Introduction

When Anthony Munday returned to England after his travels in France and Italy in 1578–9, he had a great deal to account for. The future playwright and one of the period's most prolific English prose writers had stayed for several months at the English College in Rome, one of the centres of English Catholicism on the continent. Had Munday turned Catholic? His behaviour upon his return to England suggests otherwise. When the Jesuit Edmund Campion was captured in 1581, Munday testified against him and his fellow-martyrs, including Ralph Sherwin, whom Munday had met in Rome, and gained notoriety as an anti-Catholic polemicist.[1] However, Munday's testimony was questioned by the defence as the fabrication of a notorious dissembler: 'beyond the seas he goeth on pilgrimage, and receiveth the sacrament, making himself a Catholic, and here he taketh a new face, and playeth the Protestant'.[2] Cardinal William Allen, one of the leading English Catholic publicists of the 1580s, later similarly condemned Munday as one of the witnesses that were 'companions knowen to be of no religion, of euery religion, coozeners, dissemblers, espials'.[3] Munday had indeed justified his stay in Rome by claiming 'that in France and other places he seemed to favour their religion, because he might thereby undermine them and sift out their purposes'.[4] However, when Munday eventually published an account of his continental travels in *The English Romayne Lyfe* (1582), he offered a more trivial explanation, namely, the 'desire to see straunge Countreies, as also affection to learne the languages . . . and not any other intent or cause, God is my record'.[5] His pretence of Catholic sympathies, Munday implies several times, primarily served to gain access to recusant funds in order to finance his travels.[6]

---

[1] For Munday's role in the trial and the pamphlets relating to it, see Turner 51–62; Hill, '"This Is as True as All the Rest Is"' 48–56. Documents related to the trial are printed in Simpson 393–442.
[2] Quoted in Simpson 430.   [3] Allen, *Briefe historie* A7v.   [4] Quoted in Simpson 430.
[5] Munday, *English Romayne Lyfe* 1.   [6] Ibid. 3–4, 7–9.

Whatever Munday's reasons may have been, his opponents perceived a link between his religious dissimulation and his association with the theatre. As already noted, he was accused of 'playing the Protestant' in Rome. A Catholic riposte from 1582, ascribed to the Jesuit Thomas Alfield, sardonically points out that Munday 'first was a stage player [no doubt a calling of some creditt]'[7] and recounts 'howe this scholler new come out of Italy did play extempore', only to be 'hissed . . . from his stage. Then being therby discouraged, he set forth a balet against playes, but yet (O constant youth) he now beginnes againe to ruffle vpon the stage'.[8] Munday's supposed inconstancy, here illustrated with his changing attitude towards the theatre, is arguably also supposed to evoke his religious inconstancy. After his stay in Rome, Alfield writes, Munday 'returned home to his first vomite againe'.[9] This Biblical phrase (Prov. 26:11) was common in early modern discourses of apostasy and recantation and may therefore refer as much to his religious inconstancy as to his return to the stage.[10]

While Munday's 'balet against playes', which Alfield mentions, has not survived, he has been credited with another attack on the stage, *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and Theaters* (1580). Ironically, this treatise makes, similar to the Jesuit Alfield, a case against the theatre as an institution that is incompatible with constancy: 'And as for those stagers themselues, are they not commonlie such kind of men in their conuersation, as they are in profession? Are they not as variable in hart, as they are in their partes?'.[11] The author of *A second and third blast* further claims to 'haue learned that he who dissembles the euil which he knowes in other men, is as giltie before God of the offence, as the offenders themselues . . . For he that dissembles vngodlines is a traitor to God'.[12] What, then, had Munday been doing in Rome? Had he temporarily converted to the Catholic faith, or had he merely 'played' the Catholic, as he later claimed, despite his subsequent condemnation of dissimulation as treason to God? And is the theatre itself to be considered a form of apostasy or dissimulation that is irreconcilable with a sincere confession of Christ?

As the strange case of Anthony Munday suggests, early modern debates on the legitimacy of the theatre were deeply embedded in religious culture.

---

[7] Alfield D4v; square brackets in the original.
[8] Ibid. E1r. John Dover Wilson identified the ballad, which has not survived, with 'A Ringing Retraite courageouslie sounded / Wherein Plaies and Players are fytlie confounded', which was licensed to Edward White on 10 November 1580 (486).
[9] Alfield E1r.   [10] Hamilton, *Munday and the Catholics* xx.
[11] Munday, *A second and third blast* 111.   [12] Ibid. 57.

They raise questions about authenticity and dissimulation, about constancy and apostasy, which cannot be separated from their historical context in which religious persecution and intolerance often led religious dissenters to play the Protestant or the Catholic, respectively. Although the reformations of the sixteenth century resulted in an unprecedented religious pluralisation in Latin Christianity, political and ecclesiastical authorities frequently still attempted to enforce an ideal of religious uniformity. Religious minorities were often faced with a stark choice: they could suffer martyrdom, emigrate, or dissemble their beliefs. There is a rich body of scholarship on early modern martyrdom, and increasing attention is being paid to emigration for religious reasons.[13] Of course, these two courses of action were largely elite phenomena, and their ideological capital stood in a disproportionate relationship to the lived experience of most people, who tended to conform with the state-imposed religion. However, the legitimacy of religious dissimulation was hotly debated among political theorists of the period, who often disagreed on whether, or to what extent, political and ecclesiastical authorities had a claim to the inner life of their subjects. Theologians across the confessional spectrum likewise dedicated much time and energy to the question of whether it was legitimate for Christ's persecuted flock to dissemble their beliefs in order to avoid persecution. Even as the Reformation infused fresh blood into the literature of martyrdom and gave birth to specific confessional martyrological traditions, the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century ushered in what Perez Zagorin has characterised as the 'Age of Dissimulation',[14] to which literary scholars, too, are now turning their attention.[15]

Such dissimulation was also part and parcel of the confessionally multifarious world of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, whose practitioners' religious identities are often difficult to ascertain, seemingly contradictory, and subject to change. Religious dissimulation was very much part of their life-world, and none of the playwrights whose work I discuss at length in this book can be assigned a straightforward confessional label that is not complicated by suspiciously ostentatious performances of religious identity or the obfuscation of religious identity where biographers have sometimes desperately looked for it. While some of these playwrights covered their

---

[13] See, for example, Terpstra.   [14] Zagorin 330.

[15] As Andrew Hadfield has recently noted in his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion* (2019), 'it is likely that Nicodemites [i.e. religious dissemblers] could have been the largest category of religious believers in early modern Europe' (Hadfield, 'Biography and Belief' 28–9). See also Hadfield, *Lying in Early Modern English Culture*, especially ch. 3, 'The Religious Culture of Lying'.

tracks as far as their own beliefs are concerned (William Shakespeare), others simulated religious beliefs in order to spy on dissenters (Anthony Munday and, perhaps, Christopher Marlowe) even as they attacked religious dissimulation or repeatedly changed their beliefs – at least outwardly – during their career (Ben Jonson). However, the aim of this book is not to clear up biographical questions concerning the religious beliefs of these writers but to show how early modern drama, from c. 1590 to 1614, represented these various kinds of religious dissimulation and explored its meta-theatrical implications.

This book is the first study that is entirely devoted to reading plays by Shakespeare, Jonson, Marlowe, Munday, and others in the context of early modern debates on religious dissimulation. As the subtitle of this book, 'The Limits of Toleration', further suggests, religious dissimulation can also tell us something about religious toleration, its limits in early modern England, and the drama that it produced. Thus, our understanding of early modern toleration and the way it was represented, propagated, and criticised on stage has much to gain from taking into account the dynamic and multifaceted interplay between religious dissimulation and toleration. I thereby hope to add new nuances to previous research on toleration in early modern drama by expanding the categories in which toleration could manifest itself, or not, and by raising the question to what extent the medium of the theatre itself could be said to imply toleration for religious dissimulation.[16]

The connection between religious dissimulation and toleration can be understood in three different ways. First, dissimulation was an index of intolerance insofar as it was a course of action necessitated by persecution

[16] So far, only a few book-length studies have dealt substantially with the subject of toleration (or the lack thereof) in early modern drama: see Walsh; Sokol; Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare;* and Knapp. Sokol's *Shakespeare and Tolerance* features only one chapter on religious toleration as such, which is primarily concerned with religious allusions and jokes. Walsh's *Unsettled Toleration* offers the most comprehensive discussion of toleration on the Shakespearean stage to date and does so largely from a socio-historical perspective on religious coexistence on the grassroots level as a form of everyday ecumenicity. Richard Wilson's *Secret Shakespeare* places Shakespeare's plays in a contemporary Catholic culture of secrecy and dissimulation in the face of state-sponsored persecution. In contrast to Walsh and Wilson, in the present work I approach religious pluralism and its discontents primarily through the lens of intellectual history rather than social and political history. I am also fundamentally concerned with the meta-theatrical significance of representing religious dissimulation on stage. Jeffrey Knapp's *Shakespeare's Tribe* offers an important conceptual model for this approach in that it emphasises the affinities between the theatre, with its reliance on dissimulation, and the Elizabethan policy of outward conformity. That being said, in this book I aim to complicate this link to a greater degree than Knapp's work might suggest, pay greater attention to nonconformist drama, and argue that the theatre was not generally predisposed, by virtue of its ontological and institutional status, to one particular religio-political outlook.

and chosen by religious minorities as an alternative to legal discrimination in the form of fines, imprisonment, or even martyrdom. Second, religious dissimulation could be the *object* of intolerance. It was regularly condemned by the leaders of persecuted minorities as an intolerable compromise with the truth and occasionally also attacked by the persecuting church or state, when ecclesiastical dignitaries or secular magistrates were not satisfied with outward compliance and at pains to discover and penalise even inward dissent. Finally, if the core of toleration is the refusal to act against views or practices that one disapproves of, religious dissimulation can be viewed as a form of toleration in itself. Religious dissimulation often amounted to an outward acceptance of the official state religion, which members of religious minorities may have disapproved of but nonetheless did not oppose and even outwardly conformed to. This reciprocal relationship between toleration and conformity is evident, for instance, in Erasmus' explanation to Luther in *Hyperaspistes I* as to why he never left the Church of Rome, despite the many faults he found with it: 'I know that in the church which you call papistical there are many with whom I am not pleased, but I see such persons also in your church . . . Therefore I will put up with this church until I see a better one, and it will have to put up with me until I become better'.[17] As Erasmus' pointed chiasm suggests, peaceful coexistence requires a willingness to compromise not only on the part of the established order but also on the part of those who may feel alienated from it in one way or another.

Calling such conformity 'toleration' may seem counter-intuitive. After all, the often drastic measures by means of which persecuting states sought to pressure dissenters into conformity do not seem to have left much of a choice. However, there *were* various options for dissenters, ranging from martyrdom over exile to different forms of more or less comprehensive conformity. The agency of religious minorities should not be downplayed and certainly was not downplayed by early modern theologians and political theorists, who implicitly acknowledged this agency by bothering at all to address the question of how religious minorities should behave towards the established order from a wide range of theological and political perspectives.

In what follows, I will first briefly discuss why religious dissimulation was such a contentious practice for the early moderns and how the controversies surrounding it were informed by early modern views on lying, which differ significantly from present-day views on the subject.

---

[17] CWE 76:117.

6   Introduction

In a second step, I will give an account of the various points of contact
between debates on the legitimacy of religious dissimulation and debates
on the legitimacy of theatrical dissimulation. Plays that stage religious
dissimulation as their subject matter are therefore, as I argue throughout
this book, also legible as meta-theatrical reflections on the political and
religious implications of their medium. I will conclude this introduction
with a brief overview of the following chapters and a clarification of
a number of pertinent terminological questions.

In some ways, the dilemma of early modern dissenters who had to
choose between lying or suffering adverse consequences for their beliefs
has become incomprehensible to us. What duty could there possibly be to
be truthful towards persecutors and tyrants? Most of us would likely agree
with Theodor W. Adorno: 'An appeal to truth is scarcely a prerogative of
a society which dragoons its members to own up the better to hunt them
down. It ill befits universal untruth to insist on particular truth, while
immediately converting it into its opposite'.[18] In the seventeenth century,
Milton puts forward a similar argument in *De Doctrina Christiana*:

> [W]e are commanded to tell the truth; but to whom? Not to a public enemy,
> not to a mad person, not to a violent one, not to an assassin, but to
> a neighbour, namely [someone] with whom we have a bond of peace and
> righteous fellowship. But now, if we are commanded to tell the truth solely
> to a neighbour, we are certainly not forbidden to tell even a lie, whenever
> necessary, to those who do not deserve the name of neighbour.[19]

However, Milton's view that the legitimacy of lying depended on concrete
social or political contexts, was by no means representative for the early
modern period, when the question of lying carried significant metaphysical
weight. As Aquinas puts it in the *Summa theologiae*, 'a lie has the quality of
sinfulness not merely as being something damaging to a neighbour, but as
being disordered in itself'.[20] Since '[w]ords by their nature' are 'signs of
thought, it is contrary to their nature and out of order for anyone to convey
in words something other than what he thinks'; hence, 'lying is inherently
evil'.[21] Protestant theologians such as Pietro Martire Vermigli followed suit
and similarly characterised lying as 'an abuse of signes. And for so much as
it is not lawfull to abuse the gifts of GOD: a lie is also understood to be
forbidden'.[22] In other words, lying is a violation of language itself.

For Latin Christianity, the parameters of the moral discussion of lying and
dissimulation had been set by Augustine in his two treatises on the subject,

[18] Adorno, *Minima moralia* no. 9.   [19] Milton 2.13.   [20] Aquinas 2.2.110.3.   [21] Ibid.
[22] Vermigli 2.13.31.

On Lying (*De Mendacio*) and *Against Lying* (*Contra Mendacium*). Augustine categorically denied Milton's proposition that we owe truth only to those 'with whom we have a bond of peace and righteous fellowship'[23] and showed no tolerance for lies under any circumstances, even 'if a man should flee to you who, by your lie, can be saved from death'.[24] In his typology of lies, Augustine condemns in particular 'that which is uttered in the teaching of religion' as 'a deadly one which should be avoided and shunned from afar'.[25] Early modern theologians, such as Vermigli, agreed that the most heinous lies pertain to 'matter of religion, doctrine, and godlinesse: for in no other thing can guile be more hurtfull and pernicious. For if we shall erre therein, we be cast from euerlasting felicitie'.[26]

At the same time, however, it was religion that caused people to lie and dissemble about their personal convictions on a massive scale in the religious conflicts and persecutions in post-Reformation Europe – a crisis that was only exacerbated by the charge of idolatry that was at stake in 'false' worship.[27] Few sixteenth-century theologians were as concerned about this phenomenon as Jean Calvin, who left an indelible mark on subsequent discussions of religious dissimulation. The French reformer had emigrated to Protestant Basel in 1534, and in numerous treatises from the mid-1530s onwards he admonished his French fellow-Protestants to follow his example and flee from idolatry rather than conform to the abominable sacrifice of the Mass. In his most famous treatise on the subject, his *Excuse à Messieurs les Nicodémites* (1544), Calvin discusses the term 'Nicodemism' at length.[28] According to Calvin,[29] the so-called Nicodemites claimed to imitate the Biblical Nicodemus, who visited Jesus at night, but did not openly confess him (John 3:1–2). As Calvin points out, however, Nicodemus eventually came out of his 'cachette'[30] and asked Pilatus, together with Joseph of Arimathea, for Christ's body in order to inter him (John 19:39–42).[31] When Calvin labelled religious dissemblers 'Nicodemites', he evidently did so in an ironic and derogatory fashion.[32]

---

[23] Compare with Augustine, *Treatises* 127.   [24] Ibid. 66–67.   [25] Ibid. 86.

[26] Vermigli 2.13.31.

[27] On Protestant, especially Calvinist, criticism of religious dissimulation as a form of idolatry, see Eire, *War Against the Idols* 195–275.

[28] The term 'Nicodemite' appears to have been in use already since the 1520s. See Eire, 'Calvin and Nicodemism' 46–7.

[29] CO 6:608.   [30] CO 6:608.   [31] Compare with CO 6:609.

[32] However, reality was more complicated. Calvin and Théodore de Bèze likewise resorted to dissimulation and deceit in their clandestine ministry to French Protestant congregations. As Jon Balserak has shown, 'Calvin designed Geneva's ministry to France in such a way that it systematically employed falsehood and dissembling to hide what they were doing from the French authorities and probably

Calvin's main target was the network of evangelicals in the orbit of Marguerite de Navarre, who were dedicated to reforming the Church piecemeal from within.[33] That is to say, Calvin was attacking a competing vision of French reform. However, it would be unduly limiting to conceive of Nicodemism in such historically and politically circumscribed terms. Carlos Eire has argued that Nicodemism was rather a practice than an ideology, that it 'was caused just as much by fear and confusion as it might have been by theoretical considerations'.[34] Later studies, especially Zagorin's *Ways of Lying* (1990), have further shown that early modern Nicodemites, when they felt a need to justify their behaviour, could fall back on exegetical and ethical traditions that long predated the Reformation and complicate the hegemony of Augustinian intransigence on the subject of lying.[35] In early modern Europe, dissimulation was accordingly practised and rationalised by a wide range of confessionally disparate groups, including Protestants, but also Jews, Catholics, and religious radicals of any kind. It therefore makes sense to conceptualise it as a cross-confessional phenomenon. Hence, I apply the term 'Nicodemism' not only to Protestants, in France or elsewhere, but also to crypto-Catholics and other dissenters who dissembled their faith.[36]

Not only practitioners but also opponents of Nicodemism employed similar arguments across the confessional spectrum. Sometimes, texts with a significant anti-Nicodemite component could travel across confessional boundaries with remarkable ease, as is the case with Robert Southwell's poem *Saint Peter's Complaint* (1595).[37] The Jesuit Southwell presumably meant to warn fellow-Catholics against conforming with the Church of England with his prosopopoetic resurrection of the Biblical arch-Nicodemite 'that did his God forsweare' (l. 58). However, the poem also enjoyed remarkable success among Protestant readers and was even

---

from the Nicodemites as well. Indeed, their ministry was, by their own standards of honesty, as mendacious as that of the Nicodemites' (99). As we shall see, a similar ambivalence towards dissimulation is evident in Jesuit missionaries to Elizabethan England, who condemned Nicodemism but simultaneously resorted to strategies of deception, such as disguise, the use of pseudonyms, equivocation, and mental reservation, in order to pursue their ministry.

[33] Reid 2:550–63.   [34] Eire, 'Calvin and Nicodemism' 67.

[35] The Greek fathers and Jerome, Origen's great Latin mediator, tended to take a less severe stance on lying and dissimulation, which found a notable sixteenth-century proponent in Erasmus. See Ramsey; compare with Bietenholz; Trapman. For medieval casuistical thought on lying, which was to play a particularly important role for Catholic dissimulation, see further Corran.

[36] The most important study on early modern Nicodemism to date remains Zagorin. For good overviews, see also Eliav-Feldon 16–67; MacCulloch, *Silence* 163–90. For the English context, see further Overell.

[37] Southwell, *Poems*.

reprinted by Robert Waldegrave, whose Puritan credentials are attested by his involvement in the Marprelate Controversy.[38] If the hotter sort of Catholics and Protestants could agree on one thing, it was that there could be no compromise with the other side. In his *Epistle of comfort* (c. 1587), for instance, Southwell demonstrates his thorough knowledge of Protestant anti-Nicodemite writers such as Calvin and Vermigli, whose argumentation he claims to find convincing: 'And albeit their reasons were misapplied in the particular churche, to which they proued it vnlawfull to resorte: Yet are they very sufficient and forcible to confirme that the repayring to a false church in deed, is most sinnfull and damnable'.[39] As I argue especially in Chapter 7, such confessional parallels in anti-Nicodemite discourses must be taken into consideration when assessing the confessional scope of a play like Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, which is as much concerned with Catholic as with Puritan nonconformity.

Anti-theatricality and Religious Dissimulation

Early modern opposition to the theatre had many reasons and was motivated by a wide range of ideological perspectives. Few of them have aged well, and modern scholarship has often found it difficult not to dismiss the majority of anti-theatrical writing as the product of an irrational and fanatic prejudice that ought to be pathologised rather than analysed. However, as Kent R. Lehnhof insists in his important critique of Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981) and Laura Levine's *Men in Women's Clothing* (1994), anti-theatricality was not informed by 'outlandish beliefs about the self'.[40] On the contrary, 'the conceptualization of human nature that informs the antitheatrical tracts is recognizably Protestant and culturally dominant in early modern England'.[41] And while Jonas Barish opines that anti-theatricality 'seems too deep-rooted, too widespread, too resistant to changes of place and time to be ascribed entirely, or even mainly, to social, political, or economic factors' and that it 'seems to precede all attempts to explain or rationalize it',[42] Lisa A. Freeman questions this. Instead, she calls for a more localised study of anti-theatricality that takes into account 'the actual politics that govern these ostensibly aesthetic and moral debates'.[43] One of the aims of

---

[38] For the appeal of Southwell's *Saint Peter's Complaint* to Protestant readers, see Snyder.
[39] Southwell, *Epistle of comfort* 173.   [40] Lehnhof 231.   [41] Ibid.   [42] Barish 116–17.
[43] Freeman, *Antitheatricality* 2.

this book is therefore to reconstruct the Nicodemite context that was at
least implicitly – and often also explicitly – at stake in pro- and anti-
theatrical perspectives on the issue of dissimulation.

One of the most significant arguments against the theatre that is difficult
to accept from a modern perspective is the charge of lying. While dissimu-
lation is an indispensable aspect of acting, its legitimacy was by no means
taken for granted. In *Against Lying*, Augustine famously defined lying as 'a
false signification told with desire to deceive'[44] – a definition that should
easily acquit actors, whose purpose was entertainment and not actual
deception. In his other treatise, *On Lying*, however, Augustine offered
another definition of the liar as one 'who holds one opinion in his mind
and who gives expression to another through words or any other outward
manifestation',[45] which was further elaborated by Aquinas[46] and equally
prominent in the sixteenth century. In this definition, the focus lies not on
deception but on the split between inwardness and outwardness as such. If
lying was indeed to be defined as a disjunction between inward thoughts
and outward expression, the theatre was not so easily off the hook.
Theatrical fictions might be considered what Augustine defines in *On
Lying* as comparatively harmless 'jocose lies', which 'are accompanied by
a very evident lack of intention to deceive'.[47] However, judgement on
jocose lies varied considerably in the early modern period.

Vermigli, for instance, considered the jocose lie to possess 'but a small and
slender nature of a lie: for so much as the falshood is straitwaie found out,
neither can it be long hidden from the hearers'.[48] Bullinger, on the other
hand, considered lies for the sake of 'pastime or pleasure' as 'a signe of very
great lightnesse: which the Apostle [Eph. 5] misliketh in the faithful'.[49] Some
moralists and anti-theatrical writers showed even less tolerance for jocose lies.
Stephen Gosson, for instance, explicitly refers to Aquinas' *quaestio* on lying
in order to denounce the trade of acting: 'euery man must show himselfe
outwardly to be such as in deed he is . . . to declare our selues by wordes or by
gestures to be otherwise then we are is an act executed where it should not,
therefore a lye'.[50] Critics of the theatre found dissimulation problematic in
its own right, even if it was not actually meant to deceive anyone. The mere
split between inward- and outwardness and its spiritual and moral implica-
tions were found to be just as disturbing.

Arguably the most important study that has contextualised early mod-
ern drama in contemporary debates on religious dissimulation is Jeffrey

---

[44] Augustine, *Treatises* 160.   [45] Ibid. 55.   [46] Aquinas 2.2.110.1.   [47] Augustine, *Treatises* 54.
[48] Vermigli 2.13.32.   [49] Bullinger, *Decades* 321.   [50] Gosson E5r.