

# “Masking players, painted sepulchers and double dealing ambidexters” on duty: anti-theatricalist tracts on audience involvement and the transformative power of plays<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The paper scrutinizes anti-theatrical texts from the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century England. It focuses on a specific critique of theatre, the type of corruption that is connected to the plays' ambiguous ontological status, their mixing the reality of the audience with the fiction of the play. It points out that plays were seen as having a transformative power, corrupting the reality both of actors and of audiences. This can be explained by the actions of traditional figures of audience involvement, frequently belonging to the family of the Vice, which includes stage fools as well. The two figures are shown to be mentioned frequently together in contemporary texts, as synonyms of each other and as examples of the corruptness of theatre. The paper argues that fools and Vices are singled out in the examined texts because they epitomise not only the possibility of improvising within theatre, but also a specific *double* representational logic of theatre, where figures are parts both of the play's fictional world and the festive occasion of a play, i.e. the audience's reality. In a coda to the paper an example is put forward in order to illustrate that Shakespeare critics with structuralist and post-structuralist background are condemned for a similar reason as the theatre featuring Vices and fools: for mixing reality and fiction.

KEYWORDS: Tudor theatre, anti-theatrical debate, audience involvement, vice, fool

In the present paper I propose a double argument. The primary and major part focuses on audience-involvement in theatre and the transformative power of plays from the perspective of anti-theatricalist's tracts, while the closing section, the coda highlights a related issue of contemporary Shakespeare criticism. I hope that

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these two seemingly diverse topics will gain from each other's proximity, since the question whether mixing reality and fiction can be understood as playful and creative, or rather as irresponsible and corrupt, is central to both.

The fascination with theatre in Elizabethan and Jacobean England was accompanied by opinions that were immensely enthusiastic in opposing theatre in general as an institution, as well as everything connected to it: authors, plays, actors and audiences. In their attacks, writes of anti-theatrical pamphlets were drawing on pagan and biblical sources alike, and paraded a colourful spectrum of arguments, which included such diverse items as actors being parasites of society "living of the sweat of other men's brows," spreading subversive practices; in Munday's words "discourses to counterfeit witchcraft, charmed drinks, and amorous potions, thereby to draw the affection of men, and to stir them up unto lust" (Munday in Pollard 2004: 77). Among the most prominently featuring accusations we find the ones that identify acting with hypocrisy and counterfeiting, regard plays as fictitious lies or consider them as corrupt for mixing divine and profane matter, "scurrillity with divinity" (Stubbes in Pollard 2004: 118), or interlace God's words "with unclean and whorish speeches" (Munday in Pollard 2004: 78).

But plays were considered to have a notoriously corruptive influence on their audience not only for mixing "honey and gall," or "scurrillity and divinity." In the first part of my paper I would like to address the critique of anti-theatricalist writers concerning an issue that is also connected to the blurring of strict boundaries, but it applies more strictly to issues of dramatic representation and the boundaries between the world of theatrical fiction vis-a-vis the reality of the audience. The charge of puritans against plays was founded on a vision where plays are mixing not only honey and gall, or divine and profane matter, but quite importantly, reality and fiction as well. In other words the ontological status of actions, characters, locations etc. represented in plays seemed highly questionable. A crucial problem, as we learn from various tracts, is that contrary to other corrupting and dangerous practices, plays hurt the simple gazer. This issue is vividly elaborated by Munday, who claims that "all other evils pollute the doers only, not the beholders or the hearers [...] Only the filthiness of plays and spectacles is such

that maketh both the actors and beholders guilty alike" (Munday in Pollard 2004: 66).<sup>2</sup>

Implicit in Munday's harsh critique of plays there is an understanding of theatre which has as exceptional influence on its audience, since onlookers cannot refrain themselves from being involved in the appalling crime generated by actors on stage. This corrupting force is such that it does not allow the idea of a chaste onlooker, who condemns what he sees in theatre: merely being present is enough for damnation. If it is indeed "notorious lies," lacking any reality that are presented on stage, or, as Munday has it, "feigning countries never heard of; monsters and prodigious creatures that are not" (Munday in Pollard 2004: 78), why cannot members of the audience delimit themselves from this fictitious world? And most importantly: where does the corrupting power of plays come from?

As mentioned above, the objections raised against the theatre in England at the time when the boom of institutionalised, professional theatre took off were rooted deeply in the long-established anti-theatrical tradition and were reiterations of charges that had been present in anti-theatrical texts since the time of Antiquity. Nonetheless, this moment in theatre history was peculiar enough for several reasons, and thus it is interesting to look at the context in which the objections of the opponents of theatre were raised. I suggest that the ontological status of theatre became ambiguously obscure due to the dynamic change, or development of theatrical practices in the period on the one hand, and a subsequent waning of established traditional contexts on the other. This resulted in a heightened anxiety concerning the overall effect of a theatrical play. In general, under waning traditions I think of popular festivities and moral interludes – where the ritualistic function of theatre is clearly detectable.<sup>3</sup> Traditional figures of involvement belonging specifically to the family of a figure known from popular festivities and moral interludes, the Vice constitute my particular focus within this heritage.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gosson, however, does give parallel examples: "The shadow of a knave hurts an honest man; the scent of the stews, a sober matron; and the show of theatres, a simple gazer" (Gosson in Pollard 2004: 23).

<sup>3</sup> On the influence of Christian and pagan rituals on Shakespeare's theatre see Laroque (1991).

<sup>4</sup> Critics usually agree that the Vice has a double function, both as a chief game maker/entertainer, as well as the corrupter in the play. One of the problems of

Returning to the question of the objections against theatre and the problem of mixing reality with fiction, the key word to the problem is the audience's *participation* in the events that are happening on stage, which anti-theatricalist writers seem to acknowledge indirectly by attaching such a notorious transformative power to plays. I call it transformative, since by involving the audience in the world of the play, the play's fictitious reality *overwrites* the reality of the audience, eats it away. Similarly, the way to dress into female clothes by male actors, "to act those womanish, whorish parts" is the same as to *metamorphose* the noble sex according to William Prynne, the author of *Histrionomastix*, the work that may be considered as the culmination of the anti-theatricalist debate. Plays, it seems, indeed were understood as having the power of invading reality. Prynne goes as far as to claim that actors thus "*uncreate*" themselves "offering a kind of violence to God's own work":

Is this a light, a despicable effeminacy, for men, for Christians, thus to adulterate, emasculate, metamorphose, and debase their noble sex? Thus purposely, yea, affectedly, to unhuman, unchristian, uncreate themselves, if I may so speak, and to make themselves, as it were, neither men nor women, but monsters (a sin as bad, nay worse than any adultery offering a kind of violence to God's own work). (Prynne in Pollard 2004: 291)

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definition is caused by the fact that naming a character a "Vice" in a play became customary only in the second half of the sixteenth century, however, there are figures which carry out a similar function but are not named "Vices" in earlier drama – a well known example would be Mischief from *Mankind*, from a century earlier. There is a debate about the most important characteristics of the figure, whether his comedy is condemnable (either from a moral or an aesthetic point of view) or, quite importantly, whether he typically supports or subverts the morality pattern. The latter opinion is held by Weimann (1978), while the former by Spivack (1958) and Dessen (1986). The difference in opinions is partly but not entirely based on the elusive corpus of plays. The other problem arises from the fact that there are references to non-dramatic vices as well, e.g. by Mares (1958-59) or Welsford (1935). It is a question to what extent these should be treated together with their dramatic cousins. Regarding the fact that folk and religious rituals were crucial sources of professional theatre and considering the game-maker quality of dramatic Vices, I see a strong reason to keep in mind this connection. On the other hand allegorical characters standing for moral corruptness, playing vices opposing virtues in moral interludes (where "vice" means merely sin) cannot always be connected to clowns or fools, but some of them qualify as Vices having the necessary game-maker quality. For a valuable and helpful guide, a list of Vices (including forerunners and later developments) as well as an annotated bibliography of secondary literature on the figure see Happé (1979).

In this sense the corruption caused by plays displays itself on multiple levels: the play's fiction attacks reality, while the roles played attack the identity of the actors.<sup>5</sup> Still, all this would not be so notorious, were it not for the contagious effect. It is not only actors who become sinners when "uncreating" themselves and reality while performing plays: the corruption taints mere onlookers as well. I have no knowledge of anyone having pointed out so far a fact that in this context becomes surprisingly telling and revelatory, namely, that characters belonging to the family of Vices that traditionally carried the role of audience involvement in plays are precisely the ones that are used in anti-theatricalist tracts to epitomize the profession of acting and the inherent corruptness of playing in theatre as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Thus we should not be surprised to see that the terms "vice" or "fool" are used as synonyms for actors. "Playing the vice", among the lengthy examples in the following quotation from Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses*, refers to acting:

If you will learn falshood; if you will learn cozenage; if you will learn to deceive; if you will learn to play the hypocrite, to cog, to lie, and falsify; if you will learn to jest, laugh and fleer, to grin, to nod, and mow; if you will learn to play the vice, to swear, tear, and blaspheme both heaven and earth... [etc., etc.] and commit all kind of sin and mischief, you need to go to no other school, for all these good examples may you see painted before your eyes in interludes and plays. (Stubbes in Pollard 2004: 121-2)

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<sup>5</sup> Concentrating on metadramatic devices in drama, Richard Hornby also draws a similar parallel between the ways plays attack via the play-within-the-play and role-within-the-role: "Just as using a play within the play raises existential questions, so too does using a role within the role raise questions of human identity" (Hornby 1986: 68).

<sup>6</sup> Tools of audience involvement include addressing the audience directly, commenting on the play's actions as if from outside the playworld, or engaging with members of the audience in other ways. Examples for this last type include moments such as the one where vices in *Mankind* collect money from the audience for the show before the devil enters the stage: "Now, ghostly to our purpose, worshipful sovereigns,/ We intend to gather money , if it please your negligence,/ For a man with a head that is of great omnipotence" (ll. 459-461); another example from the same play is when the vices invite the audience to sing a scatological song with them (ll. 326-327), or the beginning of *Like Will to Like* when Nicholl Newfangle the Vice enters the stage at the beginning of the play "laughing, and hath a knave of clubs in his hand, which as soon as he speaketh he offreth unto one of the men or boyes standing by," and his first line, accompanying this jesture, is "Ha, ha, ha, ha, now like unto like: it wil be none other" (l. 37). This is a gesture with which he identifies himself with the principal game-maker or master of the game, offering an interpretation of the play's title, and pointing to the fact that the audience is participating in his play.

Note that “to play” is added in case of stock dramatic figures, the vice and the hypocrite, with which the meaning “to act” is stressed in the list of the activities practices by players, such as jesting, laughing and fleering. “Playing the vice” for Stubbes stands as an example for sinning through acting, and most probably he has in mind the allegorical stock character of the Vice with his characteristic dramatic function on stage, who, in some respect, is similar to the hypocrite and the glutton – both of them are also “played”, according to Stubbes.

Another example might be cited from the same source where actors are identified with “ambidexters”. “Beware, therefore, you masking players, you painted sepulchres, you double dealing ambidexters” (Stubbes in Pollard 2004: 118). Ambidexter is the name of the Vice in two extant interludes: in Thomas Preston’s *Cambises* (1558-69) and in G. Gascogne’s *Glass of Government* (1575). Stubbes thus uses the word ambidexter as a synonym for players, through which vices are equated with actors, and actors are condemned for being similar to dramatic Vices. We should also note that the former Ambidexter, together with his brethren, i.e Vices from other plays, such as Heywood’s Merry Report from *The Play of the Weather* by their role in the play stand for the possibility of various social roles. As Axton and Happé state on the Vices of Heywood, “they are playmakers and go-betweenes, not fixed in any social ‘estate’, but able to mimic any” (Axton and Happé 1991: 13). Prynne is grieving in the above quoted *Histrionomastix* over the unfortunate fact that “witty, comely youths” devote themselves to the stage, “where they are trained in the School of Vice, the play-house” (Prynne in Pollard 2004: 291). Regarding the centrality of Vices as characters in plays for a long time in the second half of the sixteenth century, “Vice” here again most probably refers both to moral corruption and the character embodying it. However, not only Vices can turn out to epitomise actors but fools as well. As Enid Welsford notes, “supposed early references to fools prove to be references to ‘histriones’, ‘buffoni’, ‘joculatores’ and other vague terms for actors and entertainers” (Welsford 1935: 114). When elaborating upon the faults of actors, Stubbes says the following: “For who will call him a wise man that playeth the part of a fool and a vice?” (Stubbes in Pollard 2004: 122). The two roles – in several respects similar, frequently impossible to distinguish – that are singled out and are thus presented as particularly corrupt and thus condemnable, are again the roles of the fool and the vice, because they may stand for

the idea of play in general and encapsulate role playing better than any other role. An important addition to this understanding is the fact that in many moralities the Vice was played by the leading actor of the troupe, and the role, as Bevington points out, "receives typographical prominence" on the cast list. The figure dominated the stage with his central role – central also in the sense that it did not allow doubling, or perhaps only of minor parts (cf. Bevington 1962: 80-81). The function this figure plays in involving the audience in the play is highlighted by instances when these parts, namely the roles doubled by the actor playing the Vice were the ones of the prologue and/or the epilogue, in other words, when the actor playing the Vice was the one to introduce the play, e.g. in the case of *Three Laws* from 1538 or *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* from 1576. Frequently it is the Vice himself who gives a summary of the moral doctrine of the play (cf. Happé 1981: 28). The roles of the leader of the troupe playing the prologue, the epilogue and the Vice curiously merge with his actual function as director, when addressing the audience directly and acting as a mediator between the world of the play and the audience's reality. In this sense the man "that playeth the part of a fool and a vice" is the spirit of playing, the actor *per se*. Parenthetically we might recall the frequently quoted lines of King Lear's Fool in act 1 scene 4, when the Fool suggests that Lear was a bitter fool to give away his land. Hearing this, the king cries out of indignation, "Dost thou call me a fool, boy?" upon which the Fool answers, "All thy other titles thou hast given away, that thou/ wast born with," suggesting that being a fool is an inalienable characteristic of all humans, a "title" deeper than our changeable social positions and statuses, more fundamental than the roles we take up. In other words, being a fool is the possibility of playing in the sense of taking up a mask, a position in society.<sup>7</sup>

Although scattered, I find the quoted examples of anti-theatrical tracts sufficiently coherent to suggest that the puritan attack on theatre targets and finds demoralizing not just *any* type of theatre and representation, but specifically one which features these allegedly immoral figures who not only epitomize playing, but typically act as figures of involvement as well, and corrupt the

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<sup>7</sup> Mares discusses the etymology of the name "Vice" and suggests that it derives from "vis" meaning a mask. He also talks about "the face-blackening habits of the Vice and the folk fool, and is supported by a line in *Magnificence*. Folly, who wear's the fool's dress, twits Crafty Conveyance: '[...] thou can play the fole without a vyser'" (Mares 1958-59: 29).

onlookers by invading their reality by fantastically metamorphosing it. The techniques of involving the audience may be traced back ultimately to the ritualistic roots of the discussed figure, also known from popular festivities (cf. Mares 1958-59: 11-23). In such a setting the role and the actor playing it is not so clearly set apart: the person playing the Vice or a Fool "is" to some extent the Vice or the Fool of the community, the person who is a responsible master of ceremonies – a function parallel to the one of the leading actor and director of a professional troupe. There is an inherent duality in this function. In the dramatic context a Vice is applying something that may be called a double representational logic: by taking part in the illusory world of fiction and being one of the characters in the world of the play on the one hand, as well as participating in the theatrical reality of the audience, by being the principal game maker, the master of ceremonies and the chief perpetrator of the plot on the other.

The two sides of the mentioned double representational logic are described by Robert Weimann (1999: 425), who claims that both were characteristic of the Renaissance stage. He borrows the notions of Jean Alter to describe the inherent duality of codes, and distinguishes the two different types of sign and behaviour on stage as follows: one is a performative statement ("I am acting") and the other is a representational code ("I am not acting" – "I am another person"). Weimann explains that "as opposed to the modern proscenium stage, where a representational mode strongly predominated, the Elizabethan stage tended to project both these codes in intriguing patterns of entanglements." I suggest that it is through the parallel application of these codes – frequently via Vice-characters and fools – that a metadramatic effect is achieved, yielding the type of audience involvement that is regarded as abhorrent by the opposers of theatre. The perplexity around the representational logic of a dramatic figure of involvement, as well as the anxiety around morally dubious or condemnable characters addressing the audience is reflected on in an intriguing article on the "presenter" or prologue in sixteenth century plays by Michelle Butler (2004). She points out that the prologue in the sixteenth century combines two broad influences: a special character from medieval drama, who comments upon the actions, but is also part of the play, and the prologue from classical drama, the influence of Terence and Plautus, and specifically Donatus's fourth century description of what comedy should be (the first of the four parts to



be included is the prologue). Under the influence of medieval drama, the prologue as speech becomes the Prologue as a recognizable character delivering the speech. As we learn from the article, while “medieval presenters were conceived and spoken of as members of the troupe, their sixteenth century counterparts were ambivalently positioned as one of the actors, separate from them, or both” (Butler 2004: 99). I see that it is the complexity of the presenter’s fictional status, his double representational logic which surfaces in this ambiguity. As Butler points out, John Bale, eager to control the message and present the Protestant concerns of his plays clearly, radically minimizes the use of direct address of the audience by evil characters. In other words, Bale tries to make sure that the involvement of the audience into the play is channelled properly through Baleus Prolocutor the prologue as well as the lack of ambiguous direct address. Thus Bale is taking away that aspect of playing and acting that uncontrollably mingles reality and fiction, and corrupts the audience in a type of theatre that later becomes associated with the vice by anti-theatricalists.<sup>8</sup>

Another problem with the type of theatre where the corruptness of players and the institution hosting them may be exemplified with vices and fools is the fact that the action of these figures involves *extemporising*. Actors improvising in a play, even by their mere presence on stage thematize the slippery boundary between the illusion of the play and the reality of its context. Looking at the effect and implications of improvisation, the hallmark of fools and vices, it is not so difficult to see why this type of playing seemed so threatening in the eyes of anti-theatricalists. The hypocrisy attached to the fictional representation in theatre is turned inside out by improvisation: there cannot be anything hypocritical in such a presentation, since it is not repeating or duplicating anything, so it cannot falsify any original play. The anxiety around extemporising is the same anxiety that roots in the interpretation of playwrights who create false universes and place themselves “in blasphemous rivalry with [their] own maker” (Barish 1981: 93). Vices and fools may be

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<sup>8</sup> However, Butler does not take into consideration the fact that doubling complicates this scheme – and as a matter of fact, neither does Bale. It is true that Bale confidently personifies the corruptness of the Catholic Church through the Vices in *Three Laws*, but the problem is created with the same actor playing the prologue and playing Infidelity, the Vice. The audience would have had no problems noticing once Baleus “changed” from being the Prolocutor to being the Vice, but for reasons discussed above, the roles of the Vice and the Prologue often cannot be clearly separated.

understood as epitomes not only of players but of playwrights as well, since characters improvising on stage become creators, not representing any meaning that has been assigned and set in advance; they present something created at that moment, take the presence of the actual audience into account and play potential “blasphemous rivals” eventually to authors of the play, but from the anti-theatricalists’ point of view most significantly, to the creator himself.<sup>9</sup>

We can conclude that the type of theatre that is condemned by the anti-theatricalist writers quoted above (among others, for the reason of mingling fiction and reality and extemporising, and consequently corrupting the reality of the audience) is the one where actors are identified with figures of involvement. Theatre is rejected as the School of Vice not simply because theatre is evil, not simply because hypocrisy is located at the root of theatre and the chief hypocrite is the Vice (both in the sense of being an actor and in the sense that he deceives characters of the play and eventually the audience as well), but also because such figures of involvement embody a mode of representation that is impossible to pinpoint, let alone control its dramatic meaning. It is clearly this particular type of playing that is condemned by Munday when, at one point summarising his argument he says the following: “Such doubtless is mine opinion of common plays, usual jesting, and rhyming *ex tempore*, that in a Christian weal they are not sufferable” (Munday in Pollard 2004: 68). It is no accident either that Ben Jonson laments in the preface to *Volpone* over “fools and devils and those antique relics of barbarism retrieved,” and, in the face of the old one is clearly favouring an emergent new type of plays, where representation is not problematised either by extemporising, or by other metadramatic practices of these “antique relics” (Jonson in Pollard 2004: 202). The naiveté of the anti-theatricalists of seeming incapable

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<sup>9</sup> Curiously enough, extemporizing is condemned together with the theatre in which it appears, still, as a unique device that takes into consideration the given context, and thus is spontaneous and depends on the actual circumstances, extemporizing shows remarkable similarities with the Puritan’s idea of genuine worship. Their critique of liturgy was based exactly on the falsehood of expression in solidified rituals. Barish has an illuminating description of the Puritan understanding of worship: “To reduce it to set forms, to freeze it in ritual repetitions of word or gesture, to commit it to memory, to make it serve a variety of occasions or a diversity of worshippers, was to make the individual a mimic of sentiments not exactly, or not entirely, his own, to introduce a fatal discrepancy between the established gesture and the nuances of feelings” (Barish 1981: 95).

of distinguishing characters from actors, looks ridiculous only if we disregard the special representational logic of the contemporary stage. The curious status of the company clown is nicely illustrated in a stage direction found in the second quarto text of *Romeo and Juliet*. The direction says, "Enter Will Kemp." David Wiles explains that this line provides an example of "how Shakespeare's mind could not separate the actor from the role [...]. The scene anticipates Kemp's appearance with the musicians after the play is over, when he will return to sing and dance his jig" (Wiles 1987: 88).

In the concluding part, or rather the coda of my argument I would like to refer to Brian Vickers's *Appropriating Shakespeare* (1993), more specifically the part in which he criticises critics who read Shakespeare with structuralist and poststructuralist assumptions, relying on what he calls "the iconoclastic movement of the mid 1960s." For the present purpose I am referring to his text because he makes surprisingly similar charges against the condemned critics as the ones we find in anti-theatricalist tracts, namely for creating a confusion by mixing fiction and fact, real and imaginary. This is what he says:

Only magicians and frustrated Derrideans believe that language could 'literally deliver' an idea or state, as if it could arise from off this page and we could enter into it. Such a confusion between the actual and the represented is amusing when we find characters in films (Buster Keaton's *Spite Marriage*, or Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*) who can walk into and out of the screen. But such a confusion coming from professional philosophers and literary critics, and then being used to discredit language and literature, is absurd and debilitating. (Vickers 1993: 134)

This example is the more interesting for me since characters walking into and out of the screen in a Keaton or an Allen movie are easily identified as twentieth-century descendants of the figures of involvement on the medieval stage, as well as their Elizabethan successors, who were lingering between locus and platea, being present both in the imaginary world of the play, but also being capable of stepping off the stage, and reflecting on the reality of the performance, while at the same time tingeing the reality of the audience with the colour of fiction. At this point I have to agree with Stubbes, Prynne or Munday in the sense that the metadramatic techniques of Renaissance drama did aim at making the audience reflect on the potential parallel between what they perceived as their

real world and what they perceived as theatre, even in an “all the world is a stage” manner. This is what the puritan writers condemned as a notorious contamination of the reality of the audience’s presence in a theatre (and by extension corruption of the reality of the audience’s everyday being) by the play’s fiction. As for this last quotation, it is perhaps equally tempting as it is futile to boil down the difference between the stance of Brian Vickers and critics he agrees with on the one hand and critics he tries to discredit on the other, to the difference between puritan opponents and practitioners or supporters of theatre. While I definitely agree with him when he is suggesting (via quoting Said) that one important function of criticism is to work against dogmatic theories and the calcification of ideas (Vickers 1991: 440-441), I feel that the quotation displays a familiar urge to guard the borderline between the actual and the fictional, warding off the potentially corrupting element of play from serious territory, in which the former is understood to question the latter, “eating away” its solidity – the way theatre was eating away reality in the opinion of the Puritans.

If we accept the assumption that figures of involvement, such as the vice or a fool belong to the archetypal family of the trickster, we know that an apparent playful questioning of the basic tenets of a society is one of their main roles. With their play they reflect on and put on trial the basic assumptions of the community formed by the participants of the event, actors and audience alike. They might either reinforce or challenge them, based on the stability of these assumptions, but they certainly keep them alive in a cultural discourse.<sup>10</sup> With such playing and engaging their audience they exhibit an important negotiation of cultural practices, similarly to the

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<sup>10</sup> On the discussion of Elizabethan drama, or more precisely tragedy and its function within a dynamic epistemological frame as a determining cultural discourse see Reiss (1980: 2). The background of the Vice’s double function as dramatic and extradramatic may serve as good background for Reiss’s distinction between two kinds of tragedy during the Renaissance: the dialectical and the analytical. The former is the one that “seeks to draw the spectator almost physically into action, to cause the condition of his life to be fused momentarily with what is carried out not so much in front of him as with his participation.” This, he says, is represented by Shakespeare, Alexander Hardy, and Lope de Vega. In their tragedies there is “a play of theatrical elements, of interference of several semiotic systems.” The other, analytical type of theatre has no such semiotic interference, and is the one where the spectator is not drawn directly into the action, the conditions of his life do not mingle with the action going on on stage, the spectator is “involved” in the action to the extent that he may identify with the dramatic situation or a character (see Reiss 1980: 4).

function of the type of theatre in which they appear. We can perhaps see that apart from their being funny, actors stepping off the screen in movies as well as characters with extradramatic licence in plays grasp something essential about our being human, which Jonas Barish in his already quoted, truly admirable book calls the “intrinsic theatricality of our being” (Barish 1981: 476).

In Victor Turner’s terminology the practices I am talking about might be called liminal, or liminoid – depending on whether they work from challenging social practices towards reintegration or not – the former is characteristic of preindustrial-revolution societies, while the latter of postindustrial ones (cf. Turner 1974b: 53-92). Turner describes the function of the liminal the following way:

Just as when tribesmen make masks, disguise themselves as monsters, heap up disparate ritual symbols, invert or parody profane reality in myths and folk-tales, so do the genres of industrial leisure, the theater, poetry, novel, ballet, film, sport, rock music, classical music, art, pop art and so on, play with the factors of culture, sometimes assembling them in random, grotesque, improbable, surprising, shocking, usually experimental combinations (Turner 1974b: 71-72)

Having seen the parallel between the critique against theatre and against criticism based on their alleged “fictionalizing” reality, it is particularly interesting to note that in Turner’s view both theatre, or art in general, as well as academia are liminoid institutions,<sup>11</sup> thus the parallel established between Keaton and Allen and their sixteenth century ancestors as artists and tricksters, may in this regard be expanded to academics as well. We may ask ourselves a question concerning the seriousness and playfulness of the theoretical attitude we pursue in our academic explorations. The question is furthered by the possibility of understanding that discussing such issues also relies on the rules of the game, and these rules, as much sever as they are, are negotiable; dominant paradigms may be questioned, or even replaced, as if one would step out of one play into another.

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<sup>11</sup> “In the evolution of man’s symbolic ‘cultural’ action, we must seek those processes which correspond to open-endedness in biological evolution. I think we have found them in those liminal, or “liminoid” (postindustrial-revolution), forms of symbolic action, those genres of free-time activity, in which all previous standards and models are subjected to criticism, and fresh new ways of describing and interpreting sociocultural experience are formulated. The first of these forms are expressed in philosophy and science, the second in art and religion” (Turner 1974a: 15).

Finally, as a reminder of times when playing in theatre was far from being regarded as mere play, or in other words, when theatre was subject of serious concern, at the same time playing was not excluded from serious subjects. To illustrate this other side of the coin, let me quote Huizinga on the play-element in contemporary civilization: "modern science, so long as it adheres to the strict demands of accuracy and veracity, is far less liable to play [...] than was the case in earlier times and right up to the Renaissance, when scientific thought and method showed unmistakable play-characteristics" (Huizinga 1972: 204).

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