Government Control and Censorship of the Drama

by

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Licensing the Play up to the Beginning of Puritan Influence

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   1. Religious, and in harmony with the people's belief
   2. Necessary control in hands of local, civil and church authorities.

B. Need of control brought about by:
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C. Government Control of Plays
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3. Under Elizabeth
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INTRODUCTION

Much of historical and sociological interest centers around the development of the drama, even from its very beginning, but especially is this true of the period immediately following the Reformation, when the primitive drama was a dangerous controversial weapon.

In this brief study of government control I have attempted to gather such evidence as pertains to the need of censorship and control, as it centered around the changed policies of Henry VIII down through the reigns of Edward VI, Queen Mary and Elizabeth.
A study of the government censorship and control of the drama affords a most interesting avenue to a better understanding of this early period in the development of English national life. In the beginning there was no need for government control because of the nature of the play produced. The people were essentially religious and the play was in absolute harmony with their religious beliefs and practices. Even during the reign of Henry VII, when the drama progressed as never before and many noblemen kept their own companies of professional players, there was no need for government interference. Whatever control they thought necessary was handled by local civil and church authorities. So long as the religious nature of the play was in harmony with the religious ideals of the people there was no difficulty, but with the changed policies of Henry VIII and the troubles of the Reformation, a conflict was inevitable. This was the period of the great Renaissance movement. The Revival of Learning had awakened a new spirit of interest in every phase of human life. The much debated religious question was one which lay near the hearts of all, and it required only a spark to kindle the slumbering agitation into a flame. This was supplied by the sale of indulgences by Pope Leo X. At the beginning of the Reformation the authorities of the Roman Church were not aware of the extent of the danger which threatened
it, and not until men like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox entered definitely and decisively into the movement did they realize their danger.

Because of the religious nature of the play, coupled with the religious nature of the question in dispute, the stage was regarded as a dangerous weapon. Emile Legouis, in his History of English Literature, makes the following statement:

Matter for controversy was from the outset mainly provided by the questions of the translation of the Bible into English and of the dissolution of religious houses, both destined to influence language and literature importantly. . . . It was the question of translating the Bible which brought Sir Thomas More and William Tindale into conflict. (1)

In the early years when the English government championed the papacy Tyndale was one of the most active supporters of the Reformation. Thomas More, the most lettered and skillful of the Catholics, was equally ardent in his support of the papacy. This religious controversy, so near the hearts of the people, led by these powerful men fell naturally into the life of the drama, and was used to further advance the cause of each conflicting group.

It is natural that the licensing of plays would involve not only when they should be permitted, but what their content should be. In this regard it is interesting to

note the change in content of plays produced according to the changed policies of the crown. Prior to 1533 much of the drama was written in support of the Catholic Church. In 1527 there was a play by the St. Paul's boys given before Ambassadors from France on the Captivity of the Pope, in which the "heretic Luther" had a prominent part. The next year (1523) Wolsey had a performance given in his audience on the release of the Pope. (1)

We can find no evidence of any formal censoring regulation of the play prior to 1533, although there is much evidence that the drama was being used for controversial purposes as early as 1526, when Wolsey was obliged to defend himself against a political attack at Gray's Inn. This was John Roo's famous morality play called "Lord Governance and Lady Publik-Wele." (2)

Apparently the government felt no alarm until the controversy of the Reformation became so acute, and was further antagonized by the changed policies of Henry VIII. This reference to his changed policies is explained by his break with the Pope in his fruitless endeavor to divorce Catherine. The Protestants took advantage of this break and used the play to further their interests.

As Protestantism, coquetted with by Henry VIII, and encouraged by Cromwell, became gradually vocal in England and awakened an

(2) Ibid., p. 219.
equally resonant reply, the vernacular drama, like every other form of literary expression, was swept into the war of creeds. This phase, dominating even the professional players, endured through the reigns of Edward VI and Mary, and still colours the early Elizabethan interludes. (1)

So long as he remained a loyal defender of the Catholic faith, the plays were thoroughly orthodox, but when he found it necessary to sever relations with the church, the trouble was intensified almost to the point of revolt.

The change in the King's religious attitude was followed by a change in content of the play. A comedy was put on at court in which certain Cardinals were lamentably ridiculed. Later a performance was given at Christ's College, which was very offensive to Bishop Gardiner, the Chancellor at Cambridge University. (2) This was none other than the famous Anti-papal Parmmachus, written by the fiery heretic Kirchmayer in 1533. It goes back to one of the most interesting themes of medieval drama, that of Anti-Christ. Kirchmayer was careful to make it evident that Anti-Christ was none other than the Pope.

Now that the play had the favor of the crown it became a convenient weapon in the Protestant cause, and there is considerable evidence showing that both Cranmer and Cromwell were in sympathy with its use.

(2) Ibid., p. 220.
Such performances as the Protestants gave resulted in stirring up the animosity of the loyal supporters of the Catholic faith, and as they were antagonized more and more, the spirit of revolt grew until finally it became necessary to prohibit games and unlawful assemblies.

In the same year, strict orders were issued to stay games and unlawful assemblies in Suffolk, on account of a 'seditious May-Game' which was 'of a king, how he should rule his realm,' and in which 'one played husbandry, and said many things against gentlemen more than was in the book of the play.' These were exceptional cases. Both the students of Christ's and the Suffolk rustics had in their various ways overstepped the permitted mark. Certainly Henry was not going to have kingship called in question on a village green. But it is notorious that, in matters of religion, he secretly encouraged many obstinate questionings which he openly condemned. And there is evidence that Cromwell at least found the interlude a very convenient instrument for the encouragement of Protestantism. (1)

We see by this that the use of the interlude had already been introduced and the government had begun to realize that the opposing party could also use the play to promote its power and influence. The controversy became more and more heated until finally King Henry was re-established in the Catholic faith and proceeded to take up arms against Protestantism.

In 1539 the Act abolishing diversity of opinion was passed. This act reasserted the doctrine of transub-

stantiation, the celibacy of the Clergy, monastic vows, private masses, marked Henry's reaction against Protestantism and was followed by the persecution of the unorthodox. The position was altered after 1540 when Cromwell had fallen and the pendulum of Henry's conscience had swung back to Orthodoxy. Foxe records how under the Act Abolishing Diversity in Opinions (1539), known as the Act of the Six Articles, one Spencer, an ex-priest who had become an interlude-player, was burned at Salisbury for 'matter concerning the sacrament of the altar'; and how, in London, one Shermons, keeper of the Carpenters' Hall in Shore-ditch, 'was presented for procuring an interlude to be openly played, wherein priests were.railed on and called knaves.' But the stage was by now growing difficult to silence. In 1542 the bishops petitioned the king to correct the acting of plays 'to the contempt of God's Word'. (1)

Conditions continued to grow worse and we are not surprised when King Henry four years later (1543) enacted legislation governing the content of the play. This is considered a very important step in the history of government censorship since it is the first legislative act governing the play content. It was entitled "An Act for the advancement of true religion and the abolishing of the contrary." With the drama it deals incidentally. It sets forth no disapproval of the play as such, but merely states the nature of its content.

It shall be lawfull to all and everye prsone and prsones, to sette forth songes, plaies and enterludes, to be used and exercysed with-

in this Realme and other the kinges dominions, for the rebuking and reproching of vices and the setting forth of vertue: so allwaies the saide songes, plays or enterludes medle not with interpretacions of Scripture, contrarype to the doctrine set forth or to be sett forth by the Kinges Majestie. (1)

The drama in the last years of Henry's reign was in the hands of Catholics, but as soon as Edward VI came to the throne we find royal approval again turned to extreme Protestantism. From the very beginning of this period the actors were inclined to disregard propriety and discipline and Protestant authorities were urgent in the writing and production of plays. King Edward is said to have written the Comedy _De Meretrice Babylonica_, and John Fox, _The Christus Triumphans_, but Bale was the chief writer of controversial plays.

The nature of the Protestant play served to further antagonize the Catholics and they again resorted to the interlude, which the government soon found it necessary to suppress. In August 1549 there was issued a royal proclamation prohibiting English plays altogether for three months.

For asmuch as a great number of those that be common plaiers of Enterludes and Plaies, as well within the citie of London, as els where within the realme, do for the most part plaie suche Interludes as contain matter tendyng to sedicion and contemptyng of sundery good orders and lawes, whereupon are

(1) Hazlitt, _English Drama_, p. 18.
growen, and daily are like to growe and ensue, muche disquiet, division, tumultes, and uproares in this realtime; the Kynges Maiestie...straightly chargeth and com-maundeth al and every his maiesties sub-jectes...that from the ix day of this present moneth of August untill the feast of all Sainctes nexte comming, thei ne any of them, openly or secretly plaie in the English tongue any kynde of Interlude, Plaie, Dialogue or other matter set furthe in forme of Plaie in any place publique or private within this realtime, upon pain that whosoever shall plaie in Englishe any such Play, Inter-lude, or other matter, shall suffre imprisonment and further punishment at the pleasure of his Maiestie. (1)

This three month's prohibitory law was meant to extend over the three summer months, the time when plays were most popular.

The act of Uniformity which forbade interludes containing anything "depraving or despising" the Book of Common Prayer, was passed in the same year (1549).

Evidently the trouble continued to grow worse, for in April 1551 there was another proclamation dealing with plays in which the King attempted to establish a definite system of censorship. I quote the contents regulating the play:

Nor that any common players or other persons, vpon like paines, to play in thenglish tong, any maner Enterlude, play or Mattre, without they have special license to shew for the same in writing vunder his maiesties signe, or signed by .vi. his highnes priuie counsaill. (2)

(1) Hazlitt, English Drama, p. 8.
(2) Ibid., pp. 9-14.
In 1553 Mary began her reign, and there came a change in court religion, which necessarily anticipates a change in drama content. Mary realizing the danger of revolt, hastened to assure her subjects that though the Queen favored the Roman Catholic doctrines they would not be forced to accept them. This statement was given out in a proclamation in 1553, and in the same proclamation she also set forth her policy governing the play.

And furthermore, forasmuch also as it is well known, that sedition and false rumours have bene nouryshed and maynteyned in this realme, by the subteltye and malyce of some euell disposed persons, whiche take vpon them withoute sufficient auctoritie, to preache, and to interprete the worde of God, after theuyr owne brayne, in churches and other places, both publique and pryuate. And also by playinge of Interludes and Pryntyngge false fonde bookes, ballettes, rymes, and other lewde treatises in the englyshe tonge, concernyng doctrine in matters now in question and controuersye, touchinge the hyge poyntes and misteries of christen religion...Her highnes therefore chargeth and commaundeth all and every her sayde subiectes...that none of them presume from henceforth to preache... or to interprete or teache any scriptures, or any maner poyntes of doctrine concernyng re-ligion. Neyther also to prynte any bookes, matter, ballet, ryme, interlude, processe or tr eatys, nor to playe any interlude, except they haue her graces speciall licence in writynge for the same, vpon payne to in-curre her highnesse indignation and dis-pleasure. (1)

We note that in this proclamation the Queen makes no mention of a Privy Council such as Edward had, but apparently

(1) Hazlitt, English Drama, pp. 15-19.
all licensing power is limited to the Crown. There is, however, evidence that there was a council operating throughout the country. In June 1557 Noblemen's players were prevented from performing without special permit. In the following year the council gave directions for a company of players in the North to be suppressed. Later they gave orders for the Justice of the Peace to prevent the playing of interludes, songs and anything that was likely to stir the people to revolt.

Herein we see the council was kept busy issuing and enforcing orders. In May 1556 there was an order "against players and pipers strolling through the country disseminating sedition and heresy." Later the Council ordered the Mayor of London to arrest strolling players. Officials were unable to enforce these laws, and finally the council decided to forbid all plays for a season. The Mayor was directed to charge the actors throughout the city "Not to play any plays, but between the feast of All Saints and Shrovetide, and then only such as are seen and allowed by the Ordinary." This order was the first final delegation by the Crown and Privy Council of the power of licensing plays, though we have seen that the same power had been held by local officials since the time of Edward's proclamation.

A careful review of the licensing of the play up to this time shows that the government censorship was concerned
more with such things as were likely to stir up revolt and with suppressing sedition and heresy than matters of decency and morality, which we find later.

When Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in 1559 she found a religious and political situation very similar to that of her predecessor. Though she favored Protestantism she was not extreme in her policy, and endeavored to more closely unite her people religiously and nationally. She attempted to re-establish the Act of Edward (Uniformity Act), the provision against "depraving and despising" the Book of Common Prayer in interludes. Her efforts in this matter were fruitless, and she soon found it necessary to prohibit plays even as her predecessor had done. A proclamation to this effect was issued in April. In May of the same year (1559) she issued a proclamation which set forth a more definite system of licensing plays than had yet been established, though it was in reality little more than the rules and practices already in use. The supervision was to be carried on in the same manner. That is, by municipal officers in towns, and by Lord Lieutenants and Justices of the Peace in the Country. The content of the proclamation is representative of Elizabeth's policy, throughout her reign—that of removing the drama from the field of political controversy.

Forasmuchose as the tyme wherein common Interludes in the Englishe tongue are wont vsually to be played, is not past vntyll All Halloutyde, and that also some that haue beene of late vsed, are not conuenient
in any good ordered Christian Common weale to be suffred. The Quenes Maestie doth straightly forbyd al maner Interludes to be playde, eyther openly or privately, except the same be noticed before hande, and licenced within any citie or towne corporate by the Mairro or other chiefe officers of the same, and within any shyre, by suche as shalbe Lieuetaunnts for the Queenes Maiestie in the same shyre, or by two of the Justices of Peax inhabyting within that part of the shire where any shall be played. (1)

The following quotation from Collier's Annals gives further evidence of Elizabeth's wise policy.

Besides religious plays connected in subject and acted in succession which belong to the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, several dramas were written and printed upon separate stories and incidents in the Bible, complete in themselves, and apparently represented without reference to any other pieces which precede or follow them. One of the most remarkable of these is The Life of Mary Magdalene....It contains no attack direct or indirect upon Catholic or Protestants, and judging from the style, it would seem to have been written after the Reformation had been completed. (2)

This system of censorship continued for more than fifteen years and is fundamentally still existent. The Queen's lenient policy naturally made for laxness in administration; therefore, it stands to reason that these laws were not very rigorously enforced. Anyone who had influence with the Queen or Privy Council could easily get a special permit. Naturally this laxity in the matter of censorship was not conducive to better play production.

By the year 1574 conditions had become so corrupt that in London there was a special legislation (Order of London Common Council) in regard to censorship. This provided that before plays could be presented they must first be read and a permit given by persons appointed for the purpose by the Lord Mayor. There was also provision made for the punishment of those who might add to the performance unchaste or seditious utterances not included in the written play. We see by this the developing influence of the Puritan spirit, which is in direct contrast with all previous regulations. It dealt only with the purely political phase of government.

It is interesting to note that shortly before this order of the London Authorities steps had been taken to establish a licensing power that would limit that of the town and shire officials. The Master of Revels, an official of the King's household and second only to the Lord Chamberlain, whose duty prior to this time was that of managing court entertainments, had been given an extension of power to outside performances. This is found in the Royal patent of Leicester players issued in 1574, (1) and it granted them the privilege of performing throughout the state. This authority was further extended in 1581, giving the Master of Revels almost unlimited power in matters tending to regulate the play—he acting, of course, under the direction of the Crown.

(1) Cazamian—History of English Literature, p. 152.
CONCLUSION

In this study I have not tried to review in full the long controversy over plays in London with edicts and counter-edicts from royal council and municipal government, but have given a general account of the laws and regulations which affected the play itself from its earliest period down through the years until the beginning of Puritan influence. The chief interest in this review of the play, aside from its historical value, is that it reveals the political and religious controversies following the Reformation; how they disregarded the rights of local self-government and gradually extended royal power until finally, instead of regulation of plays by municipal authorities, the Master of Revels, an officer of the King's household, is endowed with absolute licensing power.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


