

Pathway Advanced: Elizabethan Theatre – John Case, “On the Prohibition of Plays” (1588): “Enemies of the theatres”

Material

The historic context: When in 1579 the first English playhouse, called “The Theatre”, was opened in London, it had not only supporters, but also enemies – especially the city magistrate was against theatres. Censorship was everpresent, both for works in print and for performances. Above all, in times of the plague, theatres had to lock down in order to minimize the risk of spreading the disease among the population, and the actors’ groups toured around the country.

Although schools and the Inns of Court¹, as well as the royal court itself, had presented many performances in years before, the “Theatre” was the first that was owned by actors and run by professional business men. It became the model for many other such playhouses, including Shakespeare’s “Globe”.

The following dialogue presents some of the arguments which summarize the views of the critics and supporters of the theatre.

[Opponent] Games, dances and plays are said [...] to be of little use. Therefore they should not be permitted. Furthermore they often corrupt morals, they expend² money, they direct the minds of the citizens away from necessary things towards trivia³. Therefore they should be prohibited. [...] they are so unnatural as to display⁴ men dressed in women’s clothes acting as women and dancing disgracefully with others in circles, these things should not be tolerated. Moreover in the primitive church the fathers prohibited⁵ these games [...]. Lastly, we have six hundred other better forms of recreation, such as singing hymns, reading moral stories and encouraging bird-like singers along with St. Ambrose⁶.

[Supporter] I shall reply to these arguments in order. First I affirm⁷ that games, dances and plays are of little use in relation to the great matters which are usually discussed in the city. [Answering to] the second argument [...], plays [...] do not corrupt morals but correct them, and draw the minds of the citizens not to vain trifles⁸ but to ideas useful to life. [...] It is not indecorous⁹, nor impious for men to portray the characters of women in plays. The disease of disgrace resides not in clothes but in the mind. [...] On the fourth argument my opinion is this: the [church] fathers prohibited profane¹⁰ and pagan¹¹ plays because Jove¹², Phoebus¹³ and other idols were superstitiously¹⁴ celebrated in them. [...] In the final argument I think I hear an over-severe¹⁵ stoic¹⁶ voice, defining virtue¹⁷ as the absence of excitement. [...] Tell me, do those who always sing hymns and psalms never eat? Do they never feast? [...] As King David¹⁸ said, the name of the lord can be praised with songs and dances.

¹ Inns of Court = [name for the four law schools in London]

² expend = cost much

³ trivia = unimportant things

⁴ display = show

⁵ prohibit = forbid

⁶ St. Ambrose = Bishop of 4th century Milan, is said to be the creator of anti-phonial chants (in which one side of the choir responds to the other). One of the church fathers (cf. ll. 6 and 14), i.e. theologians who established the doctrine of the early Christian (Catholic) Church.

⁷ affirm = [here:] agree

⁸ vain trifles = trivia

⁹ indecorous = without decorum (= *Anstand*)

¹⁰ profane = worldly, not spiritual

¹¹ pagan = believer of a non-Christian faith

¹² Jove = Jupiter, the highest god in Roman mythology

¹³ Phoebus [f:bs]: the Greek god of the sun

¹⁴ superstitiously = adj. to superstition = a belief in a wrong religion

¹⁵ severe = serious

¹⁶ Stoic = a follower of a Greek branch of philosophy, which dates from the 3rd century BC, and had its prime until the 3rd century AD. Stoicism is directed towards a virtuous life, and often seen as prohibiting excitement, pleasure, and fun.

¹⁷ Virtue = *Tugend*

¹⁸ King David = king of Israelites. The Old Testament in the Bible tells his story in the Book of Samuel, which describes the life and actions of King David who rose from a shepherd to king. He is often associated with playing music and singing.

From: John Case, "On the Prohibition of Plays (1588)," transl. Peter Mack. In: *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney. Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 899. (371 words)

Tasks

Comprehension

1. Outline the general criteria both speakers choose to exchange their different views on entertainment. Which points cannot be found in the respective other's?

Analysis

2. Make a grid with the detailed views about entertainments of the two speakers.

Opponent	Supporter
of little use (l. 1)	of little use only in great matters (l. 10)
corrupt morals (l. 2)	correct morals (l. 11)
...	...

3. *Interpret the argumentative structure of both views, and its effect on the reader.
4. *Explain the function of the references to St. Ambrose and to King David at the end of each speaker's argument. Discuss, which of the two references may have been more convincing to a contemporary reader.

Evaluation

5. Evaluate which of the two views you support with respect to modern theatre – or do you disagree with both of them? Give reasons for your own view.

5 assignments

Must do: 1, 2, 5

Can do: 3 (based on task 2), 4 (higher level of complexity)

Minimum: 4 assignments

Solutions

Textbooks:

Camden Town, p. 280

Green Line Oberstufe, p. 230-231

Pathway Advanced, pp. 447-449

Fokus Literaturvermittlung: pp. 256-258

Task 1

Categories in the argument

Both speakers focus on morals. According to them, plays have an effect on the mind of the spectators, and they comment on male actors who play female roles. Towards the end both speakers refer to the Christian tradition, mentioning a Church father and a biblical king.

They agree on the question that there are plays which are not useful, because they idolise pagan gods. The supporter gives more details on bad plays than the opponent who considers all plays bad.

The opponent mentions money which is spent on the theatre, which the supporter ignores.
(94 words)

Task 2

Grid

Opponent	Supporter
of little use (l. 1)	of little use only in great matters (l. 10)
corrupt morals (l. 2)	correct morals (l. 11)
expend money (l. 2)	--
Direct the mind away from necessary things (ll. 2-3)	Draw the minds of people to important things in life (ll. 11-12)
Cross-dressing = unnatural (l. 4)	Cross-dressing no indecorous or impious thing (ll. 12-13)
Church fathers prohibited plays (l. 6)	Church fathers prohibited pagan, superstitious plays but allowed virtuous plays (ll. 14-16)
Good entertainment: singing hymns, reading moral stories (ll. 7-8)	Virtue is not absence of excitement (ll. 16-17)
Reference: St. Ambrose, church father	Reference: King David, biblical figure

Task 3

Argumentative structure, effect on reader

Most of the arguments raised by the two speakers are based on the same ideas but opposite in their function. The supporter of the theatre answers almost with a 1:1 relation to the views the opponent mentions. He introduces his answer to the opponent with the words "I shall reply to these arguments in order" (l. 9). This creates a very clear balance for the reader and makes it easy to follow. Also, it is important to see that to some extent, the supporter agrees with the opponent, but where the opponent generalises his views, the supporter asks for differentiation:

1. Plays are not all useless, but they cannot solve any political problems in the city.
2. There are good plays and bad plays, the good ones make people think about important things, the bad ones are about Pagan ideas.

At the same time, some points are individual to each speaker: The opponent mentions the fact that theatres cost much money, and the supporter points out that to lead a good and virtuous life does not mean to starve yourself of food and entertainment. (184 words)

Task 4

Function of the two theological references

Both speakers seek support for their arguments in the earlier Christian tradition, by referring to St. Ambrose (opponent) and to King David (supporter) respectively. These two names serve as giving authority to their arguments, because the church fathers were theologians who formed the Christian belief in its earliest times. King David, in turn, is highly valued among Christians for his music and his prophecies. Both names are therefore important, but a contemporary, post-Reformation reader might have seen more persuasive power in the reference to King David. He is mentioned in the Bible, which

was considered as the single authority in the Reformation. In contrast, St. Ambrose was a Bishop, a representative of the Roman Catholic church, against which the reformers fought in the reformation. It is possible that the opponent's reference to the "primitive church" (ll. 5-6) is a remark against Roman Catholicism, expressing his general distance from it as well as from its representatives, yet he follows this particular saint because of his attitude towards music that celebrates God. (170 words)

Task 5

Evaluation

[individual answers]