

CHAPTER ONE

A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with Other Idle Pastimes (1577)

JOHN NORTHBROOKE

When the preacher John Northbrooke wrote *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with Other Idle Pastimes* in 1577, he became the author of the first published work attacking the theater in England. The book did not only, or even primarily, attack the theater; rather, it set out to declare the evils of a number of immoral and decadent practices (including excess sleep), of which theatergoing was merely one. Northbrooke objected to plays primarily on moral grounds: they draw spectators away from wholesome work and tempt them to idleness, lust, and vanity. He was prepared, however, as most antitheatricalists were not, to accept the use of plays as an educational tool, as long as certain conditions were upheld: no bawdiness, no lavish costumes, and no romantic material; only performed in Latin (for educational value), infrequently, privately, and not for profit.

The exact dates of Northbrooke's life are not known. He was born in Devonshire, and was a minister by the early 1560s. He was one of the first ministers to be ordained by Gilbert Berkeley, bishop of Bath and Wells under Queen Elizabeth. At the time of writing *A Treatise*, he was living near Bristol. For all his attention to the dangers of playing, then, there is no evidence that he ever actually lived or even spent significant amounts of time in London, the center of the theatrical enterprise. Although it is unclear whether Northbrooke had explicit puritan sympathies, he subscribed to powerful anti-Catholic sentiments, which he expressed in earlier writings: *A Brief and Pithy Sum of the Christian Faith*, published in 1571, and *The Poor Man's Garden*, 1573.

Northbrooke frames his treatise as a dialogue between two speakers, Youth and Age. Youth, who is naive and unaware of the dangers of the

world, questions Age on a number of matters of moral nature. The authoritative Age does the lion's share of the speaking (in some cases, multiple pages go by before Youth can interrupt); Youth steps in occasionally to prompt him to further declamations. The resulting resemblance between the treatise's structure and that of a play itself is not particularly unusual: Stephen Gosson titled his last and most important antitheatrical tract *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, and William Prynne divided his *Histriomastix* into dramatic acts and scenes. It is, however, intriguing. Like Plato, the earliest recorded critic of the theater, Northbrooke has a tendency to imitate features of the genre he attacks, suggesting either that he recognizes and wants to exploit the appeal of the dialogue form, or that he has absorbed it unwittingly.

Northbrooke's style in his treatise is in some ways fairly typical of the antitheatrical writers. He laces his arguments liberally with references to biblical and ancient authorities, at times creating a rather tedious list-like tone. Because his treatise is earlier than the others in this book, his language is more archaic. The distinction may not be entirely obvious here, as the spelling has been modernized, but a number of expressions and rhetorical turns point to the difference. Northbrooke may not be the most compelling of the authors included in this volume, but he is historically important as the first writer to express a lengthy and specific complaint against the theater in print. His book was popular and influential; it moved into a second printing shortly after the first edition, and his points echo throughout the antitheatricalist works that follow. The selection printed here includes the full portion of his treatise that is dedicated to the theater.

Further Reading

John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes*, ed. Jeremy Payne Collier (London: Shakespeare Society, 1843; reprinted, New York: AMS Press, 1971).

John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* (New York: Garland, 1974).

[59] Youth: Do you speak against those places also, which are made up and built for such plays and interludes as the Theater and Curtain, and other such like places besides?

[60] Age: Yea truly, for I am persuaded that Satan has not a more speedy way and fitter school to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women

into his snare of concupiscence and filthy lusts of wicked whoredom, than those places, and plays, and theaters are: and therefore it is necessary that those places and players should be forbidden and dissolved and put down by authority, as the brothel houses and stews^a are. How did the Benjamites overcome and take away the daughters of Israel? But in watching them in a special open place, where they were accustomed upon the festival days to sport and dance most idly and wantonly.¹ Doctor Peter Martyr (that famous learned man) upon this place says: hereby we may perceive that the virgins gave themselves to plays and dances, which was to abuse the feast day.² It had been better for them to have occupied themselves about graver matters. For the feast days were to this end instituted, that the people should assemble together, to hear (not plays) but the word of God, to be present at the sacrifices, where they should both call upon God, and communicate together the sacraments instituted of God. Wherefore it is no marvel if these maidens were so stolen away, resorting to such open place.

Romulus (after Remus his brother was slain) erected and built up a certain spectacle and place of safeguard for all transgressors that would come thither, practicing thereby to ravish all maidens of the country resorting to their new erected place in Mount Palatine. At solemn games and plays, they overcame the people of Cenia, and slew their king.³ Saint Augustine says that the women of Saba, being of curiosity desirous to be present at open spectacles, were raped and ravished by the Romans: whereof followed such wars, that both nations were almost destroyed.⁴ In consideration of this and the like, Scipio Nasica (that worthy Roman) obtained in the Senate that all theaters and stage plays should be abolished, for that it was so hurtful unto public and civil manners.⁵ Also S.C.^b destroyed utterly that theater place, which was so gorgeously built, and gave commandment that no such places should be built again in the city of Rome, and that they should not make any seats or benches to sit upon (for to behold such plays in such places) neither in the city, nor yet within a mile compass thereof. I would to God our Magistrates would follow those good and wholesome examples.

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Y: I have heard many both men and women say that they can resort to such plays, and behold them without any hurt to themselves, or to others, and that no lust nor concupiscence is inflamed or stirred up in them, in the beholding of any person, or of the plays themselves. How say you, may it be so?

^a Stews: brothels.

^b S.C.: *Senatus Consultum*, decree of the Senate.

A: Saint Chrysostome shall answer them, who wrote only of such as you speak of that resorted to such playing places.⁶ Some curious, dainty, and nice^c persons (sayeth he) hearing this, will say (to excuse their sins and follies) we that do resort to behold and consider the beauty and fairness of women at theaters and stage plays are nothing hurt thereby. David (sayeth he) was sore hurt in beholding Bersabe, and thinkest thou to escape?⁷ He did not behold an harlot, but on the top of his house, *tu autem in Theatro, ubi condemnat animam sapientis*: thou beholdest them in an open theater, a place where the soul of the wise is snared and condemned: in those places (sayeth he) thou seest not only *res infaustas*, unlawful things, but also hearest *spurciloquia*, filthy speeches, whereof is (sayeth he) *incessu meretricis*, the beginning of whoredom, and the habit of all evilness and mischief, where thou shalt by hearing devilish and filthy songs hurt thy chaste ears, and also shalt see that which shall be grievous unto thine eyes: for our eyes are as windows of the mind, as the prophet sayeth, death entered into my windows, that is, by mine eyes.⁸ Possibly thou wilt say (sayeth he) I am not moved with those sights. What art thou, iron (sayeth he) stone, or an adamant?^d Art thou wiser, stronger, and holier than David? A little sparkle of fire cast into straw begins quickly to kindle and flame: our flesh is straw, and will burn quickly; and for that cause the Holy Ghost setteth David for an example to us, that we should beware of [62] such contagiousness.⁹ Job said: I have made a covenant with mine eyes, why then should I think upon a maid?¹⁰ David also made his prayer to God, saying, O Lord turn away mine eyes from regarding vanity, and quicken me in thy way.¹¹ Saint Ambrose upon these words called stage plays vanities, wishing that he could call back the people which run so fast thither, and will them to turn their eyes from beholding of such plays and interludes.¹² The like saying hath Saint Augustine.¹³

Lactantius sayeth that the eyes are diverse and variable, which are taken by the beholding of things, which are in the use of men, nature, or delectable things.¹⁴ *Vitanda ergo spectacula omnia*, all such spectacles and shows (sayeth he) are therefore to be avoided, not only because vices shall not enter our hearts and breasts, but also lest the custom of pleasure should touch us, and convert us thereby both from God and good works.

Y: I perceive by your communication that none ought to haunt and frequent those theaters and places where interludes are, and especially women and maids.

^c Nice: subtle, manipulative.

^d Adamant: hard stone.

A: You have collected the meaning of my sayings (nay, rather of the Fathers' sayings). Truly you may see daily what multitudes are gathered together at those plays, of all sorts, to the great displeasure of almighty God, and danger of their souls, for that they learn nothing thereby, but that which is fleshly and carnal, which Diogenes saw and well perceived, as appeared by his doings, when as upon a certain day he thrust himself into the theater or playing place, as the people were coming forth. Being demanded why he did so, he answered: because I will differ from the multitude, for the greatest part of men are led rather by affections than reasons. I wot^e not what precepts may be given our people, for our custom now is worse than it was amongst the pagans. Therefore let the people, and especially women, give ear to pagan Ovid, if not to Christian precepts. Speaking of those common resortings unto plays, he sayeth:

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*They come to see, and eke^f for to be seen,
Full much chastity quailed^g thereby hath been.¹⁵*

Juvenal the poet sayeth also that no wives or maidens, that list^h to content or please sadⁱ and honest men, will be found and seen at common plays, dancings, or other great resort of people.¹⁶ For these plays are the instruments and armour of Venus and Cupid, and to say good sooth,^j what safeguard of chastity can there be, where the woman is desired with so many eyes, where so many faces look upon her, and again she upon so many? She must needs fire some, and herself also fired again, and^k she be not a stone; for what mind can be pure and whole among such a rabblement,^l and not spotted with any lust?¹⁷ According to the old proverb, *ex visu amor*.^m And as Virgil sayeth, *ut vidi ut peri*.^{18, n} Saint Cyprian persuaded his friend Eucratius mightily to leave off, and not practice nor teach such plays and interludes, showing what inconveniences and wickedness is gotten thereby, and what lust and concupiscence is stirred up thereby in beholding of it, and what filthy and foul acts are done of

^e Wot: know.

^f Eke: also.

^g Quailed: overpowered, destroyed.

^h List: like.

ⁱ Sad: sober, serious.

^j Good sooth: truly.

^k And: if.

^l Rabblement: disorderly mob, crowd.

^m *Ex visu amor*: love comes from sight.

ⁿ *Ut vidi ut peri*: I looked and was lost.

whoredom and bawdry,^o to the hurt of the beholders, adding this, *histrionicis gestibus inquinatur omnia*, by the gestures of interlude players all honesty is defiled and defaced.¹⁹ Read those places of Saint Cyprian which he wrote of purpose against plays, for the inconveniences that he saw and heard to come thereof.²⁰ O Lord what would he say and write of our plays now, if he were alive and saw their order in these days?

[64] For these causes was it that the godly Fathers wrote so earnestly against such plays and interludes, and also commanded by Councils, that none should go or come to plays. As in the third Council of Carthage, and in the Synod of Laodicea, it was decreed that no Christians (and especially priests) should come into any place where interludes and plays are, for that Christians must abstain from such places where blasphemy is commonly used.²¹ Chrysostome calls those places and playing of interludes, *feſta ſatanae*, Satan's banquets.²² Salvianus both bitterly reprehended those men and women that will not abstain from going to such vain interludes and plays, saying *ſpernitur Dei templum, ut concurratur ad theatrum: ecclesia vacuatur, circus impletur: Chriſtum in altario dimittimus, ut adulterantes viſu impuriſſimo oculos ludicorum turpium fornicatione paſcamus*: he despises the temple of God, that he may run to the theater; the Church is always empty and void, the playing place is replenished and full: we leave Christ alone at the altar, and feed our eyes with vain and dishonest sights, and with filthy and unclean plays.²³ And a little after, he declares what innumerable vices there grow by those plays, and what sins are committed against God and his laws.²⁴ Also, Olympiodorus sayeth (to all Christians, men and women in general:) abstain from profane spectacles and interludes, for it is not meet^p that we should go with those feet unto plays, interludes, and abominable spectacles, wherewith we use to go into the temple of God. For they that will go with clean unpolluted feet into the church of God must utterly altogether abstain from ungodly and profane places, as these are.²⁵

Y: Notwithstanding all this that you have alleged out of the Fathers and Councils, I suppose a man or woman does not sin to behold and lust one for another, except they commit carnal copulation together.

A: My son, how doest thou read or hear the words of Christ in the Gospel that sayeth: he that looketh on a woman, and desireth to have her, he hath committed adultery already in his heart.²⁶ And surely they are not spiritual, but carnal, which do not believe that they have a spring of

^o Bawdry: bawdiness, lasciviousness.

^p Meet: fitting, suitable.

ungraciousness within them, and force⁹ not what the mind is, but the body. I dare boldly say that few men or women come from plays and resorts of men with safe and chaste minds. Therefore Augustus Caesar gave commandment that no woman should come to see wrestlers and players.²⁷

The Marsilians (as Valerius sayeth) kept so great gravity that it would receive into it no stage players, because the arguments (for the most part) contained the acts and doings of harlots, to the end that the custom of beholding such things might not also cause a license of following it: and therefore to exercise this art is not only a dishonest and wicked occupation, but also to behold it, and therein to delight, is a shameful thing, because the delight of a wanton mind is an offence.²⁸ Alas my son, notwithstanding all this, are not almost all places in these our days replenished with jugglers, scoffers, jesters, and players, which may say and do what they list, be it never so filthy and fleshly, and yet are suffered and heard with laughing and clapping of hands. Lactantius sayeth *histrionum quoque impudicissimi motus, quid aliud nisi libidines docent, & instigant*: those filthy and dishonest gestures and movings of interlude players, what other thing do they teach than wanton pleasure and stirring up of fleshly lusts, unlawful appetites, and desires, with their bawdy and filthy sayings and counterfeit doings?²⁹ Saint Paul therefore biddeth us to abstain from all appearance of evil, etc.³⁰

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Y: I marvel why you speak against such interludes and places for plays, seeing that many times they play histories out of the Scriptures.

A: Assuredly that is very evil to do, to mingle scurrility with divinity, that is, to eat meat with unwashed hands. Theopompus intermingled a portion of Moses' law with his writings, for which God struck him mad.³¹ Theodectes began the same practise, and was stricken stark blind;³² and will God suffer them unpunished, that with impure and wicked manners and doings do use and handle upon scaffolds God's divine mysteries with such unreverentness and irreligiousness? What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? What communion hath light with darkness?³³ Out of one mouth (sayeth Saint James) proceedeth blessing and cursing; these things ought not so to be.³⁴ Saint Augustine sayeth it is better that spiritual things be utterly omitted, than unworthily and unreverently handled and touched.³⁵ O what rashness and madness is that (sayeth Bernard) to handle the word of God with polluted hands, and to utter and speak it with a filthy mouth, mingled with filthy speeches and words.³⁶

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⁹ Force: care.

And by the long suffering and permitting of these vain plays, it hath stricken such a blind zeal into the hearts of the people that they shame not to say and affirm openly that players are as good as sermons, and that they learn as much or more at a play than they do at God's word preached. God be merciful to this realm of England, for we begin to have itching ear, and loath that heavenly manna, as appeareth by their slow and negligent coming unto sermons, and running so fast, and so many, continually unto plays. Ovid was banished by Augustus into Pontus (as it is thought) for making the book of the *Craft of Love*.³⁷ Hiero Syracusanus did punish Epicharmus the poet because he rehearsed certain wanton verses in the presence of his wife.³⁸ For he would not have only in his house chaste bodies, but also chaste ears. Why then should not Christians abolish and punish such filthy players of interludes, whose mouths are full of filthiness and wickedness? Saint Paul willed the Ephesians that fornication and all uncleanness should not once be named among them.³⁹ Neither filthiness, neither foolish talking, neither feasting, which are things not comely: but rather giving of thanks. He showeth the reason to the Corinthians why they should so abstain: Because evil speakings corrupt good manners (sayeth he).⁴⁰ Again: Come out from among them, and let us separate our selves, and touch no unclean thing, and then the Lord will receive us, and abide with us.⁴¹ For (sayeth he) the grace of God that bringeth salvation unto all men hath appeared, and teacheth us that we should deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and that we should live soberly, righteously, and godlily in this present world, looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the mighty God, and of our saviour Jesus Christ.⁴²

Y: Now I perceive it is not good nor godly haunting such places.

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A: It is truth. For as the Preacher sayeth: It is better to go into the house of mourning, than go to the house of feasting. For the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning: but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.⁴³ And therefore it is better (sayeth Solomon) to hear the rebuke of a wise man, than that a man should hear the songs of fools.⁴⁴

Y: Truly I see many of great countenance both men and women resort thither.

A: The more is the pity, and greater is their shame and pain, if they repent not, and leave it off. Many can tarry at a vain play two or three hours, when they will not abide scarce one hour at a sermon. They will run to every play but scarce will come to a preached sermon, so much and so great is our folly, to delight in vanity and leave verity, to seek for the meat that shall perish, and pass not for the food that they shall live by for ever. These people, sayeth Job, have their houses peaceable, without fear,

and the rod of God is not upon them; they send forth their children like sheep, and their sons dance.⁴⁵ They take the tabret^r and harp, and rejoyce in the sound of instruments. They spend their days in wealth, and suddenly they go down to the grave. They say unto God, depart from us. For we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. Who is the almighty that we should serve him? And what profit should we have, if we should pray to him?⁴⁶ Therefore I speak (alas with grief and sorrow of heart) against those people that are so fleshly led, to see what reward there is given to such crocodiles, which devour the pure chastity, both of single and married persons, men and women, when as in their plays you shall learn all things that appertain to craft, mischief, deceits, and filthiness. If you will learn how to be false, and deceive your husbands, or husbands their wives, how to play the harlots, to obtain one's love, how to ravish, how to beguile, how to betray, to flatter, lie, swear, forswear, how to allure to whoredom, how to murder, how to poison, how to disobey and rebel against princes, to consume treasures prodigally, to move to lusts, to ransack and spoil cities and towns, to be idle, to blaspheme, to sing filthy songs of love, to speak filthily, to be proud, how to mock, scoff, and deride any nation, like unto Genesius Aralatansis:⁴⁷ shall not you learn then at such interludes how to practice them? As Palingenius sayeth:

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Index est animi fermo morumque fidelis,
 Haud dubie testus.
*The tongue hath oftentimes witness brought,
 Of that which heart within hath thought:
 And manners hid in secret place,
 It doth disclose and oft disgrace.*⁴⁸

Therefore great reason it is that women (especially) should absent themselves from such plays. What was the cause why Dina was ravished?⁴⁹ Was it not her curiosity? The maiden would go forth, and understand the manners of other folks. Curiosity then no doubt did hurt her, and will always hurt women. For if it were hurtful unto the family of Jacob (being so great a patriarch) for a maiden to wander abroad, how much more dangerous is it for other families, which are not so holy nor acceptable unto God? But the nature of women is much infected with this vice. And therefore Saint Paul admonisheth women to love their husbands, to bring up their children, and to be bidders and tarriers at home.⁵⁰ And when he entreateth of wanton and young widows: They wander abroad (sayeth he)

^r Tabret: small drum.

and run from house to house, and at the last go after Satan.⁵¹ Give the water no passage, no not a little (sayeth Syrach), neither give a wanton woman liberty to go out abroad.⁵² If thy daughter be not shamefast, hold her straightly, lest she abuse herself through overmuch liberty. As men cannot gather grapes of thorns, and figs of thistles, neither can any man or woman gather any virtue or honesty in haunting places where interludes are.⁵³ As one virtue bringeth in another, so one vice nourisheth another.

[69] Pride engendreth envy, and idleness is an entrance into lust. Idleness is the mistress of wanton appetites, and fortress of Lust's gate. For no man entreth into the palace of Lust, unless he be first let in by Idleness, and more Idleness can there not be, than where such plays and interludes are. Therefore as Christ sayeth: The light of the body is the eye: If then the eye be single, thy whole body shall be light. But if thine eye be wicked, then all thy body shall be dark.⁵⁴ As if he would say: If thine affections and wicked concupiscence overcome reason, it is no marvel though men be blinded and be like unto beasts, and follow all carnal pleasures. To take away this darkness and blindness, the Athenians provided well when they appointed their Areopagites to write no comedy or play, that they would avoid all evils that might ensue thereof.⁵⁵ Theodosius likewise did by express laws decree that dances and wanton dalliance should not be used, neither games or interludes.⁵⁶ Constantinus the Emperour made laws wherein he did utterly forbid all interludes and spectacles among the Romans, for the great discommodity that came thereof.⁵⁷

Saint Cyprian sayeth it is not enough for his friend Eucratius to abstain from such interlude plays himself, but also he must not teach others, nor encourage them thereto.⁵⁸ Saint Ambrose sayeth that all such plays (though they seem pleasant and full of sport) must utterly be abolished, because no such plays are mentioned nor expressed in holy scripture.⁵⁹ Saint Augustine sayeth that such interludes and plays are filthy spectacles. For when the heathen did appoint and ordain (sayeth he) plays and interludes to their gods, for the avoiding of the pestilence of their bodies, your bishops, for the avoiding of the pestilence of your souls, hath prohibited and forbidden those kind of scenical and interlude plays.⁶⁰ Thus you may perceive and understand how those plays have been thought of among the good and godly fathers afore time, which instruct us thereby to hate and detest the like now in this latter time practised.

[70] Y: Are there no laws or decrees that have been made against such players of interludes, since they are so noisome^s a pestilence to infect a commonwealth?

^s Noisome: harmful, offensive.

A: Very many laws and decrees.

Y: I pray you express some of them for the better satisfying of my mind herein.

A: I will so do, God willing. It was decreed under Constantinus the Emperor that all players of interludes should be excluded from the Lord's table.⁶¹ Johannes de Burgo, sometime Chancellor of Cambridge, and a Doctor of Divinity, in his book entitled *Pupilla Occuli*, sayeth that *histriones*, interlude players, *non sunt ad ordines promovendi*, are not to be promoted to any dignity. The reason is (sayeth he) *quia sunt infames*, that those players are infamous persons. He noteth further how they are known: *Hoc intellige de his quibus qui publice coram populo faciunt aspectum sive ludibrium sui corporis exercendo opus illud*, understand this of those players which use to make shows openly before the people, or else in using their bodies to this business, as to make sport to be laughed at.⁶² In another place he sayeth *histrionibus, magicis, scenicis, et aliis infamibus notoriis et manifestis, non est eucharistia conferenda, quia tales vitam ducunt illicitam*: the sacrament of thanksgiving ought not to be ministered unto stage players of interludes, or to witches, sorcerers, or any such infamous and notorious wicked persons, for they lead a lewd and ungodly life.⁶³ In the decrees, it is so decreed that all interlude players, comedy players, heretics, Jews, and pagans, are infamous persons, and ought to be taken for no accusers of any, nor yet to be produced as witnesses in any matter or cause before any judge. If they be, the law is that the party may lawfully except against them and say they are infamous persons, for they are players of interludes.⁶⁴ And this may you do also against common minstrels. Saint Augustine sayeth also that those interlude players are infamous persons.⁶⁵ Cornelius Agrippa sayeth there was in times past no name more infamous than stage players.⁶⁶ And all they that had played an interlude in the theater were by the laws deprived from all honor and dignity. Also there is a notable statute made against vagabonds, rogues, etc., wherein is expressed what they are that shall be taken and accounted for rogues.⁶⁷ Amongst all the whole rabblement, common players in interludes are to be taken for rogues, and punishment is appointed for them to be burned through the ear with a hot iron of an inch compass, and for the second fault to be hanged as a felon.⁶⁸ The reason is that their trade is such an idle loitering life, a practice to all mischief, as you have heard before.

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Y: If they leave this life, and become good true laborers in the commonwealth, to get their own things with their own hands, in the sweat of their face, shall not they be admitted and taken again to the Lord's table, and afterward be reputed and taken for honest men?

A: Yes, truly. And therefore in the third council of Carthage, it is put down in these words: *scenicis atque histrionibus, caterisque personis huius modi, vel Apostatis, conuersis ad Dominum, gratia vel reconciliatio non negetur*: to players of interludes and comedies, and other such like infamous persons and apostates converting and returning to the Lord (by repentance), grace and reconciliation is not to be denied.⁶⁹ And this is according to the saying of the prophet Ezekiel: if the wicked will return from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live and not die.⁷⁰

Y: I pray you, show me from whence those kind of plays had their beginning, and who devised them.

A: Chrysostome sayeth the devil found out stage plays first, and they were invented by his craft and policy; that they contain the wicked acts and whoredoms of the gods, whereby the consciences of goodly men are grievously wounded, and wicked lusts are many ways stirred up. And therefore the devil built stages in cities.⁷¹

[72] Arnobius sayeth: The heathens supposed to have pleased and pacified their gods from their wrath and displeasure when they dedicated to them the sounds of instruments and shalms,[†] stage plays and interludes.⁷² Saint Augustine sayeth the heathen did appoint plays and interludes to their gods for the avoiding of pestilent infections.⁷³ Theophilus sayeth *Gentiles suos dies habebant quibus publica spectacula etc. religiosa*; the Gentiles had their certain days appointed for open spectacles and shows, which they dedicated religiously unto their gods.⁷⁴ Clemens and others say *Diabolus sit auctor Gentilium superstitionum*, the devil is the author of the Gentiles' superstitions.⁷⁵ For these causes and many other, sayeth Theophilus, Christians were forbidden to use any such like plays.⁷⁶ If you will know more hereof, I will refer you unto Polydore Virgil, and also unto John Tertor, where you shall fully see the original of all those plays.⁷⁷

Y: I marvel much (this being as you say) that these plays and interludes are tolerated and suffered nowadays in a commonwealth, being so evil of itself, and having so evil patrons.

A: It is much to be marveled at indeed, my son, for where God's gospel is preached and taught, such vain, idle, and filthy pastimes and mirths should surcease, and be banished far away from Christians, from whence it came. Beatus Rhenanus sayeth *non solum temperandum fuit, qua manifestam praese ferrent impietatem: sed etiam etc.*; it was meet for them to refrain, not only from such things as have a manifest show of wickedness,

[†] Shalms: medieval reed instruments.

but also from such things as might be called indifferent, partly lest any of the weaker Christians should be corrupted: partly also, lest the heathens should be encouraged in their errors, thinking that thing, for that the Christians themselves do it, to be the better.⁷⁸ Tertullian sayeth also *de hoc prima consistam etc.*; herein will I first stand, whether it be lawful for the servant of God to communicate with whole nations in such things: either in apparell, or in diet, or in any other kind of their pastimes and mirth.⁷⁹ Saint Basil sayeth let idleness and superfluous things be put to silence, where God's church is.⁸⁰ What meaneth this (sayeth Saint Origen) leave her no manner of remnant.⁸¹ The meaning is this: abolish not certain of the superstitions of the Chaldes, reserving certain.⁸² Therefore he commandeth that nothing be left in her, be it never so little. Therefore Saint Augustine sayeth that his mother left bringing of wine and cakes to the church, for she was warned it was a resemblance of the superstition of the heathen.⁸³ Tertullian reasoneth vehemently that a Christian man ought not to go with a laurel garland upon his head, for none other cause but that the heathens used so to go.⁸⁴ How much more should we leave off to imitate those filthy plays and interludes that came from the heathens, nay from the devil himself? But as one sayeth: *dolosus hominus dolosae vestis*: crafty man, crafty coat. These players, as Seneca sayeth, *malunt personam habere quam faciem*, they will rather wear a vizard^u than a natural face.⁸⁵ And therefore Saint Cyprian vehemently inveigheth against those which contrary to nature and the law do attire themselves, being men, in women's apparel, and women in men's apparel, with swans' feathers on their heads, silks, and golden apparel etc.;⁸⁶ showing forth in their plays as very Venus itself, as if they were fully in the kingdom of Satan.⁸⁷

[73]

Y: You have, in my judgment, painted out those things to the full, and opened such matters by the effects as will loath any honest man or good woman to come near such plays.

A: Nay truly, I have rather given but an inkling hereof than opened the particular secrets of the matter.

Y: The publishing and opening of the filthy matters thereof is sufficient to prove that they ought to be overthrown and put down.

A: You say truth.

Y: Yet I see little said and less done unto them, great resort there is daily unto them, and thereout suck they no small advantage.

[74]

^u Vizard: mask.

A: They are like unto the citizens of Sybaris, which were in all kind of sensuality delicious, far passing all other, for they used commonly to bid their guests a whole year before, that neither the bidder might lack time to prepare all dainties and delicious fare and costly furniture, nor the guests to adorn and trim themselves up with gold etc.⁸⁸ So they used to set up their bills upon posts certain days before, to admonish the people to make their resort unto their theaters, that they may thereby be the better furnished, and the people prepared to fill their purses with their treasures, that they may sing, which Horace sayeth:

*Now are the brave and golden days,
Now fame with play we gain,
And gold can show us many ways
Men's favor to attain:
For money they hear the music sweet,
And plays they buy with gold,
We seek for gold, and straight unmeet,
Our name by it is sold.*⁸⁹

Therefore of them Boetius sayeth:

*How they do get, few folks do care,
but riches have they must,
By hook or crook we daily see,
they draw men to their lust.
No faith nor fear of God have they,
which do those plays pursue:
Their hands are given to sell and spoil,
their gain they call their due.*⁹⁰

[75] Y: I do now well perceive the wickedness hereof, by that I have heard of you, out of ancient authorities, councils, laws, and decrees, and I would to God such laws were now executed upon such things, which are occasions and lodestones^v to draw people to wickedness. I marvel the magistrates suffer them thus to continue, and to have houses built for such exercises and purposes which offend God so highly, since it came from the heathen, Satan being the author, as you have proved. For my part I shall henceforth (Jesus Christ willing) absent my self from such places and theaters, and

^v Lodestones: magnets.

shall provoke others to do the like also. Yet I marvel much, since the rulers are not only negligent and slow herein to do, but the preachers are as dumb to speak and say in a pulpit against it.

A: I doubt not but God will so move the hearts of magistrates, and loose the tongue of the preachers in such godly sort (by the good devout prayers of the faithful), that both with the sword and the word, such unfruitful and barren trees shall be cut down, to God's great glory, comfort, and safety of his people, and increase of virtue and Christianity, which God grant for his Christ Jesus' sake.

Y: Amen, Amen, good Lord.

A: Now that you are resolved in this point, according unto your request and desire, let this suffice at this time, as touching this matter, and let us go forward to reason of some other matter.

Y: Before we reason of any other matter, let me understand your judgment as touching comedies, and such like things, which scholars do many times practice and use, both in the universities and also in diverse other good schools.

A: Saint Cyprian, writing unto his friend Evagrius in a certain epistle, sayeth that he is *doctor, non erudiendorum, sed perdendorum puerorum, etc.*; a teacher not of learning, but of destroying children, which practice them in these interludes and stage plays. For (sayeth he) *quod male didicit, caeteris quoque insinuat*; that evil which he hath learned, he doth also communicate unto others.⁹¹ Notwithstanding you shall understand that Saint Cyprian speaketh here of him that did teach and practice only this kind of vain pastimes and plays, and did allure children up therein. But to show you my mind plainly, I think it is lawful for a schoolmaster to practice his scholars to play comedies, observing these and the like cautions. First, that those comedies which they shall play be not mixed with any ribaldry and filthy terms and words (which corrupt good manners).⁹² Secondly, that it be, for learning and utterance sake, in Latin, and very seldom in English. Thirdly, that they use not to play commonly, and often, but very rare and seldom. Fourthly, that they be not pranked^w and decked up in gorgeous and sumptuous apparel in their play. Fifthly, that it be not made a common exercise publicly for profit and gain of money, but for learning and exercise sake. And lastly, that their comedies be not mixed with vain and wanton toys of love. These being observed, I judge it tolerable for scholars. [76]

^w Pranked: dressed up, decorated.

Y: What difference is there, I pray you, between a tragedy and a comedy?

A: There is this difference: a tragedy properly is that kind of play in the which calamities and miserable ends of kings, princes, and great rulers are described and set forth, and it hath for the most part a sad and heavy beginning and ending. A comedy hath in it humble and private persons; it beginneth with turbulent and troublesome matters, but it hath a merry end.

Notes

- 1 Judges 21. 20–1.
- 2 Peter Martyr, *Commentary on Judges* (1564), Chapter 21.
- 3 Livy, *History*, I, ix, 6–16.
- 4 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, II, 17.
- 5 P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica, the nephew and son-in-law of Scipio Africanus, was chosen by the Senate as “best citizen” in 204 BCE; he was hostile to the theater, and dissuaded the Senate from building a new amphitheater. See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, I, 31.
- 6 Chryostome, *Homily LXVIII*, iv, on Matthew.
- 7 2 Samuel 11. 2.
- 8 Jeremiah 9. 21.
- 9 James 3. 5–6; Proverbs 6. 27.
- 10 Job 31. 1.
- 11 Psalm 119. 37.
- 12 Ambrose, *De Fuga Saeculi*, I, 4.
- 13 Augustine, *Expositions upon Psalms*, Psalm LXXXI, 1.
- 14 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, VI, 20.
- 15 Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, I, 99–100.
- 16 Juvenal, *Satire VI*, 60–2.
- 17 Vives, *De Institutione Feminae Christianae*, II, xii, 110.
- 18 Virgil, *Eclogue VIII*, 41.
- 19 Cyprian, *Epistle 2*, to Eucratius.
- 20 Cyprian condemns plays throughout his writings; see especially, *To Donatus*, viii.
- 21 Northbrooke seems to refer to decisions made at two late fourth-century CE church councils, at Hippo (referred to here as Carthage, because reference was made to it in the acts of that later council, in 419 CE; the Hippo council took place in 393 CE), Canon 11, and at Laodicea (in Asia Minor; the date is not certain), Canons 39 and 54.
- 22 Chryostome, *Homily on Gospel of John*, XXXII, 3, on John 4. 13–21.
- 23 Salvianus, *De Gubernatione Dei*, VI, 7.
- 24 Salvianus, *De Gubernatione Dei*, VI, 8–15.
- 25 Olympiodorus, *Ecclesiastica*, IV.

- 26 Matthew 5. 28.
- 27 Suetonius reports that Augustus excluded women from watching athletic contests, and restricted their viewing of gladiators to the uppermost seats; see *Lives of the Caesars*, II, xlv, 2–3.
- 28 Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium* II, vi, 7.
- 29 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, V, 10, VI, 20.
- 30 1 Thessalonians 5. 22.
- 31 Josephus reports on Theompompus in *Jewish Antiquities*, XII, 112.
- 32 Josephus reports that Theodectes of Phaselis got cataracts after including biblical material in one of his tragedies. *Ibid*, XII, 113.
- 33 2 Corinthians 6. 14.
- 34 James 3. 10.
- 35 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, II, v.
- 36 Bernard of Cluny, *Abbatis Apologia ad Guillelmum*.
- 37 Although the confessions of adultery in *Ars Amatoria* served as an excuse for Augustus to exile Ovid in 8 CE, the actual cause of this decision is not at all clear; it seems likely that perceived political criticisms in his poetry were more incendiary than his erotic writings.
- 38 Plutarch, *Moralia*, 175C.
- 39 Ephesians 5. 4.
- 40 1 Corinthians 15. 33.
- 41 2 Corinthians 6. 17.
- 42 Titus 2. 11–13.
- 43 Ecclesiastes 7. 4.
- 44 Ecclesiastes 7. 5.
- 45 Job 21. 9–11.
- 46 Job 21. 12–15.
- 47 Northbrooke notes in the margin: “Genesius Aralantansis patria was a common jester and player to Domitian, the emperor, which did mock and scoff most filthily with his gestures the godly Christians, etc.”
- 48 Palingenius, *Zodiacus Vitae* (1528).
- 49 Genesis 34. 1–2.
- 50 Titus 2. 4–5; Ephesians 5. 22–4.
- 51 1 Timothy 5. 13.
- 52 This comes from Syrach, a book included in early editions of the Bible but now deemed apocryphal and omitted in standard versions. See Syrach 9. 34.
- 53 Matthew 7. 16.
- 54 Matthew 6. 22–3.
- 55 Plutarch, *Moralia*, 348B.
- 56 This refers to a decree issued at the Council of Carthage in 419 CE, Canon LX.
- 57 Northbrooke’s “Constantinus” is probably an error. He seems to be referring to the Roman emperor Constantius II (died 361), who issued laws forbidding pagan festivities. These can be found in the Theodosian Code, a summary of laws compiled between 429 and 438 CE on the authority of Emperor Theodosius I (401–50). See *Theodosian Code*, XVI, x, 2–5.
- 58 Cyprian, *Epistle 2*, to Eucratius.

- 59 Ambrose, *De Officiis*, I, xxiii, 102.
- 60 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, I, 32.
- 61 This refers to a decision under the Emperor Constantine I (ca. 272–337 CE) at the Church Council of Ancyra, 314 CE, Canon IV.
- 62 Johannes de Burgo, *Pupila Oculi*, VII, v.
- 63 Ibid, IV, ix.
- 64 It is unclear what decrees Northbrooke has in mind here; he may be referring to laws against actors discussed by Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* II, 12, citing Cicero, *De Republica*, IV, x.
- 65 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, II, 14.
- 66 Cornelius Agrippa, *De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarum*, XX.
- 67 14 Elizabeth, Chapter 5.
- 68 This is not, in fact, exactly what the provision of the law said: it rather decreed that all strolling stage-players not under the name and license of a nobleman should be considered and treated as rogues and vagabonds. The act, renewed and elaborated upon in 1595, required that companies of players should be provided with a license giving the hand and seal of the noble under whose patronage they were.
- 69 See note 21, above.
- 70 Ezekiel 18. 21.
- 71 Chrysostome, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, VI, 10.
- 72 Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes*, VII, 36.
- 73 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, I, 32.
- 74 Theophilus condemns plays in *Ad Autolyicum*, III, xv, although he does not use the quotation attributed to him by Northbrooke.
- 75 Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Gentiles*, I, vii.
- 76 Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum*, III, xv.
- 77 Polydore Virgil, *De Rerum Inventoribus*, III, xiii, 1–12.
- 78 Beatus Rhenanus, Notes on Tertullian's *De Corona Militis*.
- 79 Tertullian, *De Idololatria*, XIII.
- 80 It is not clear where in Basil's works this sentence appears.
- 81 Origen, Homily III on Jeremiah 2. 31.
- 82 The Chaldeans were an ancient Semitic people dominant in Babylonia.
- 83 Augustine, *Confessions*, VI, 2.
- 84 Tertullian, *De Corona Militis*, I–XV.
- 85 This exact phrase does not appear in the writings of either Seneca; it is probably a loose summary of Seneca the Younger, *Epistles*, LXXX, 7–8.
- 86 Cyprian, *Epistle 2*, to Eucratius.
- 87 Deuteronomy 22. 5.
- 88 The Sybarites, residents of the ancient city of Sybaris, were identified with indulgence and sensual luxury.
- 89 Loosely based on Horace, *Epistles*, I, i, 52–6.
- 90 Boethius, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, III, iii.
- 91 Cyprian, *Epistle 2*, to Eucratius.
- 92 1 Corinthians 15. 33.