Crockett

The Play of Paradox

The Play of Paradox

Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England

Bryan Crockett

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Frontispiece: Bishop John King preaching at Saint Paul's Cross before King James I, the Lord Mayor William Cockayne, and other Londoners (detail). Oil on wood, circa 1616. Reproduced by permission of The Society of Antiquaries of London.

Preface

A good bit of the most fruitful literary theory in early modern studies has for the last fifteen years or so implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) relied on the paradigm of ***masking***: religious discourse for example is only superficially about contact between the human and the divine. In fact it is encoded language of political subjugation. One removes the mask to reveal the face of power. Despite the enormous appeal of this kind of analysis, I can't help thinking that it ascribes to early modern thought an anachronistic innocence of the mask's potential. For the Renaissance is the great age of the mask, the *persona*. If ever a culture understood what a mask can and can not disguise, it is that one.

The drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries flaunts its theatricality. It delights in calling attention to its own artifice, to its layers upon layers of metatheatrical maskings. At times the literary-critical discussion has lost sight of the way this kind of drama actually functions. At its best, whether conceived by Webster or Brecht, metatheater leaves the audience not with the feeling that essential reality has been unmasked but that reality is complex, conflicted, implicated in the masks it wears. A case in point is a moment in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* that bears on the standard theme of appearance masking reality but that complicates that theme in an exchange entirely gratuitous in terms of the play's action. In typically graphic prose, Bosola compares an old woman wearing heavy make-up to

> a lady in France, that having had the smallpox, flayed the skin off her face, to make it more level; and whereas before she look'd like a nutmeg grater, after she resembled an abortive hedgehog. (2.1.28–31)

With sufficient ingenuity one could perhaps unmask the phallogocentric core to Bosola's tirade, but it seems safe to say that the *experience* of the scene in the early seventeenth century (or the twentieth) would not have been so neatly edifying. To behold this actor in make-up playing the part of an ambitious courtier disguised as a melancholic (or perhaps a malcontent) saying what he says to a boy actor made up to look like an old lady trying

to look like a young lady is not to "discover" any solid reality at all, political/misogynous or otherwise. Working through the layers here is more like peeling an onion than removing a mask: the whole thing is peelings. But to say that the onion has no solid ideological core is not to say that it is therefore without any meaning whatever. It still tastes exactly like an onion.

All this is to suggest that contradiction (or contrariety or paradox) might provide a more useful paradigm than masking for understanding the period's performances—whether on the stage or in the pulpit. The following chapters will make that case by attending to the interplay between drama and theology in a few of the stage and pulpit performances of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: an age that continues to confront us with its odd combinations of strangeness and familiarity.

B.C., Baltimore, 1995

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Contents

1. Introduction: Bucer's Round Church and Shakespeare's "Wooden O"—The Circulation of the Reformation Sermon and the Renaissance Play

I

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the influential Reformation theologian Martin Bucer made an unsuccessful plea for a sort of sermon-in-the-round. Bucer's idea was to replace the usual cruciform churches with round ones; the cross-shaped structures, it seems, were reminiscent not only of lingering notions of the sacrificial mass but also of the idolatrous adoration of crosses and crucifixes. Bucer claimed that according to the Holy Fathers the earliest churches had been round, and the preacher had occupied the exact center of the building.[1] The claim is historically dubious, but the idea behind it says a great deal about the way Reformation preachers thought of themselves.

While Bucer's plan was based in part on an iconoclastic impulse, his proposal didn't do away with representation altogether; it invested the preacher with a new kind of iconic significance. Bucer's vision was that of a little world, a microcosm of the invisible church, an enclosure within which the single, continuous wall would be without distinctive features. The right angles of the cruciform structures would be replaced with one smooth surface; there would be no sharp corners, no niches for statuary, no sacrificial altar, no crux—that is, no crossroads, with all its unsettling implications. Instead, the preacher would occupy the single architectural focal point. Without visual distractions, the concentric rings of auditors would be free to attend to the hour-long sermon.

English clerics did not embrace Bucer's proposal with much enthusiasm. One reason is no doubt that church polity seemed more pressing than new building projects, but there may have been another factor: to

those sympathetic to architectural along with theological reform, circles seemed suspiciously pagan. The Elizabethan period was, after all, the heyday of the mage and the witch, whose charmed circles were thought to pose a threat to the faith. And the circular buildings that did begin to crop up along the Bankside were hardly houses of worship. Bear-baiting pits and theaters, they were embodiments of pagan excess. The sermons of the period are filled with polemics against such indulgence: against the mage and the witch, the pit and the playhouse. The "cunning men" who practiced magic throughout the country were thought to be in competition with the churches for the people's attention, as were the London theaters.[2]

But competition implies kinship. There is no doubt of the antitheatrical prejudice among some Puritans of the late sixteenth century,[3] but the evidence of this antitheatricalism works both ways: on the one hand the polemics amply demonstrate a perceived antipathy between stage and pulpit; on the other, the same polemics imply that the two modes were perceived as closely enough related to compete. Beneath all the polemics, all the bitter disagreements about godly and ungodly pastimes, lie closely related cultural forces. It would be a mistake to assume, for example, that playwrights responded to King James's 1606 act outlawing theatrical references to controversial religious topics by suddenly becoming "secular"; the term is an anachronism for most of the period's discourse.[4] Rather the playwrights, like the preachers, engaged in rhetorically subtle and forceful ways the period's peculiar synthesis of magic, drama, and religion: forces impossible to dissociate, as the general failure of attempts to do so before the Enlightenment attests.

Shakespeare is a case in point: the "wooden O" of the Globe Theatre, to which the Prologue in *Henry V* refers in asking the audience to imagine that the enclosure encompasses a vast space, often functions as an arena for something nearer to communal alchemy than to mere pastime.[5] There is a moment in *The Tempest*, for example, when the magician Prospero traces a magic circle with his staff.[6] Wearing his enchanted robe and employing the heightened, incantatory diction appropriate to the moment, he abjures the "rough magic" that has allowed him not only to raise tempests but also to eclipse the sun and awaken the dead (5.1.40–50). In renouncing in the service of a higher calling the very powers he invokes, Prospero casts a spell—the incantation is based on a speech that Ovid gives to the sorceress Medea—but it is a spell renouncing his own sorcery, his own spellbinding powers. In this moment he is magical, dramatic, and religious all at once, and the power of the moment depends on the audience's registering the synthesis.

My claim in this study is that this synthesis occurs not only on the

stage but also in the pulpit performances of Shakespeare's day. Since the Renaissance stage play and the Reformation sermon perform the same work—helping audiences adjust to and control the peculiar ambiguities of the early modern period—the two modes can be evaluated in the same terms. The lines of analysis can be various: anthropological, rhetorical, epistemological, generic, thematic. I will range fairly freely among these approaches, focusing on plays and sermons that address one of the main obsessions of the age: the principle of contrariety, or paradox.[7] It seems to me that this obsession throws a good deal of light on those points of contact that literary historians have increasingly seen as characteristic of the Renaissance: the conflicts and contradictions that all the artistic modes of the period both reflect and attempt to resolve. All seven chapters, then, have to do with contrariety, the coincidence of opposites. After this introductory chapter, which examines the theatrics of preaching and the rhetoric of paradox, the remainder of the study is divided into three parts, each containing two chapters. The first chapter in each pair highlights performances that rhetorically contrast with those of the second. While every chapter examines the interplay between theology and drama, Chapters 2 and 3 focus especially on sermons, 4 and 5 on comedies, and 6 and 7 on tragedies. By this arrangement I hope to show that the cultural interplay between the Renaissance stage play and the Reformation sermon cuts across generic boundaries and apparent antipathies.

II

Back to Bucer and his round church. Where did he get his idea? He was in exile at Cambridge when he made his plea for circularity. There he no doubt would have been familiar with a twelfth-century structure in the heart of the town, one of the few round Norman churches left in England.[8] A second possibility is that Bucer was influenced not just by the local Norman architecture (the nave of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Cambridge, only twenty feet in diameter, can hardly be what he had in mind) and not just by the purportedly round churches of primitive Christianity, but by the very real centrally planned churches that flourished at the height of the Italian Renaissance. But one need only glance at the architectural use of the circle in these churches to get a sense of the difference between their design and what Bucer seems to have had in mind.

During the century before Bucer wrote *Scripta Anglicana*, which contains his argument for the round church, the Platonist architects of Renais-

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sance Italy were designing churches in which the defining shapes were the circle and the sphere rather than the cross. These churches were based on the geometric principle of the circle's ideal simplicity. From Plato to Plotinus to Ficino to the architects of the quattrocento, the commonly held view was that the circle—or, better yet, the sphere—is the geometric form that most closely approximates divine perfection. In fact, in the first architectural treatise of the Renaissance, Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (written about 1450), the section on ecclesiastical architecture begins with a eulogy on the circle.

It is doubtful that Bucer actually visited any of the centrally planned churches designed by Alberti, Filarete, Bramante, or Giorgio (although he no doubt would have been familiar with the numerous small, round churches of Northern Europe, some of which date from Carolingian times). In any case, the point here is that the similarities between his design and those of the Italian humanists are not as telling as the differences. It is true that Bucer shared with his Italian forebears a desire for simplicity, a freedom from the visual distractions of ornament. As Filarete's treatise on architecture has it, "In looking at a circle the glance sweeps round instantaneously without interruption or obstacle."[9] Alberti's plan was to paint the centralized choir of the SS. Annunziata white, leaving it absolutely without ornament.[10] One thinks of a similar impulse behind the whitewashed churches of Reformation Europe: the impulse to transcend the mediating effects of visual display, to remove the statues and paintings of the saints, to get beyond the icons that always carried the danger of idolatry. But again, there is a difference, and the difference has to do with what happens once the mediating object is removed.

In the Italian Platonist churches the move is away from ritual sacrifice, away from the suspiciously theatrical contingencies of enacted history, and toward a timeless, ideal perfection.[11] In these churches the dominant architectural feature is the dome. The hemisphere suspended above the worshipper draws the attention upward, inviting a sense of transcendence above the plane of human activity. As Filarete puts it, the design of a church should ensure "that those who enter feel themselves elevated and the soul can rise to the contemplation of God."[12]

If the medieval cruciform churches were designed to encourage contemplation of and participation in an *action* (the atoning, sacrificial martyrdom, re-enacted at every mass), the centrally planned churches were designed to foster contemplation of *perfection*, to lift the worshipper out of the conflicted world of history and into a state of serene transcendence. As

Rudolph Wittkower has said, in the architectural move from the medieval cross to the Renaissance circle, "Christ as the essence of perfection superseded Him who had suffered on the Cross for humanity; the Pantocrator replaced the Man of Sorrows" (30).

Bucer and the Platonists are alike in rejecting the theater, the spectacle, of enacted sacrifice. They agree that there is something suspect in all that seems "theatrical" about the Catholic mass—the visual display, the mediating role of the priest, the performance of a sacrifice, the processions, the elevation of the Host, the very shape of the building. But Bucer's design would accommodate theater of another sort. His round church would be an ***auditorium***, an arena where the air would be filled with sound. The theatrical activity of the mass would be replaced not by the Platonists' serene transcendence but by the action of the ***word***. In this sense it was closer to Shakespeare's "wooden O" than to the centrally planned Italian churches.

Bucer himself argued that he wanted round churches for a purely practical reason: so that everyone would be able to hear the preacher. In the medieval Roman-cross churches the priest not only kept his back to the congregation as he performed his sacred offices at the altar, which was often separated from the main body of the church by an elaborate rood screen, he was also at a great distance from most of the worshippers—the distance from the choir to the nave. According to Bucer,

> this is Antichristian. For the choir to be so far removed from the rest of the church serves this end: that the ministers, whatever their faith and life, are nevertheless by their very order and placement held to be nearer to God than lay people, and empowered to appease God by the force of external works, which they perform for themselves.[13]

The round church with the preacher in the center would solve the problem, Bucer claimed, both ensuring that the preacher would be visible and audible to everyone present, and emphasizing the priesthood of all believers; all would be enclosed in the fold of the same circle, no one by virtue of office any nearer than anyone else to God.

Clearly, mere practicality forms only a part of Bucer's vision; the reformer is also aware of the symbolic force of his design. If hearing the preacher's words were really the paramount concern, would the sermon-in-the-round be the most practical scheme? What would become of the numerous worshippers who would find themselves behind the preacher, no matter which way he turned? Wouldn't an amphitheater design—or even

a round church with the pulpit against the wall—better serve the purely acoustic purpose? The center of the church could then be reserved for the communion table, the proper placement of which Bucer does not mention. In his view the preacher was to be at the center, making it iconically plain that the word had superseded all sacramental representations of the divine presence.

Or, rather, a ***newly embodied*** word superseded the traditional sacraments, refiguring in the physical presence of the speaker the Word that had been incarnate in bread and wine. The reformers' impulse to shift the mode of representation from the visual to the aural was checked by the preacher's bodily presence, just as the impulse to abolish the priest as mediator resulted in a different kind of mediation in the person of the preacher. Rather than beholding a profusion of visually alluring icons and then taking part in a communal act of sacrifice, all of which could be denounced as "theatrical," the worshipper in Bucer's church would watch and listen as the preacher performed. Paradoxically, then, the Reformation insistence on the centrality of the spoken word reintroduced an element of theater into the liturgy—albeit theater of a different order from the theatricality of which the medieval liturgy stood accused.

In addition to the physical presence of the speaker, the very nature of oral performance fosters an experiential sense of history, of action, of drama. The modulations of sound through the course of an auditory performance—whether a sermon or a symphony—immerse the audience in a sequential experience: one that works through time to present change, conflict, resolution. The preacher's reliance on the action of the word means that there is an element of drama inherent in the sermon-centered liturgy. This is particularly true of pre-Enlightenment sermons, whose audiences' habits of perception are still primarily aural rather than visual. These habits of aural synthesis conceive of a world in flux: a dynamic, dramatic, threatening world compared with the relatively static world a visually-centered synthesis constructs.[14]

III

Before the great watershed of the middle of the seventeenth century, stage plays and sermons performed complementary roles in what has been called the "social drama" of the Protestant Reformation.[15] In Elizabethan England one finds not only the mutual influence of drama and theology that

would be present in any age in which both modes flourished, but also the cultural interdependence that results from the readiness on the part of both Renaissance playwrights and Reformation preachers to experiment, to create new genres out of old forms, to use whatever cultural materials were at hand in the service of successful performance.[16]

There is little doubt that Reformation preaching styles influenced dramatists, just as there is little doubt that Renaissance stage plays influenced preachers. The substantial audience overlap between the two modes meant that preachers could assume a high degree of receptivity to oral performance, as the playwrights could assume their audiences' tendency to cast their experiences in religious terms.[17] Henry Smith, dubbed by Thomas Nashe the "silver-tongued" preacher of Elizabethan England, demonstrates the ease with which the language of the pulpit could mix with that of the stage:

> How many years of pleasure thou hast taken, so many years of pain: how many drams of delight, so many pounds of dolor: when iniquity hath played her part, vengeance leaps upon the stage: the comedy is short but the tragedy is longer.[18]

One of the problems in appreciating the cross-fertilization of Reformation sermons and Renaissance plays is the assumption that Protestantism implies antitheatricalism. Martin Butler points out that Protestantism, even Puritanism, was inextricably entwined with Tudor/Stuart drama right up until the closing of the theaters in 1642.[19] Protestant moral interludes were frequently performed in the middle of the sixteenth century, and some of the leading English reformers, including John Foxe, were also playwrights.[20] These preacher/playwrights objected not so much to the theater as an institution as to the theatricality of Roman Catholicism. Foxe, for example, refers to the typical medieval pope as a "remarkable actor,"

> that wholly theatrical contriver, [who] descended into the orchestra for the purpose of dancing his drama. While the other actors were driven off the stage little by little, he wished to keep the stage alone and to keep up all of the roles of everyone.[21]

Yet Foxe himself wrote the plays *Titus et Gesippus* (1544) and *Christus Triumphans* (1556). Politically influential Englishmen who were both Puritan sympathizers and lovers of the theater include Leicester, Walsingham, the third and fourth earls of Pembroke, Cromwell's chaplain Peter Sterry, and

Milton.[22] Calvin's English translator, Thomas Norton, coauthored the first English tragedy in blank verse. Nor was Calvin himself antitheatrical; he allowed the production of a play in Geneva, and in his *Institutes* he repeatedly refers to the world as a glorious theater in which angels behold human actions.[23]

A second problem in appreciating the affinity between Reformation sermons and Renaissance plays is that we are heir to the style of preaching that emerged in the eighteenth century, a style that valued analytics over theatrics.[24] But both in their manner of delivery and in their effects on audiences, Tudor/Stuart sermons were performances. Preachers repeatedly made the point that they were neither mere instructors nor orators. In a mid-century preaching manual that John Ludham translated into English in 1577, the Marburg theologian Andreas Hyperius says,

> They that teach no otherwise in the temple than professors are accustomed in the schools, it cannot be that they should be the authors of any great spiritual fruits, and very few or none are seen to be induced with such sermons to repentance and amendment of life.[25]

In a remark to his congregation, John Donne is more concise: "We are not upon a lecture but a sermon."[26]

Just as preaching involved more than instruction, it demanded more than mere oratory. The popular Puritan Samuel Hieron says, "I am come hither to discharge the duty of a Preacher, not of an Orator."[27] And Hyperius: "the action of a Preacher in the Church of God is much discrepant from the action of a Rhetorician in the guild hall" (17^{v}). Even if it is clear why a preacher would be called on to be more animated than a lecturer, precisely what is the difference between the preacher and the orator? (One of the standard studies of seventeenth-century preaching, after all, is called *English Pulpit Oratory*.)[28] It seems to me not only that there is a clear distinction between preaching and oratory in the Tudor/Stuart period but that the distinction goes beyond even the import of the subject matter: the difference is essentially theatrical. What distinguishes the Reformation preacher from the instructor or the orator is his *role*.[29] The preacher self-consciously takes on the mantle of the divinely inspired prophet. Like Shakespeare's Prospero, the preacher quite literally dons a robe and heightens his language for the prophetic performance.

Reformation preachers explicitly think of themselves as prophets. As Stephen Gosson says, "Believe we cannot but by preaching, whereby it

grows that the object of this act in this place is the Prophet."[30] Hieron points out that whereas in the Old Testament "prophesying" meant predicting the future, in the New Testament "It is even the very same which we term *Preaching*."[31] In Hieron's view the Reformation preacher is to be a prophet in the New Testament sense. His inspired utterances do not merely explain or interpret the divine Word, nor do they simply predict God's actions; they *precipitate* those actions during the course of the performance. The role of the preacher/prophet is to work a kind of sacred magic, transforming the very souls of the listeners.

Theologians throughout the period echo Gosson's claim that a prophetic style of preaching is necessary for the salvation of the soul; without it all other measures, including the sacraments, are useless. Both Luther and Calvin hold that the sacraments of the Eucharist and baptism require preaching in order to beget faith, and Thomas Cartwright insists that the sacraments should be administered only *after* preaching.[32] As William Sclater puts the matter in a 1609 sermon,

> I cannot yet see what that great and important business of the ministry should be to which it may beseem Preaching to give place. I am sure not Sacraments. Christ sent me not to baptize (saith the Holy Apostle) but to preach the Gospel.[33]

Protestant reformers frequently support their position by quoting Paul's statement, "Then faith is by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).[34] When Henry Smith says, "without the word never any was converted to God," he refers explicitly to the word preached.[35] Hieron is more blunt: "he who thinks to be saved without preaching shall be damned."[36] Nor does John Marbecke mince words: "no priest, no more than a dead man is a man, which doth not preach."[37] If the ministers were to work the sacred magic of imparting divine life to their audiences—if in fact they were to be spiritually alive themselves—they must assume the role of the prophet.

Gosson makes a clear distinction between the minister in his ordinary human capacity and in his divinely inspired role in the pulpit, calling it the devil's work to confuse the two offices.[38] In his manual for preachers *The Art of Prophecying*, the popular theologian William Perkins also distinguishes two offices, both proper to the prophet: "And every Prophet is partly the voice of God, to wit, in preaching: and partly the voice of the people, in the act of praying."[39] In both offices the preacher mediates be-

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