

The High Road to Hell: Antitheatricalism in England and America

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Foundation Grant Proposal

Proposed Project

My research on the theater has always centered on its power as a social phenomenon—a collective experience informed by and capable of shifting the discourse surrounding pressing social issues. My dissertation (published 2009) and my edited collection (forthcoming 2011) both focus on the intersection of religion and theater during Shakespeare’s lifetime, arguing that the so-called secular stage was in fact deeply concerned—as was its audience—with questions of faith.

Since coming to Evergreen, I have struggled to find time to locate a source of inquiry outside the parameters of these two projects, and now that the second book is about to go to press, I am finally ready to consider new avenues for research. Since much of my teaching focuses on modern and contemporary theater—subjects that generally have more relevance for my students than the socially conservative theater of Shakespeare’s England—I am interested in beginning to bridge the historical gap between the 17th and 21st centuries, and between England and America. At the same time, I would like to find specific thematic approaches that would allow me to narrow my focus within this broad transhistorical framework.

My initial research has led me back to the University of Pennsylvania, where I did my doctoral work. I drew heavily on Penn’s rare books library for my dissertation research, but many of their holdings remain untapped, in part because libraries in England have a much better range of texts from the centuries in which Shakespeare was actually alive and writing.¹ What *is* valuable about Penn’s collection are its 18th- and 19th-century texts, which explore the afterlives of Shakespeare’s plays and the growth of the professional theater in England and America in the modern era. During a recent web search of these collections, I was astounded to find dozens upon dozens of pamphlets, sermons, and scholarly treatises dealing with the subject of antitheatricalism. I believe that these texts, which provide an extraordinary transcript of public debates about the status of the theater, are one major element of Penn’s collection that deserves further scholarly attention.

The heyday of English Renaissance drama is typically thought to have ended with the closing of the London theaters in 1642—the year when all the professional playhouses were officially shut down by the strict Protestants who had recently gained control of Parliament. But the theater was up and running again by 1660, and antitheatrical debates continued to rage on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the 1700s and well up into the first decades of the 20th century. During the first fragile years of the republic, American politicians and public intellectuals were caught up in discussions about whether state

¹ At the heart of Penn’s rare books library is the private collection of Horace Howard Furness, the most important figure in 19th-century Shakespeare studies. Furness self-deprecatingly called himself a “snapper up of unconsidered trifles,” but it was his passion for theater history that provided the foundation for the present collection.

governments should even allow the theater to exist. The library at Penn houses copies of speeches by Alexander Hamilton and other major figures, as well as writings by a range of religious and secular authorities.

Why is antitheatricalism important? Like all forms of iconoclasm, the antitheatrical attack ironically confirms the power of theatrical performance. Christian ministers who believed that plays fostered immorality were forced to admit that the theater could exert a variety of forms of influence over its audience members—both positive and negative. During Shakespeare’s lifetime, attacks on the stage focused on the supposedly licentious practice of casting boy actors in women’s roles. Cross-casting had largely disappeared by the 18th century, but the theater was still a highly sexualized medium, and more importantly, it was still a place where politically volatile ideas might be tested out in front of large groups of people under the screen of “fiction.” I don’t yet know what later antitheatricalists were most concerned about, but I suspect that religious language was often used to mask larger anxieties about how the theater might be contributing to political instability, especially in the newly-formed American states.

In proposing this project on 18th- and 19th-century antitheatricalism, I’m essentially asking two questions:

- 1) What was the relationship between antitheatrical attacks and the increasing prominence of professional actors in English and American society? What was the impact of having a widely accessible professional theater that was beginning to cultivate actors as celebrities?
- 2) When did these attacks begin to die down and why? The advent of the moving image gradually brought about the demise of the popular theater, leaving in its wake a more elite enterprise. But what was happening to religious culture during this same time period, and what impact might those changes have had on debates about the virtue—or lack thereof—of play acting?

In other words, I want to see what I can learn about the theater’s relationship with popular culture from this flood of pro-and anti-theater propaganda and I want to use this set of historical case studies to help my students reconnect to the radical potential of live performance.

Benefits to Teaching and Professional Development

- This project will get me back into the archives, and allow me to begin to shape a research agenda for the next 3-5 years.
- Traveling to Philadelphia will help me maintain relationships with my mentors at the University of Pennsylvania.
- Writing up my findings will give me a way to tap into a new thread of current scholarly discourse. Recent articles on figures such as Jeremy Collier—the theologian who provoked the first big flood of pro- and anti-theater pamphlets in

- the 1700s—indicate a growing interest in the topic among my colleagues at other institutions.²
- Studying this aspect of theater history will help me develop new material for programs and lectures, while allowing me to reflect on the central philosophical questions about the social function of art that have informed my teaching over the last several years.
 - Gaining a better understanding of the 18th and 19th centuries will provide me with material that will complement the expertise of our new British Literature hire, Trevor Speller, and pave the way for future collaborations.

Resources and Budget

In this proposal, I am asking only for money to fund a brief trip (7 days, 6 nights) to Philadelphia in the summer of 2011, though I fully expect that this initial work will seed a larger project.

Plane fare: \$400

Hotel stay: 6 nights @ \$100 = \$600

Per diem: \$200/day for 7 days = \$1400

Total = \$2400

As readers of this proposal are likely aware, the Foundation Grant was designed in part to fund travel to libraries and archives, an aspect of professional development which is not covered by regular faculty travel funds. This support will be crucial for the development of my post-Ph.D. research by giving me access to an extraordinary collection of primary source materials and the time necessary to conduct a preliminary exploration of them. I have had generous support from the College for conference travel over the last several years; I now need to return to the library so that I will have new material to present at future scholarly gatherings.

For more on my recent publications, including the two book projects, please see my website: <http://academic.evergreen.edu/w/williams>

² Lisa Freeman, "Jeremy Collier and the Politics of Theatrical Representation," in Michael Cordner and Peter Holland, Peter, eds., *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating Performance, 1660-1800* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 135-51; Jean Marsden, "Female Spectatorship, Jeremy Collier and the Anti-Theatrical Debate," *ELH* (Winter 1998): 877-98; Kevin Berland, "Bribing Aristophanes: The Uses of History and the Attack on the Theater in England," in Greg Clingham, ed., *Sustaining Literature: Essays on Literature, History, and Culture, 1500-1800* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2007), 229-46.