
Garry K. Waite's book is a welcome contribution to early modern studies: the first thematic and doctrinal study in English of the role of civic drama in promoting religious and social reform in the Netherlands, between the Burgundian era of the late middle ages and the wars of independence with Spain in the second half of the sixteenth century. The plays examined in *Reformers on Stage* were commissioned and performed in cities throughout Flanders and Holland by members of the chambers of rhetoric. “Chambers” refers to both social organisations and performance events. The “chambers” were civic societies, whose literate all-male personnel were drawn from a fairly wide range of labouring, merchant, artisanal, and professional urban occupations. “Chambers” were also public playing spaces, indoors in halls, or outdoors on fixed scaffolds or pageant wagons. When these stages were erected for inter-city drama competitions, or for royal or civic celebrations, they could be splendidly elaborate, as seen in a contemporary drawing, reproduced in this book, of the flamboyant, multi-level, neo-classical stage constructed for the famous Ghent competition in 1539. The illustration brings to mind the kind of lavish stage designs associated with court theatre in early seventeenth-century England and continental Europe.

The rhetoricians' plays were performed in the vernacular before audiences of men and some women from virtually all social classes. They varied considerably in style and genre, ranging from the farcical and scatological to the bookish and homiletic. Individual plays sometimes mixed these modes, so that bawdy dialogue, rough anticlerical satire, and didactic speeches appeared together in works dedicated to instilling moral virtues and advocating spiritual benefits from particular forms of worship. The drama's star attractions were the *spelen van zinne*: “plays of the senses,” or, alternatively, “plays of the mind.” The double meaning in *zinne* identifies the combined aesthetic and intellectual popularity of these plays. The *spelen* resembled Tudor morality plays in having allegorical figures represent human virtues, vices, and behavioural types. But in their creation of hybrid theatrical forms and their dedication to social commentary, the *spelen*'s dramatic horizons were considerably more far-reaching.

The anonymous *Allegorical Play of a Sick City* (ca. 1535) provides an example. Its central female character, Amsterdam, has fallen ill because of repressive measures taken against hard-working reform-minded citizens. Amsterdam has been infected by Tyranny, and he and his sidekicks Hypocrisy and Finances gloat about their success to Scriptural Preacher. Their sectarian debates allude to a political conflict between the city's magistrates and civil militia. The latter supported the rhetoricians and their plays, which satirised the clergy and civic magistrates. A figure named Community threatens the wealthy So Many in apocalyptic tones. So Many is also accused of hoarding grain and causing recent food shortages. When he complains to Hypocrisy about this treatment, Hypocrisy wryly

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tells him to blame Erasmus and his heretical Greek New Testament for spreading disease to So Many's afflicted grandmother, Amsterdam. The godly artisan More Than One challenges Hypocrisy's explanations, saying that the city's sickness is the fault of the lazy clergy and their secular confreres, the magistrates. Finally, a Doctor examines Amsterdam and finds the cause of her illness to be false religion. He prescribes raising the standards of scriptural knowledge for the ignorant clergy. Presumably the magistrates too should look to this self-healing advice.

The rhetorician plays were artfully crafted in verse and prose, with abundant puns and tropes, and copious scriptural and classical allusions. Most told good stories with clear topical relevance to city audiences. They were also visually entertaining, incorporating moments of choreographed spectacle and pageantry, as well as emblematic costumes and hand properties. In what was still predominantly an oral culture, these visual discourses were effective means of communicating ideas and social practices to a broad and only partially literate public. And as Waite observes, the physical vitality of actors' performances, and their ability to improvise social and political messages to suit particular audiences, must have lifted serious theological controversies off the page in daring and engaging ways.

One of the many virtues of this meticulously documented study is the way it contextualises the chambers of rhetoric and their plays for English-language readers. The book's first section discusses the spread of early Reformation doctrines in the Netherlands, then describes the organisation and personnel of the chambers, the workings of local city governments, their social hierarchies, and their economic interests. It also examines two cities in detail, Antwerp and Amsterdam, and thereby underlines the necessity of particularising local conditions in order to analyse properly the motives and interests of each city's chambers. As a result, Reformers on Stage is not just a groundbreaking study of the drama's theological and propaganda uses, but also a persuasive account of how early modern culture in the Low Countries was locally produced and debated. Furthermore, Waite reflects on his own assumptions and conclusions, above all on questions of social agency: what measurable effects did these plays have on urban opinion? to what degree did they catalyse social and religious reform outside the play-world? Within the field of early modern English drama, there has been a tendency to put a great deal of faith in the power of the theatres as agents of social change and of ideological resistance to established authority. Sometimes this alleged power seems to lie more in the fantasies of new historicist critics than in the materially traceable responses of governing elites, or in recorded events. Reformers on Stage is conscious of the need to gauge the operative limits of these plays, and wary of the danger of overstating their ideational power. As a result, its claims about the plays' impact as vehicles of ideological and material change are generally convincing, though occasionally some assessments come across as impressionistic. Waite's study also demonstrates from the beginning that the propaganda function of these plays was relational and transformative: not only did rhetoricians disseminate, say, new Lutheran ideas from Germany, but in representing those ideas on stage, they modified them in ways that Luther, or later John
Calvin, could never have foreseen. The rhetoricians thus influenced public policies by mediating, prioritising, and diversifying emergent Protestant doctrines according to local and national interests.

Perhaps the most important of these interests was mercantile trade, whose growth city officials believed depended on social harmony and public order. The rhetoricians were often fiercely anticlerical, and their theological positions included an eclectic assortment of Catholic and Protestant reform options, from the temporing to the zealous. Yet their attitudes to social reform on the whole remained conservative and self-censoring. The chambers conspicuously promoted their city’s economic welfare and civic pride when competing with other city chambers. They were nearly always loyal to the imperial policies of Charles V, despite his onerous taxes. They rarely questioned the privileges of the local aristocracy. Criticism of civic authorities was likewise muted, partly because the chambers represented an institutionalised opportunity for members to advance themselves within civic power structures or to secure patronage. Since the class and trade interests of the rhetoricians and those of the city authorities were not dissimilar, the plays avoided undermining civic unity. Celebrating the advantages of peace — a major theme of these plays and of Waite’s book — was both a moral and a commercial virtue. For their part, city officials obliged by supporting the chambers financially and tolerating their varying positions on reform and spirituality to a wide degree. Material support varied from one city to another, however, depending on a city’s economic prosperity and willingness to spend money on culture generally. In this regard Antwerp was generous, but Amsterdam could be stingy and philistine. Yet what Amsterdam’s rhetoricians lacked in official support, they sometimes made up for in shows of public fervour, such as the occasion on 11 February 1535, when eleven Anabaptist streakers caused a sensation by running through the streets displaying the “naked truth” to the city’s unreformed residents.

Waite’s deeply researched work opens up fascinating networks of early modern dramatic, civic, and religious activity. For scholars more familiar with the sixteenth-century English stage, the co-operation between city officials and the reform-minded chambers may come as a surprise, since it contrasts so strikingly with relationships between the public theatre and the City in Shakespeare’s London. There, religious reformers who dominated City offices continually denounced plays and players as morally and socially destructive. (That partly explains why the Globe Theatre stood on the south bank of the Thames in Southwark rather than across the river in the City proper.) What seems to be almost entirely absent in Netherland cities during this period is the aggressive antitheatrical sentiment that characterised Protestant reformers in Tudor England (with odd — in both senses — and temporary exceptions such as John Bale). Reformers in the Low Countries did not reject the theatre simply because medieval plays had been associated with Catholic doctrines. Nor did they find in scripture the absolute prohibitions on acting and masquerade that English puritans did. There are historical explanations for some of these differences, such as the varying rates of momentum and the doctrinal emphases of each country’s Reformation. Also to the point are the
aristocratic alliances of English playhouses and acting companies, which gained legal protection and financial patronage from the crown and nobility, as opposed to the mercantile classes. Nonetheless, the fact that sophisticated urban drama was an important vehicle of religious and, to a lesser extent, social reform in the Netherlands is just one of the fascinating discoveries about European early modern culture to be gleaned from this impressive book.

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Practicing New Historicism is a gracefully written account of the genesis, guiding principles, and, of course, the practices that have guided the development of this broadly influential school of literary criticism. Gallagher and Greenblatt usefully supplement our current understanding of the school's genesis in dialogues between like-minded faculty members at the University of California, Berkeley, during the 1970s, who, as they show, were not driven by the “ressentiment” of which its detractors often accuse them. While admitting some “tinge of aggression” toward earlier close-reading practices that “intensified . . . wondering admiration” toward “genius,” they primarily situate their practice in the kind of “ideology critique that played a central role in the Marxist theories in which we were steeped.” Finding themselves uncomfortable, however, with “such key concepts as superstructure and base or imputed class consciousness,” they transformed “the notion of ideology critique into discourse analysis” (pp. 8–9) in ways that the rest of the volume goes on to demonstrate once again. Nowhere, however, do they attempt to modify or refute the determinist assumptions associated with this kind of ideology critique, but instead simply omit their most controversial premise: that even the most apparently innovative, iconoclastic, or indeed “subversive” literary texts are undercut by strategies of “containment” that place them in the service of the dominant ideology.

This omission seems intended to buttress the book's general project of emphasizing the positive rather than the negative elements of New Historicist practice previously pointed out by critics. Its introduction in particular emphasizes how this practice enables the appreciation of aesthetic power without “uncritically endorsing the fantasies that the representations articulate” in the realm of Power (p. 9). Following Foucault in rejecting the alternative Marxist tradition of Lukács, Gramsci, and Goldmann, in which “consciousness” remains a “primary object of analysis” (p. 61), their more liberating approach “embodies” cultural ideology in material objects and actual bodies. For New Historicists, these are the key “sites” of social construction, even when they appear to be mere byproducts of nature or (to use the word re-echoing throughout the book’s final chapters) mere “leftovers” of culture. Such objects supply the “Touch of the Real” proclaimed in their first