

# *Reforming Signs: Semiotics, Calvinism and Clothing in Sixteenth-century England*

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If there was one arena that rivalled theology in the intensity of debate during the early modern period, then it was semiotics. In England at least, the controversies surrounding the teaching, function and signification of signs arose in relation to old arguments revived under the impetus of profound changes ushered in by the Reformation. However, this is not to set up a false distinction between theology and language. Indeed, as the Reformation painfully demonstrated, few theories of signs could be theologically neutral. But if those English writers on semiotics who were influenced by Reformed theology shared one key trait, then it was a focus on human misrepresentation, distortion, and falsification when man came to view the world. For these Protestant thinkers, this meant stressing the essential artificiality of discourse, especially speech. According to George Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589): ‘Speech is not naturall to man sauing for his onely habilitie to speake, and that he is by kinde apt to vtter all his conceits with soundes and voices diuersified many maner of wayes’.<sup>1</sup> In *The Art of Rhetoric* (1553), Thomas Wilson explains the reasons behind Puttenham’s assertion. Due to the Fall and ‘by the corruption of this our flesh, man’s reason and intendment were both overwhelmed.’ But when God gave ‘the gift of utterance’ as Wilson calls it, it was not to all men but to the ‘faithful and elect’.<sup>2</sup> The logical question is: what of those who do not fall into this category? Indeed, when combined with what Arthur F. Kinney has called the humanistic ‘method of *imitatio* – the art of writing by following specific models’,<sup>3</sup> sixteenth century theoreticians, theologians and artists found themselves in something of a quandary when trying to explain – or imitate – the most magnificent image of

them all, God's created universe. Because these thinkers problematised the relationship between mental language and 'reality' and since they believed that the fallen mind necessarily distorted any image presented to it, could any representation, verbal or visual, have *any* connection to the divine? In short, what was the precise nature of the relationship between things ('*res*') and words ('*verba*')?

Debora Shuger has outlined one scholarly approach to this question, arguing that in the early modern period, 'The split between *res* and *verba* . . . parallels a separation of sign from signified dividing visible form from spiritual substance.'<sup>4</sup> One notable example of this division can be found in the virulent Europe-wide debates concerning the status of the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> To begin with, the iconoclastic impulses of the Reformation were fuelled by a desire to rid worship of an over-reliance on Catholic forms of representation such as crucifixes, statues and stained glass. This point notwithstanding, in relation to Eucharistic doctrine, English Protestants, influenced by Martin Bucer, John Calvin and Theodore Beza, actually reversed the terms of their own main argument by seeing signs as *representations* of the object in question where Catholics saw signs as the *embodiment* of the object. I am referring here to the figurative or literal status of the host at the mass and the interpretation of the words uttered by Christ at the Last Supper: '*hoc est corpus meum*'; 'this is my body'. Whereas Catholics saw the host as the actual body of Christ most Protestants saw it as a representation of Christ's body. Paradoxically, Protestantism accused Catholicism of being a religion of representation. At the basis of this contradiction is a deeply paradoxical semiotics as expounded here by Theodore Beza: 'wee confound not the signe with the thing signified nor abolish the substance of the signe, but make a distinction of that which is conioyned.'<sup>6</sup> Or as Bishop John Jewel puts it: 'wee put a difference betweene the Signe, and the thing itselfe that is signified.'<sup>7</sup> In many respects, the story of the Protestant Reformation in England is an account of how thinkers tried to wrestle with this paradox at the centre of their semiotic system.

In particular, these arguments find a common heritage in a long tradition of Christian semiotics that stresses the fundamental distance between *res* and *verba*. In the words of Brian Copenhaver and Charles Schmitt:

Augustine, Proclus, pseudo-Dionysius, the author of the *Book of Causes*, and many other medieval thinkers had developed a metaphysical scheme in which God at one extreme and matter or non-being at the other stood as two end-points against which the location of all other entities in the continuum of being could be plotted.<sup>8</sup>

The late medieval manifestation of this form of Christian semiotics is of particular importance to early modern conceptions of language. The so-called Nominalist school of medieval theologians promoted an approach to language

that offered a reworking of the dominant scholarly paradigm in respect of signs. In the first place, the Nominalists argued that a universal is essentially a fictive construct.<sup>9</sup> It is not that Universals do not exist but that they are singular categories that reflect their status as signs, not archetypes as such. The most important figure of the Nominalist school was William of Ockham. In the first place, what is intriguing about Ockham's semiotic theory is the way in which it replicates the conceptual paradigms he also uses in respect of God. Firstly, Ockham does not deny that there are categories of mental concepts above *verba* in the same way that he does not deny the omnipotent existence of God. Nevertheless, these concepts are, like God, at odds with what humans can either predicate or know of them. As Heiko Oberman points out, for Ockham, 'analysis of God's nature and characteristics comes up against an impenetrable barrier in the form of God's peculiar and particular way of being and perceiving, divine activities which are not structured according to . . . human logic'.<sup>10</sup> This reading applies equally to Ockham's semiotic theory. For example, in his *Summa totius logicae* (c. 1329), he observes:

I say vocal words are signs subordinated to mental concepts or contents. By this I do not mean that if the word 'sign' is taken in its proper meaning, spoken words are properly and primarily signs of mental concepts; I rather mean that words are applied in order to signify the very same things which are signified by mental concepts. Hence the concept signifies something primarily and naturally, whilst the word signifies the same thing secondarily . . . all authors who maintain that all words signify, or are signs of, impressions in the mind, only mean that words are signs which signify secondarily what the impressions of the mind import primarily.<sup>11</sup>

Fallen language is essentially a secondary mental construct that has no bearing on the primary order of signs. According to Ockham, as Martin Elsky notes, 'the mental language prior to utterance in speech belongs to no spoken or written language and is separate from any *vox* made significant by convention.' In short, for Ockham, as 'for many Scholastic logicians, speech and thought are at odds.'<sup>12</sup>

A number of scholars of early modern language have stressed the importance of this Nominalist heritage. Indeed, with Reformed theology's particular emphasis on man's incapacity to comprehend or reach the Divine,<sup>13</sup> it is perhaps no surprise that the Nominalists are often singled out as a special influence on the Reformers. For example as Bryan Crockett argues: 'One factor in the religious disquiet of Elizabethan England is the Reformation's indebtedness to the Nominalist movement of the late Middle Ages.'<sup>14</sup> Certainly it is the case that many of the major Reformers including Martin Luther and John Calvin were well versed in Nominalist theology. However, care needs to be taken over the precise status of Nominalism's influence on the Reformed movement. Platonic and Neo-Platonic conceptions of language may have

come under attack from scholars like Ockham and, later, Lorenzo Valla was to offer a rejection of the Aristotelian categories that underpinned many late medieval and humanist theories of signs.<sup>15</sup> However, neither man fully succeeded in eliminating these older semiotic traditions.

This is especially the case in relation to the work of Saint Augustine. Augustine's theory of language was, broadly speaking, Neo-Platonic. It was also extremely popular amongst humanists of all philosophical persuasions as well as amongst the early Reformers, nearly all of whom had a dual training in late scholastic theology and newer humanist methods.<sup>16</sup> So despite its debt to the Nominalist school, Reformed theology was also deeply influenced by an important humanist reading of Augustinian semiotics. One way of understanding this particular strand of thought is in relation to Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* (c. 397). In this text, he notes that 'Words have gained an altogether dominant role among humans in signifying the ideas conceived by the mind that a person wants to reveal.'<sup>17</sup> The saint's affective focus is on the interior ramifications of language: 'a sign is a thing which of itself makes some other things come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.'<sup>18</sup> Combined with this internal imperative is Augustine's conception of language as a spiritual force leading to the gradual illumination of inward truth or *caritas*. However, as Martin Elsky observes: 'For Augustine, the word depends upon the quality of the mind that conceives it.'<sup>19</sup> For this reason, there is always the possibility 'that one might misspeak because of the mind's fallen condition.'<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the last sentence quoted above from *De Doctrina Christiana* was extremely popular with fifteenth and sixteenth century logicians and linguists precisely because of this problem.<sup>21</sup> Because the Augustinian theory of language was primarily concerned with *mental* language, naturally enquiries came to be structured around the relation of that language to 'reality'. As E. J. Ashworth has noted:

Medieval and Renaissance philosophy of language is characterized by two central doctrines, which can only be fully understood in conjunction: the doctrine that spoken language is purely conventional and the doctrine that spoken language corresponds to a mental language that has signification.<sup>22</sup>

Reformed sign theory is so interesting because in certain cases it seems to present a challenge to Ashworth's 'two central doctrines', combining as it does Augustine's Neo-Platonic semiotics with the insights of the Nominalistic project, which denied the human mind *a priori* knowledge of universal mental concepts, and, ultimately, of God<sup>23</sup> What were the ramifications of such an inheritance?

I want to answer this question by turning to the work of John Calvin and in particular, his use of metaphors of theatre and painting, metaphors that appear frequently in his book of instruction, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.<sup>24</sup> For Calvin, God was the divine 'Artificer'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, for a thinker

who is forever associated with the iconoclasm of Reformed religion, it is perhaps slightly surprising to find Calvin saying: 'We must therefore admit in God's individual works – but especially in them as a whole – that God's powers are actually represented as in a painting.'<sup>26</sup> God's powers are presented here in an admittedly high-powered, but nonetheless representative sixteenth-century humanist vein. In another place, Calvin is positively effusive about God's *mimetic* skills: 'let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theatre.'<sup>27</sup> But while Calvin is happy to examine what is put upon the stage, like a somewhat cautious post-structuralist he becomes worried when this *mimetic* mindset is applied to the dramatist himself. Calvin notes: '*Every figurative representation of God contradicts his being*'.<sup>28</sup> This is deeply problematical. For if language and *mimesis* are taken within the traditional framework as the 'imitation of an *object* by a subject'<sup>29</sup> then representation or imitation is held within a metaphysic whereby the perception of an object also involves the perception that it refers back to 'a first-order realm of empirical reality'.<sup>30</sup> But as I have shown, even if this is the case, the fallen human mind has no direct knowledge of this 'first order realm' and consequently we are obliged to make, in Beza's words, 'a distinction of that which is conioyned.' Furthermore, by denying this possibility in relation to God, Calvin raises a terrifying prospect: that *mimesis* or imitation must always impel the viewer to acknowledge *their* status in constituting the 'reality' of the *mimetic* or imitated object. This is especially worrying in a Protestant context. As Huston Diehl explains: 'For early Protestants the challenge of living in a world where human knowledge is partial, indirect, and limited centered on the need to curb the all-to-human tendency to mistake the sign for the thing it signifies.'<sup>31</sup> To put it slightly differently, the challenge of interpretation was intimately bound up with the challenge of salvation.

For these reasons, it is important that Calvin regularly utilises the trope of the mirror in his discussion of human perception. For example, in the *Institutes* he notes: 'although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull towards so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us.'<sup>32</sup> Here *misrecognition* in the mirror becomes more than a trope; it becomes the focal point of Calvinist semiotics. Linda Gregerson has written of the interior, subjective ramifications of this system, noting: 'The self that properly sees the self as a sign reads in the self a double image: at once a likeness of God and the sin that has rendered that likeness obscure. In the book as in the mirror the self sees itself in error.'<sup>33</sup> Staring at the statue of God or gazing into the interior mirror become, strangely and almost inexplicably, *the same action*. In both cases the subjective ramifications are frighteningly similar. As Calvin concludes, God 'represent[s] himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us.'<sup>34</sup>

Bearing in mind the theatrical basis of this Calvinist metaphysic, the question arises as to what happens when the Calvinist subject gazes upon an actor? After all, the theatre brings together both *res* and *verba*, both spoken language and outward signs, and it does so through the potentially transgressive figure of the actor, a personage who is both the imitator and the imitated. Perhaps the most important point to note here is that imitation was a branch of rhetoric, and as Arthur F. Kinney remarks: 'In promoting the study of rhetoric . . . language [was seen] as a logomachy, or contention, and promoted the study of antilogy, the ability to argue either side of a question with comparable ease.'<sup>35</sup> In other words, an actor was dangerous precisely because he used the tools of rhetoric not necessarily to argue 'either side of the question', but to persuade the viewer of the veracity of the imitation, even to the point of making imitation seem more 'real' than 'reality' itself. A case in point is 'The Mousetrap' in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1601), a play that replicates Claudius' murderous actions on stage as he watches. Disturbed by the 'false fire', he abandons the theatre calling for light. The (temporary) disorder engendered by the players in Elsinore might well be connected to the commonplace Puritan complaint that plays were a catalyst for social unrest. As Margot Heinemann points out, the ruling classes' 'fear of the "many-headed multitude" reflected itself in the demand to control, to limit and to censor what appeared in the popular theatres.'<sup>36</sup> If 'The Mouse-trap' can be seen as an expression of popular (anti) theatre, then Claudius' actions might be seen as an attempt to censor, to forestall the unrest that further exposure of his actions might possibly engender.

In *De Oratore* (46 AD), a text central to the early modern humanist tradition, Cicero explores the transgressive potential of representation that so disturbs Claudius. He notes that the orators 'are the players that act real life' but that they have 'been taken over by the actors themselves.'<sup>37</sup> This is a hazardous shift for Cicero because the actors can be seen to be actively appropriating the wiles of the orators themselves. As he goes on to say of the art of the orator:

all these emotions must be accompanied by gesture – not this stagy gesture reproducing the words but one conveying the general situation not by mimicry but by hints . . . everything depends on the countenance, while the countenance itself is entirely dominated by the eyes . . . this is the only part of the body capable of producing as many indications and variations as there are emotions.<sup>38</sup>

What is so dangerous here is the attractive combination of rhetorical persuasion and physical gesture. In the case of the actor on the stage, the danger is heightened because the actor is both the imitator and the imitated, both the sign and the thing signified.<sup>39</sup> This duality was to eventually provide the basis for a number of virulent attacks on the secular stage in early

modern England. Scholars such as Patrick Collinson and Paul Whitfield White have shown that from the mid 1570s onwards, the most important line of condemnation was against religious drama. Whereas the first generation of Protestant Reformers had been content to harness the persuasive power of drama, particularly religious drama, later thinkers attempted to highlight the essential incompatibility of secular and sacred semiotics. In the words of Collinson: 'To *represent* the Word of God mimetically rather than expound it faithfully was to turn it into an object of mockery.'<sup>40</sup> In many respects the point at issue here was also the catalyst for the Reformation at large: who possesses the ideological authority to legitimate signs? Indeed, in England by the late 1570s, as Whitfield White asserts, 'The popular theatre now began to be perceived as a kind of alternative church or anti-church.'<sup>41</sup> In a Reformed context, then, to be persuaded by an actor was, potentially at least, to fall even further from God.

Unsurprisingly, this is one of the main arguments used by those anti-theatrical writers who attacked the Elizabethan stage. For example, writing in 1582 against Thomas Lodge, Stephen Gosson observes:

The perfectest image is that, which maketh the thing to seeme, neither greater nor lesse, then [sic] in deede it is. But in Playes, either those thinges are fained, that neuer were . . . or if a true Historie be taken in hand, it is made like our shadows, longest at the rising and falling of the Sunne, shortest of all at hie noone.<sup>42</sup>

Gosson's view is directly opposed to that of Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* (1595).<sup>43</sup> In this work, Sidney notes that the poet 'coupleth the general notion with the particular example. A perfect picture, I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description'.<sup>44</sup> But for Gosson, the gap between the image and the shadow replicates the gap between God and fallen humankind. Spatially, a play and an actor throw this metaphysic into confusion by externalising the 'distinction of that which is conioyned' through outward signs. In order to understand these issues better, I want to turn now to examine the interesting connections between the debates surrounding ecclesiastical apparel and the clothing worn by actors on the Elizabethan stage. Both debates arise in relation to questions of authority and they are very much concerned with the limits and propriety of what clothes might signify in certain contexts.<sup>45</sup> More interestingly than this, they also externalise the paradox at the centre of the Reformed conception of *res* and *verba*.

After Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558, her first priority was to secure the theological and political unity of the English Church.<sup>46</sup> One of the most far-reaching effects of the legislation passed by Elizabeth's government aimed at achieving this goal was a vigorous and often poisonous debate

as to the best form of Church governance. The question at the centre of this bitter divide within Elizabethan society was: how should the church be governed; along Episcopalian or Presbyterian lines? Since 1559, the official structure of Church governance had been Episcopalian. Essentially this meant that at the head of the Church stood the Queen and underneath her the Bishops who determined all aspects and forms of worship. All ministers were expected to subscribe to the Church's injunctions and faced expulsion from their posts if they did not conform. In opposition to this centralised system, the Presbyterian wing wanted an organisation whereby ministers and elected elders governed their own congregations, preached their own sermons and decided their own form of worship. What the Presbyterians really sought was, in the words of Donna Hamilton, 'a model for church governance that bypassed royal authority.'<sup>47</sup> In 1590, the Presbyterian John Penry outlined these opposing positions – not entirely without bias:

To speake more plainly, by reformation we mean, first the rooting out of our Church, of al dumb and vnpreaching ministers, all nonresidents, Lord Arch – bishops and bishops, commissaries, officials, chancellors, and all the rest of the wicked offices that depend vpon that vngodly and tyrannous hierarchie of Lord Bishops, together with their gouernment . . . Secondly, by reformation we meane the placing in euerie congregation within England (as far as possible able men can be provided) of preaching pastors and Doctors, gouerning elders, & ministring Deacons . . . And these are the onely matters that we meane by the reformation.<sup>48</sup>

What is noticeable in Penry's exposition is the division between the practical Elizabethan reality of an Episcopalian system, and an ideal, Calvinist, godly and Presbyterian structure. Indeed, as Patrick Collinson has written of the Presbyterian wing: 'They conducted themselves sometimes like separatists, sometimes like tenacious if aggrieved members of the establishment, and the discomfort of this ambiguous position was virtually chronic.'<sup>49</sup> It was also 'chronic' because the frequent deprivations meted out to those on the Presbyterian wing led many of them to conclude that society did not contain any kinds of structures to validate their ideological system. Such feelings gave rise to the bitterly polemical tone that characterises much separatist discourse.

As is well known, one of the requirements of Elizabeth I's early ecclesiastical legislation was that all ministers conformed to the Prayer Book. Instituted in Edward VI's reign, but revived and revised under Elizabeth, it was considered by many clerics, especially those with Puritan leanings, to be 'an imperfect book, culled and picked out of that popish dunghill, the mass book full of all abominations.'<sup>50</sup> Issues of contention in the Prayer Book centred on the administration of the sacraments, holy days, and baptism, kneeling at communion, transubstantiation, and the order of the service. But perhaps the most factious issue of all was the injunction concerning what ecclesiastical

clothing the minister could wear. The so-called Admonition controversy ran almost the whole length of Elizabeth's reign.<sup>51</sup> As the *Injunctions* of 1559 state:

her majesty being desirous to have the prelacy and clergy of this realm to be had as well in outward reverence . . . willeth and commandeth that all archbishops and bishops . . . or that be admitted into vocation ecclesiastical . . . shall use and wear such seemly habits, garments, and such square caps, as were most commonly and orderly received in the latter year of the reign of King Edward the Sixth.<sup>52</sup>

By wearing the prescribed clothing, ministers identified themselves with the centralised Church and legitimised its authority. More interesting than this is the idea that wearing a particular set of clothes imbues the wearer with an outward authority that he might not otherwise possess. Indeed, because clothes are nominally only outward signifiers, the possibility arises from a reading of the *Injunction* that the clothes themselves might be said to contain an inherent authority. This was precisely the possibility against which the Puritans railed. Published in 1572, *The View of Popish Abuses* says this of the prescribed ecclesiastical apparel:

There is no order in it, but confusion: no comeliness, but deformity: no obedience, but disobedience, both against God and the prince . . . there are as the garments of the idol, to which we should say, avaunt and get thee hence. They are the garments of Balamites, of popish priests, enemies to God and all Christians.<sup>53</sup>

By appropriating the discourse of obedience and inverting the authoritative correlations of official doctrine in relation to ecclesiastical garments, the *View* argues that authority resides not in clothes but in man-made laws. To wear these garments is disobedience only if the outward signifier correlates with the inward 'truth' of the law. Patently for many Protestants, it did not.

Modern scholarship has also been concerned with the signifying value of early modern clothing, and in particular the use of (former) ecclesiastical clothing within the playhouse. For example, in his book *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Stephen Greenblatt asked: 'What happens when the piece of cloth is passed from the church to the playhouse?' He goes on to answer: 'A consecrated object is reclassified, assigned a cash value, transferred from a sacred to a profane setting, deemed suitable for the stage.'<sup>54</sup> Or as Peter Sallibrass has more recently argued: 'In their assumption of clothes from court and church, the actors put the *meaning* of these clothes in crisis. They thus subordinated the rituals of the church and the state to the protean play of the marketplace.' As he concludes: 'clothing *could* carry the absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal and material value.'<sup>55</sup> While it is easy to dispute both these accounts on the grounds of evidence (the fact that the

anti-theatricalists make almost no reference to actors appropriating ecclesiastical clothing is significant here), Greenblatt and Stallybrass are surely correct in locating the public theatre as a place where the constitutive function of signs was interrogated in an often-radical way. However, both scholars only make a causal link between the controversies surrounding the function of clothes in the ecclesiastical and dramatic arenas, with the latter location being the most important in terms of their cultural and critical focus. In their desire to understand the processes of cultural and economic exchange *from* the sacred to the secular, Greenblatt and Stallybrass do not pay enough attention to the fact that, in the church as on the stage, the debate was not so much about exchange from one location to another as it was about the deeply fraught semiotic system engendered by Reformed religion. To put it slightly differently, perhaps the stage was such a fraught space of cultural dialogue because it provided the outlet for ideas and attacks that could not be expressed more directly elsewhere. When Phillip Stubbes and Stephen Gosson railed against cross dressing on the early modern stage, is it not at least possible that they were also indirectly commenting on a repressive state apparatus that forced their like-minded brethren to wear clothes that they considered had the idolatrous potential to alter the self? If actors were free to circumvent sumptuary laws and effectively wear what they liked, why was the same freedom not extended to non-conformist ministers?

Like many non-conformists, the anti-theatrical writers of the period were deeply concerned with ‘proper’ standards of dress, and not just on the stage. For example, in *The Schoole of Abuse* published in 1579, Stephen Gosson asked: ‘How often hath her Maiestie with the graue aduise of her honorable Councell, sette downe the limits of apparell to euery degree, and how soone againe hath the pride of our harts ouerflowed the chanel?’<sup>56</sup> And in his *The Second Part of the Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), Phillip Stubbes writes that ministers ‘are knowen and discerned from others also, by exteriour habite, and attire, as namely by cappe, tippet, surplesse, and such like.’<sup>57</sup> There is something curious occurring in both of these examples. Stubbes was a well-known Puritan minister and, as Michel Massei has shown, Gosson’s work ‘clearly illustrates the Puritan manner of reasoning.’<sup>58</sup> Therefore, why should these, to all extents and purposes Puritan writers utilise precisely the same kind of arguments that were consistently being deployed *against* their non-conformist brethren in the High Commission?<sup>59</sup> This question is further complicated by the fact that, in a reply to Gosson, Thomas Lodge – no Puritan he – finds one of his few points of agreement with his opponent in his attitude towards clothing. As Lodge observes: ‘as for the state of apparell and the abuses therof, I see it manifestly broken and if I should seeke for example, you cannot but offend my eyes . . . a simple cote should be fitted to your backe.’<sup>60</sup> What might these seeming contradictions signify?

The answer lies in the common application of the term 'Puritan' to denote the anti-theatrical writers, if by 'Puritan' is meant a zealous, non-conformist extremist opposed to *any* form of theatre.<sup>61</sup> Patrick Collinson has pointed out that 'It should never be forgotten that "Puritan" began life as a term of more or less vulgar abuse and continued as a weapon of increasingly sophisticated stigmatization.'<sup>62</sup> To put it another way, it is important not to allow the partisan derivation of the term 'Puritan' to cloud our critical judgment as to what the appellation actually meant *in practice*. Furthermore, Collinson's suggestion that we adopt 'a sense of Puritanism which is at once polemical and nominalistic'<sup>63</sup> is useful because it connects Puritanism with a philosophical position in respect of signification that I have been drawing attention to throughout this paper. Therefore, both Gosson and Stubbes's assertions that there is nothing *inherently* wrong with the theatre are important because they draw attention to the uses, or *abuses* to which the theatre is put, particularly in respect of its various signifying practices. Paul Whitfield White is surely correct when he argues that 'we need to resist the commonplace notion that the views of Gosson, Stubbes, and Prynne typified the mainstream or even "the left wing" or so-called "Puritan" segment, of Protestant opinion'.<sup>64</sup> Rather, Gosson, Lodge and Stubbes utilise the same arguments in respect of apparel because each man was engaged in the same highly complex debates surrounding what Huston Diehl has termed the 'iconoclastic agenda of the reformed religion' itself.<sup>65</sup> In order to spell out the ramifications of this 'agenda', I want to look now in a little more detail at the works of a writer who brings together the Admonition and anti-theatrical controversies surrounding apparel, namely the Calvinist minister Phillip Stubbes.<sup>66</sup>

Probably the most significant texts in the war against the playhouses were Phillip Stubbes's *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) and *The Second Part of the Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), books which should be seen less as the rantings of an extremist and more as the expositions of a 'moderate', conformist Puritan. Furthermore, his are the only anti-theatrical texts to make an explicit connection between the controversies surrounding ecclesiastical apparel and the transvestite stage. For all these reasons, Stubbes's writings are uniquely positioned to offer an insight into the connections between these two debates.<sup>67</sup> In *The Anatomie of Abuses*, he first addresses the signifying potential of clothing itself. Importantly, he does so in an explicitly religious context. He notes that there is 'No holynes in apparell', a view that would have certainly been held by the authors the *View of Popish Abuses*. Stubbes then goes on to ask: 'why do they than [sic] attribute that to the garments, which is neither adherente to the one nor yet inherente in the other?'<sup>68</sup> In the ecclesiastical realm, these semiotics appear fairly straightforward; but in the context of the playhouse, they possess other resonances. As he writes of cross-dressed actors:

to weare the Apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his own kinde. Wherefore these Women may not improperly be called *Hermaphrodita*, that is, Monsters of both kindes, half women, half men.<sup>69</sup>

The key phrase here is ‘the veritie of his own kinde’ which in Modern English might read ‘the truth of his own nature’. According to Whitfield White, in passages such as this, Stubbes is able to argue that ‘theatrical impersonation impiously subverts one’s God given identity and place in the sexual and social order and counters the biblical mandate to imitate Christ in all things.’<sup>70</sup> This is certainly the case, but I want to focus on another aspect of Stubbes’s argument.

Why should ecclesiastical garments have no effect upon the wearer, whereas garments worn upon the stage are said to have the power to radically unfix the identity of the wearer? The answer lies in Stubbes’s deeply contradictory (paradoxical even) epistemology in respect of outward signs. He acknowledges, as he must, that God ‘created man, after his own similitude’.<sup>71</sup> However, after the fall, men were given clothes – much in the same way that for Thomas Wilson men were given language – ‘to couer our shame . . . & not to feed the insatiable desires of mens . . . luxurious eies!’<sup>72</sup> In practical terms, this means for Stubbes that ‘the attyre of Adam, should haue beene & signe, or patterns of mediocritie vnto vs.’<sup>73</sup> But his problem is that to assert that clothes are a ‘signe’ of anything at all is necessarily to call into question the semiotic and affective divide between man and God instantiated by the founding narrative of the Fall. This assertion can be made clearer by reference to the writing of the Calvinist divine William Perkins. Noting that Adam bequeathed to man ‘a depravation of knowledge in the things of God’, Perkins observes:

The remnant of God’s image in the conscience is an observing and watchful power like the eye of a keeper, reserved in man partly to reprove, partly to repress the unbridled course of his affections. That which the conscience hath received from Adam is the impureness thereof. This impurity has three effects. The first is to excuse sin, as if a man serve God outwardly he will excuse and cloak his inward impiety . . . The second is to accuse and terrify for doing good . . . The third is to accuse and terrify for sin.<sup>74</sup>

Perkins demonstrates that the divide between man and God in Reformed theology is deeply fraught. On the one hand, man is separated from God through sin. But, on the other hand, there is a ‘remnant’ within man of the deity that, however faint, institutes a supplementary connection between the two. At the semiotic level, this means that the signifier *does* potentially have the affective potential to alter the signified, both on the stage *and* in the pulpit. ‘It is trulye said’, observes Stubbes, that ‘*sublata causa, tollitur effectus*: But not, *subrepto effectu tollitur causa*. Take away the cause, and the effect

falleth, but not contrarylye'.<sup>75</sup> Or as Othello more eloquently puts it, albeit in a rather different context: 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul' (V. ii. 1).<sup>76</sup>

For these reasons, it seems that there is a much stronger connection than many scholars have acknowledged between the ecclesiastical debates concerning apparel and the scandal of cross-dressing on the London stage. To this end, it is also significant just how similar the anti-theatricalists' rhetoric is in respect of cross-dressing to those Protestant polemicists who railed against Catholic ecclesiastical clothing. This is Robert Crowley, veteran polemicist and editor of *Piers Plowman*, writing of Catholic apparel in 1566:<sup>77</sup>

How these garments haue bene abused, is manifest to as many as haue considered the doings of Idolaters, sorcerers, & coniuers. For all these doe nothing without them. The Idolater dare not appeare before his Idoll to offer any sacrifice, vnlesse he be in his sacrificing garments.<sup>78</sup>

The idolatrous stage and the idolatrous old faith go hand in hand in respect of the discourses used to attack them and in terms of their transgressive signifying power. Indeed, the influential Calvinist divine and Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, William Whitaker, states explicitly what Crowley only hints at: 'Our religion is not like yours [the Catholics], consisting in outward shew of gestures, garments, and behauiour: so that our externall Ornaments may be changed, without any alteration or change of our doctrine.'<sup>79</sup> The argument is unmistakable; certain clothes, worn in certain places (and not just on the stage) have the ability to 'alter' the inward state of the wearer.

In *The Second Part of the Anatomie of Abuses*, Stubbes highlights this realisation. In a reply to a query as to whether it is 'lawfull for a minister of th[e] Gospell to wear a surplesse, a tippet or forked cappe', one of the interlocutors replies:

As they are commaunded by the Pope the great Antichrist of the worlde, they ought not to wear them, but as they be commaunded, and inioyned by a Christian Prince, they maie wear them without any scruple of conscience. But if they should repose any religion, holinesse or sanctimonie in them, as the doting Papists doe, than [sic] doe they greuouslie offend, but wearing them as things meere indifferent (although it be controuersiall whether they bee things indifferente or not) I see no cause why they maie not vse them.<sup>80</sup>

For such a normally effective polemicist, Stubbes's tortured logic and strained equivocating only serve to highlight the faultlines within his argument. Although ostensibly a passage about the various authorities of secular and ecclesiastical rulers, the pith of the matter lies elsewhere. What Stubbes cannot get away from is the realisation that the inability to separate completely *res* from *verba* in the ecclesiastical realm always threatens to make the wearer a papist by proxy. The perception that clothes are *not* 'things indifferente'

exposes a much wider cultural anxiety predicated upon the simultaneously decorous and rebarbative imperatives of Reformed semiotics itself. If the sign could, potentially at least, alter the signified, then the subjectivity of the minister wearing the tippet and surplice, or the actor wearing woman's clothes, was open to a radical deconstruction.

With its iconoclastic impulse to distance *res* from *verba*, Reformed theology led, almost inevitably, to the conclusion that the divine could not have a visible locus on earth.<sup>81</sup> This discourse was not exclusive to the world of outward representations such as pictures, statues, and stained glass; it also penetrated the inner recesses of the human interior. 'But somewhat paradoxically', writes Debora Shuger, 'the Protestant impulse to deny the sacred a visible locus led to (or at least coexisted with) a massive endeavor to instantiate the holy in some sort of institutional form. That is the essence of English Presbyterianism.'<sup>82</sup> Much as they tried to convince themselves to the contrary, Protestants of whatever ecclesiastical and political allegiance could never fully rid themselves of a deep cultural suspicion that *res* and *verba* were connected, if only in a supplementary sense. The Episcopalian and the Presbyterian wings employ essentially the same discourse in relation to apparel because for each writer, to drive a final metaphysical wedge between *res* and *verba*, between the garment and its outward signification, would mean ultimately that Reformed semiotics could no longer be, in the words of Michel Foucault, 'coeval with the institution of God.'<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the internalisation of such a rationalist project would not be undertaken for perhaps another one hundred years.<sup>84</sup> So in practice, what these Elizabethan discussions of signs reveal is a deeply unsettled participatory consciousness, a mode of discourse that, according to Shuger, 'tends not to separate words from things',<sup>85</sup> jarring markedly against the Nominalist-inspired, iconoclastic impulses of Reformed theology. Foucault's assertion in *The Order of Things* that during the sixteenth century 'Things and words were to be separated from each other'<sup>86</sup> does not do justice to the complexity of Reformed semiotics. Because they had to insist on the 'distinction of that which is conioyned' through outward signs, Calvinist writers could never fully reform semiotics.

## Notes

- 1 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (Menston, 1968), p. 119.
- 2 Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric*, in Wayne A. Rebhorn (ed.), *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric* (Ithaca and London, 2000), p. 175.
- 3 Arthur F. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-century England* (Amherst, 1986), p. 11.
- 4 Debora Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley and Oxford, 1990), p. 37.
- 5 For a concise explanation of the Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist, see the entries for *consubstantiatio* and *transubstantiatio* in Richard Muller, *Dictionary of*

*Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1985), p. 80 and p. 305.

6 Theodore Beza, *A Briefe and piththie sum of the Christian faith, made in forme of a confession, with confutation of all such superstitious errors, as are contrary there vnto*, R. F. (trans.) (London, 1572), STC 2007, Sig. K4r.

7 John Jewel, *The Workes of The Very Learned And Reuerend Father in God Iohn Iewell not long since Bishop of Salsburie. Newly set forth with some amendment of diuers quotations* (London, 1611), Sig. V6v.

8 Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford and New York, 1992), p. 152.

9 The study of Nominalism has provoked considerable controversy. For the sake of brevity, I have provided a necessarily selective reading because the basic point I am making – that these late medieval and early modern theories of language posit a gap between the semiotic realms of *res* and *verba* – is broadly agreed upon. Studies that engage with the controversy surrounding Nominalism include: Jesse M. Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: Oral Contexts of Writing in Philosophy, Politics and Poetry* (Princeton, 1995); Hugo Keiper, Christopher Bode and Richard J. Utz (eds), *Critical Studies: Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives*, (Amsterdam, 1997); Martin Elsky, *Authorizing Words: Speech, Writing and Print in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca and London, 1989) and Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford, 1987).

10 Heiko Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (Edinburgh, 1994), p. 197.

11 William of Ockham, *Summa totius logicae* in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Philotheus Boehner and rev. Stephen Brown (Indianapolis, 1990), p. 48.

12 Elsky, *Authorizing Words*, pp. 30–33.

13 For more on the Nominalist heritage of Lutheran theology, see McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins*, pp. 70–85 and Oberman's *The Dawn of the Reformation*, especially pp. 52–65.

14 Bryan Crockett, *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 124.

15 For a reading of Valla's work on signs as radically rejecting predominant Aristotelian scholasticism, see Richard Waswo, 'Theories of Language', in Glyn P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume III: The Renaissance* (Cambridge and New York, 1999), p. 29. For a reading that opposes Waswo's, see Timothy J. Reiss, *Knowledge, Discovery and Imagination in Early Modern Europe: The Rise of Aesthetic Rationalism* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 25–26.

16 One early Reformer whose work demonstrates this 'dual' training is Thomas Cranmer. See Ashley Null's *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance* (Oxford, 2000).

17 Saint Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine*, R.P.H. Green (trans.) (Oxford and New York, 1997), p. 31.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

19 Elsky, *Authorizing Words*, p. 73

20 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

21 In what follows, I am indebted to E. J. Ashworth, 'Traditional Logic', in Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (eds), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York, 1996), pp. 143–72. The reference to the importance of the sentence from *De Doctrina Christiana* is on p. 157 of Ashworth's essay.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

23 I should perhaps state at this point that what I am outlining is a necessarily selective account of what I see as some of the most important elements that

contributed towards the Reformed conception of language outlined in the following pages. It is by no means intended as an exhaustive account. For such an account, see Glyn P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume III: The Renaissance* (Cambridge and New York, 1999).

24 One scholar who has recently pointed to the 'theatrical' basis of much of Calvin's writing is Huston Diehl in her article "'Infinite Space': Representation and Reformation in *Measure for Measure*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 49 (1998), 393–410.

25 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeil (ed.) and Ford Lewis Battles (trans.), 2 vols (London, 1961), I. 53. In Calvin's theory of imitation, it is possible to find the competing imperatives of Nominalism, Augustinianism, and humanism grating against each other. According to William Bouwsma, Calvin 'was not prepared, like Lorenzo Valla, to acknowledge that substantives are only human constructions without demonstrable reference to external reality; on the contrary, he relied heavily on substantives . . . He needed to believe in the concrete existence of some "thing" or "quality". William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford and New York, 1988), p. 102. This point notwithstanding, Calvin's belief in substantives does not prevent his spatial theory of God's universe from being deeply problematic as I demonstrate.

26 *Ibid.*, I. 63

27 *Ibid.*, I. 179

28 *Ibid.*, I. 100

29 Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 156.

30 Christopher Norris, 'Post-Structuralist Shakespeare: Text and Ideology', in John Drakakis (ed.), *Alternative Shakespeares* (London, 1985), p. 48.

31 Huston Diehl, 'Infinite Space', p. 399.

32 Calvin, *Institutes*, I. 63.

33 Linda Gregerson, *The Reformation of the Subject: Spenser, Milton and the English Protestant Epic* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 66–67.

34 Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 227.

35 Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction*, op. cit., p. 21.

36 Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 32.

37 Cicero, *De Oratore*, H. Rackham (trans.), Loeb Library (London, 1960), p. 171.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

39 Another reason why the anti-theatricalists attacked actors so severely was that they saw them as usurping many of the functions of the preacher, a person who in many respects was the early modern version of the classical orator.

40 Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Basingstoke, 1988), p. 113.

41 Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 172.

42 Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (New York and London, 1972), Sig. D5v.

43 This is unsurprising as Sidney's *Apology* was written against Gosson who had dedicated his *School of Abuse* to Sidney without permission.

44 Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry in Documents Illustrating Elizabethan Poetry*, Laurie Magnus (ed.) (London, 1906), p. 52.

45 Judy Kronenfeld's *King Lear and the Naked Truth: Rethinking the Language of Religion and Resistance* (Durham and London, 1998) gives a good account of contemporary debates on apparel, esp. pp. 17–91.

46 For more on these debates in general, see Peter Lake's *Anglicans and Puritans: Presbyterian and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London, 1988).

47 Donna B. Hamilton, *Shakespeare and the Politics of Protestant England* (Lexington, 1992), p. 6.

48 John Penry, *A Treatise Wherein Is Manifestlie Proved . . .* (Edinburgh[?], 1590), Sig. B3r.

49 Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London, 1967), pp. 132–133.

50 David Cressy and Lori Anne Ferrell (eds), *A View of Popish Abuses Yet Remaining in the English Church*, in *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: A Sourcebook* (London and New York, 1996), p. 83.

51 As Peter Lake explains: 'The presbyterians (represented by Thomas Cartwright) wanted to argue that there was only one form of church government. This was set out in scripture and amounted to presbyterianism . . . Cartwright's opponent, John Whitgift, contended that there was no one form of church government laid down in scripture and that in external matters the church was to be guided by the decision of the Christian magistrate', Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans*, p. 13.

52 G. W. Prothero (ed.), *Statutes and Constitutional Documents: 1558–1625* (Oxford, 1944), p. 188.

53 Cressy and Ferrell (eds), *A View of Popish Abuses*, p. 89.

54 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford, 1997), p. 113.

55 Peter Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds: Clothes and Identity on the Renaissance Stage', in Margreta De Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (eds), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, (Cambridge, 1996), p. 306, 310.

56 Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (New York and London, 1973), Sig. C6r.

57 Phillip Stubbes, *The Second Part of the Anatomie of Abuses* (New York and London, 1973), Sigs. P1r – P2v.

58 Michel Massei, 'Stephen Gosson: Playes Confuted in Five Actions. A Critical Introduction to the Pamphlet and its Background', *Cahiers Elisabethains*, 2 (1972), p. 45.

59 The High Commission dealt, as Prothero notes, with 'the maintenance of the ecclesiastical supremacy', and in particular, with issues of (non) conformity, Prothero (ed.), *Statutes and Constitutional Documents*, xl.

60 Thomas Lodge, *A Reply to Gosson's Schoole of Abuse* (New York and London, 1973), p. 44.

61 For the difficulties of defining the term 'Puritan', see Christopher Hill's *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1966), pp. 13–29 and M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism: A Chapter in the History of Idealism* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 487–93.

62 Patrick Collinson, 'A Comment: Concerning the Name Puritan', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 31 (1980), p. 486.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 488.

64 Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation*, p. 173.

65 Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London, 1997), p. 66. As Diehl has also more recently observed, 'apologists for the stage also appropriate basic tenets of Calvinist theology to wield against their opponents, a phenomenon that has for the most part been ignored in the critical literature.' Diehl, "Infinite Space", p. 396.

66 The public stage was a particular ‘abuse’ that the authorities both inside and outside the city were enjoined to do something about. Indeed, there is some evidence that the London city fathers actively encouraged polemics opposing the playhouses. For example, Anthony Munday’s *A second and third blast of retreat from plays and Theaters* not only carries the arms of the corporation of London, it calls on the London magistrates ‘to redresse the mischiefs that are likely to ensue by this common plague . . . when a matter is knowen of them to be euil, it is there part to reforme it’ (New York and London, 1972, p. 73). Nonetheless, a few years after writing this, Munday can be found penning plays for Philip Henslowe. Munday’s ideological profligacy only serves to bolster my point about the difficulty of associating all anti-theatricalists with the radical ‘Puritan’ wing. When ideological configurations are as much a matter of opportunism and economic necessity as of ‘belief’, social, cultural and textual hegemony cannot necessarily be guaranteed.

67 It is important to state that Stubbes was not simply an anti-theatrical writer. He was a moralist in the broadest sense of the term and as the titles of these two books makes clear, his focus was on the range of ‘abuses’ that he believed afflicted Elizabethan society.

68 Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (New York and London, 1973), Sig. D2v.

69 *Ibid.*, Sig. F6v.

70 Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation*, p. 140.

71 Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses*, Sig. C4v.

72 *Ibid.*, Sig. C4r.

73 *Ibid.*, Sig. C6v.

74 William Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, in Ian Breward (ed.), *The Works of William Perkins* (Abingdon, 1970), p. 193.

75 Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses*, Sig. D2r.

76 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in Stephen Greenblatt and others (eds), *The Norton Shakespeare*, (New York and London, 1997), p. 2163.

77 Crowley was also one of the leaders of those Puritans who objected to proscribed ecclesiastical dress during the Admonition controversy mentioned earlier. For more on Crowley, see Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism*, pp. 198–99, 209–10.

78 Robert Crowley, *A brief discourse against the outward apparell and Ministring garmentes of the popishe church* (London [?], 1566), STC 6078, p. 34.

79 William Whitaker, *An Answere To A Certaine [sic] Booke, Written by M. William Rainolds* (London, 1585), STC 25364, p. 7.

80 Stubbes, *The Second Part of the Anatomie of Abuses*, Sig. P3v.

81 Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, pp. 44–46.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

83 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, 1994), p. 34.

84 See John Cottingham, *Rationalism* (London, 1984), pp. 36–90.

85 Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, p. 45.

86 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 43.

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