradiction which implied an extraordinary mechanism: the tendency to turn to a theory of knowledge to quell the fear that one's gender could dissolve. For to say, as Gosson does, that garments are set down as "signes distinctive" between sex and sex is to assert that knowledge is possible. And the more worried anti-theatricalists became about the possibility of effeminization, the more dogmatically they turned to an epistemology of signs, a faith in a pure referentiality.

Why should anti-theatricalists turn to this epistemology – to any epistemology at all – to quell such a fear? This has been the question that has haunted the writing of this book. And the question it generated in turn: "What did Renaissance playwrights 'do' with such a legacy?" has provided the structural principle for writing the book and dictated its form: what Shakespeare "did" was imagine the world the anti-theatricalists feared, one in which men really could be turned into women. What Jonson "did" was imagine the world anti-theatricalists wanted, one built on a faith that "signs" really could lead to things, a world built on a faith in pure referentiality.

But to say that what Jonson "did" was "imagine" such a world is to tell only part of the story. For what he did when he imagined this world was to suggest that it was ultimately untenable. Thus at the center of both *Epicoene* and *Bartholomew Fair* are figures who simultaneously embody the worlds the anti-theatricalists long for and are doomed in this very enterprise: Morose, so bent on constructing a language of pure signs that he misses the fact that he is marrying a boy and nearly brings on the very experiences anti-theatricalists fear: homoeroticism, near-castration, and the recognition that he is "no man." Or the puppet Dionysius in *Bartholomew Fair* who has "nothing" under his clothing and who simultaneously represents the supreme anti-theatrical fantasy of sanitization – with no sexual equipment, he is immune from the seductions anti-theatricalists fear – and the destruction of what they cherish: for with "nothing" under

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his clothing he has no "thing" for the costume, the "sign," to refer to, and thus represents the destruction of referentiality itself.

Why should anti-theatricalists turn to a fantasy of pure reference to quell the fear that gender can dissolve? Why should they turn to an epistemology at all? In some way, it seemed, the epistemology must offer an opposite, an antidote to the fear, but to see this it was necessary to isolate this principle in a series of related texts.

But what texts would these be? In a sense, the fear that costume can alter the gender beneath it is only a specific version of a much more profoundly "magical" idea that representations in general can alter the things they are only supposed to represent. But to dismiss this as "magical thinking" is to miss the way that in the Renaissance such thinking lay, almost literally, at the heart of texts about magic and witchcraft, texts bent on the extermination of witches. Thus King James' *Daemonologie*, the most influential English text on witchcraft, if only because of its author's political stature, shares a fundamental contradiction with anti-theatrical tracts of the period. Although it *claims* that magic itself is merely a series of representations (figures, illusions, pictures merely formal in nature) it *acts* as if these representations had a constitutive power – a power to alter and unman the male body itself.

Daemonologie doesn't, as anti-theatrical tracts do, turn to a coherent and systematic epistemology of signs to quell its fears. But *Newes from Scotland*, the text that in a sense "explains" *Daemonologie*, in its picture of how the king put his beliefs into practice, does just that. Here, the "sign" which is believed to guarantee certainty is not costume, but the "mark" that the devil leaves on a given witch. It frequently takes torture to "discover" this sign, but what is crucial here is the anxiety that makes such a discovery *necessary*. At the heart of *Newes from Scotland* is the same fear that dominates anti-theatrical tracts, but escalated to a more desperate level, the fear of sympathetic magic, that the shirt that is only supposed to stand for the king can actually kill the king, the fear that representations can actually alter the things they are merely supposed to represent.

What can such a text tell us about anti-theatricality? How can it help us to answer the original question, "Why should anti-theatricalists turn to this particular epistemology of signs, to an epistemology at all, as consolation for the idea that men can be turned into women?" *Newes from Scotland* suggests a general principle of use in answering this question, for more starkly here than anywhere else the epistemology men seek to construct is the opposite of what they fear. If they fear that representations can alter, they are willing to torture to restore the idea that representations merely signify.

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More information

If we apply this principle to understanding the specific relation between the fear of effeminization that dominates anti-theatrical tracts and the epistemology of signs anti-theatricalists turn to as consolation, it suggests that here, too, the relation must be one of opposites. Why turn to a system of knowledge at all to quell the anxiety that it is possible to turn into a woman? Why not turn one's rage against women or assert with renewed vigor that one is a man? In fact, anti-theatricalists do both things, but if we turn the question around and ask what the consolation tells us about the fear, the specific consolation offered by an epistemology of signs suggests that the fear of effeminization must be in part about the experience of doubt itself. At stake in the fear of effeminization must be a basic doubt: "What am I?" – as if one of the primitive, fundamental categories of knowledge for these tract writers were, "What am I, man or woman?" The consolation offered by a faith in referentiality must be that it generalizes: if we live in a world where "signs" always lead inevitably to things, then those things must be fixed, always what they are and unsusceptible to change. And if we live in a world in which this is so, then one of the things that must be fixed and unsusceptible to change is gender itself. Thus the naive epistemology at the heart of anti-theatricality seems to promise anti-theatricalists both that the genders will remain fixed and that the doubt that is triggered by the idea of them changing can be erased. Although, as we shall see, even this is an inadequate formulation, since the promise required is really that one gender remain fixed, the one that is so badly feared to be capable of change, masculinity itself.

All of these texts and all of the chapters about these texts are about doubt. Chapter 1, "Men in women's clothing," is about the doubt that men are really men (or able to stay men), about the model of the self that generates this fear, and about the epistemology that serves as a way of containing or managing it. The Jonson chapters are about the way that epistemology generally fails to deliver the certainty or security that those who turn to it look for. The witchcraft chapters are about the violence that erupts when that epistemology can not be successfully established. The Shakespeare chapters are much more centrally about the subjective experience of doubt, what it feels like and why those who choose to create it in others do so: "*Troilus and Cressida* and the politics of rage" is about the cultivation of doubt, not in the way Montaigne employs such a notion, as a purge for violent emotion, but in just the opposite way, about the cultivation of doubt as a means of producing violent rage, because in the experience of that rage men can be trusted to "act" and perform like warriors, and thus like men. But the need for such a performance implies a much more fundamental kind of doubt that is of even greater interest to me, a doubt that is, in a sense, the true subject of this book. For it implies

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More information

that men are only men in the performance of their masculinity (or, put more frighteningly, that they are not men except in the performance, the constant re-enactment of their masculinity) – or, and these are the implications I am particularly interested in, that they have no way of knowing they are men except in the re-enactment, the relentless re-enactment, of their own masculinity. The texts examined in this book give quite a lot of information about what this state of affairs would feel like and about the particular type of powerlessness they would induce.

As such, they have the potential for offering a kind of corrective or qualifier to what for me has been the most suggestive and important strain of Renaissance criticism in the last couple of decades. Ever since 1975, when Stephen Orgel quoted Elizabeth I as saying "We princes, I tell you, are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world," the tendency to think of power as expressing itself in theatrical ways during the Renaissance has been implicit in New Historicism.[8] But this tendency has steadily grown. From Orgel's citation of Elizabeth to Stephen Greenblatt's repetition of the same passage as evidence that "Elizabethan power ... *depends* upon its privileged visibility" (italics mine), is "constituted" in theatrical celebrations, to Jonathan Goldberg's insistence (invoking Foucault) that "for the period we are concerned with, power is manifested in the spectacle," at least one strand of New Historicism has increasingly come to view power as existing *only* in the theatricalization of itself.[9] Foucault, such an authority for New Historicism, puts the claim in what are perhaps its strongest terms when he tells us we should think of power as "exercised" (enacted, acted out) "rather than possessed."[10] Over a decade and a half of criticism, as the insights of New Historicism have solidified, it has been marked by a tendency to think of power as existing only in the enactment, the performance of itself.

But there are at least two things about this view that are (to me) highly problematic. The first is the failure to acknowledge the epistemology that such an ontology of power logically implies. For if there were really no power except in the theatricalization of power, there would be no knowledge of power except in the theatricalization of power, and in the absence of such a theatricalization, what one would be left with would be a profound sense of powerlessness. Hypothetically, then, if New Historicism were "right," there would be an acute sense of *powerlessness*, not being talked about, but being passed over by the critics in their discussions of Renaissance texts, a sense of powerlessness that is implicit in the texts I consider.

Secondly, as New Historicism has broadened its scope, and in the process extended the number of things it has come to conceive of as existing only in the performance of themselves, it has been marked by a

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More information

striking omission. As New Historicism has come more and more to construct the Renaissance itself in theatrical terms, it has viewed not only power as existing in the enactment of itself, but selves and reality as well. Consider Greenblatt on *1 Henry IV* (in "Invisible Bullets," but articulating the concerns of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*) when he says that "it is by no means clear that such a thing as a natural disposition exists in the play as anything more than a theatrical fiction."[11] Or Jonathan Goldberg in an even more comprehensive moment when he says of the Renaissance, "The public sphere, the realm of the gaze, constitutes reality as a theatrical space."[12] But if New Historicism has extended the number of things it construes as existing only in the performance of itself, it has been marked by a striking failure to consider that gender too may exist only in the theatricalization of itself, only insofar as it is performed.[13] Why has New Historicism failed to apply its own insights to the issue of gender, to see the degree to which in Renaissance texts masculinity itself apparently must be staged in order to exist?

Such a proposal has emerged from other quarters, from gay and feminist circles outside of Renaissance studies. Judith Butler makes precisely the point that New Historicism omits, that the "gendered body" has no "ontological status" at all except for the series of actions and performances that create the idea of gender.[14] For Butler this is a liberating possibility, precisely because it is in the failure to repeat these acts (as well as in parody) that the possibility for gender transformation exists. But Butler will not account for the texts this book examines (or for the worlds they depict). Precisely because she is committed to the idea that the "gendered body" has "no ontological status" apart from the acts that create it, she must by definition be equivalently talking about male and female bodies lacking an ontological status apart from the performances that create them. And it is the peculiarity of the texts this book considers to think *only* of masculinity as needing to be performed in order to exist; it is as if femaleness were the default position, the thing one were always in danger of slipping into. The texts I consider call attention to what New Historicism has passed over and left to silence: a kind of *a priori* sense of powerlessness that springs from precisely the fear that there is no real masculinity, no masculine self.[15]

If we ask, "Why is it that it is only masculinity in these texts that needs to be enacted?" the question is susceptible to two kinds of answers. In a general way, for these texts, femininity seems to be the default position, the otherness one is always in danger of slipping into, so nobody ever thinks of it as *needing* to be maintained or performed.[16] But to answer the question with more specificity, we need to ask, "What is the alternative to an enacted masculinity for each of these texts?" That is, for *Antony and*

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More information

Cleopatra, castration, the loss of the sword; for *Troilus and Cressida*, the sense that Helen's "white enchanting fingers" can do more than all the island kings to disarm Hector; for *Epicoene*, the loss of all difference; for *Daemonologie*, where the sense of powerlessness is clearest, the sense of the body as a set of holes; for Prynne, the sense of something "other" where the self is supposed to be. These moments are pressure points where the sense of powerlessness that informs these texts is most nearly articulated, the sense of powerlessness that necessitates the enactment of masculinity. Thus, in a sense, the answer to the question "Why is it masculinity only that has to be enacted in order to exist?" lies for each of these texts in the alternative envisioned to masculinity (castration, porousness, effeminization, otherness), a series of terrifying possibilities one is always in danger of slipping into.

These texts themselves point to what it is that New Historicism has eclipsed or passed over and in that sense offer a critique of New Historicism, even as they ratify one of its deepest insights: that of a culture which conceives of itself (almost compulsively) in theatrical terms. But in isolating the fear that there is no masculinity except in the performance of masculinity, they also isolate a key determinant in a series of phenomena we might ordinarily fail to connect: in hostility toward the stage, the persecution of witches, the attempt to construct an epistemology and language of "signs" devoid of connotation and affect, war itself. All of these phenomena in the texts treated in this book spring from the terror that there is no masculine self. It is this fear and the particular kind of powerlessness it generates, and the strategies of accommodation it necessitates and creates, that this book examines.

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Excerpt
More information

1 Men in women's clothing

Sometime in 1579, in a pamphlet which was to establish the terms of attack and defense for another sixty years, Stephen Gosson made the curious remark that theater "effeminated" the mind.[1] Four years later, in a pamphlet twice the size, Phillip Stubbes clarified this claim even as he heightened it by insisting that male actors who wore women's clothing could literally "adulterate" male gender.[2] Fifty years later in a one-thousand-page tract which may have hastened the closing of the theatres, William Prynne described a man whom women's clothing had literally caused to "degenerate" into a woman.[3] In the years of mounting pamphlet war about the stage, the vague sense that theatre could somehow soften the responses of the audience had been replaced by the fear – expressed in virtually biological terms – that theatre could structurally transform men into women. How can we account for this fear of effeminization? It at once seems irrational and tends to endow theatre with magical properties: the idea that a man can be turned into a woman is a version of the more basic "magical" idea that one person can be turned into another. But what model of a self would one have to have to maintain that idea?

Curiously enough, critics have ignored the information that such an anxiety provides about anti-theatrical (and perhaps wider Renaissance) conceptions of the self. Explanations of antipathy to the stage have traditionally begun with the idea that anti-theatricalists saw the self as fixed and stable, "uniforme" and "distinct."[4] Jonas Barish, for instance, takes the claim made by William Prynne that God "hath given a uniforme, distinct and proper being to every creature" at face value, as being an accurate depiction of the anti-theatrical view of the self.[5] But a position which tries to explain anti-theatricality from the standpoint of a fixed and stable self gives rise to a glaring contradiction. If those who attack the stage see the self as stable, why do they imagine that theatre has such a tremendous power to alter it? If they see the male self as "fixed;" why do they so frequently imagine it being turned into a woman? What is

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