
Matthew H. Wikander. *Fangs of Malice: Hypocrisy, Sincerity, and Acting*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002. 229p.

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Like the best theater history, *Fangs of Malice* helps to remind us why, despite the efforts of the medieval Church fathers, Puritans, various government-sponsored censors, and the advent of film, television, and digital enhancement, live theater has yet to expire. In this wide-ranging study of what Jonas Barish famously called the “anti-theatrical prejudice,” play texts themselves are employed as primary evidence of the centuries-long diatribe against everything theatrical. Actors, as the embodiment of the lies told on stage, bear the brunt of this prejudice, but actors can also claim that the power of theater begins and ends with them, with their performances. Without the convention of our willing suspension of disbelief, of our agreement that the man we applaud (or hiss) is no longer himself but his character, drama exists only on the page. This conventional dismantling of identity is inherently dangerous and thus eternally appealing. In other words, as Wikander concludes, “Acting and play going are compulsive, mutually dependent behaviors; actors and audiences, in the language of addiction, are each other’s enablers” (183). We need theater even while we revile its producers: an antagonism as old as the drama itself.

Rather whimsically divided into acts and scenes instead of chapters, the book outlines three primary causes for the conventional mistrust of the stage: costuming and disguise; dissemblance and dishonesty; and its celebration of addictive behaviors like alcoholism and gambling. Primarily a series of close readings of a dazzling variety of plays, *Fangs of Malice* undertakes a gentle but unapologetic critique of New Historicism. Such a critique is particularly appropriate in a text depending so heavily on plays of the Renaissance period, a period well trodden by New Historicist scholars. Wikander finds this bias too literal in its application of the precise historical moment to explain every element of theater. Indeed, the New Historicist compulsion to explain theater solely in terms of its social context does dilute its magic, a magic which may be, Wikander implies, timeless.

As evidence, Wikander points to the common Renaissance trope of characters musing, or worrying, about being mistaken for actors. Of course the audience’s knowledge that such fear is being voiced by none other than the actor makes it more compelling. Is this a reflection of the playwright’s distrust of his medium, another person? That a number of playwrights discussed in the book were also actors seems not to matter here, although we might conjecture that their experience as actors made them even more critical of the job. The question, of course,

goes beyond the boundaries of the stage to encompass the very nature of the self. According to Wikander, “The mimetic problem of staging the inner self—by definition unplayable—extends through the whole context of European early modern and modern drama. The great characters of this drama, like Hamlet, Alceste, and Hedda Gabler, repudiate the falsity of the worlds they inhabit and arrogate to themselves sole power to be judges over themselves” (xvii). The New Historicist self may be a product of time and place, but theater’s lengthy efforts to expose that self remain a source of fascination.

In a fine reading of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part One*, and *Henry V*, Wikander shows that mutability, especially Hal’s, is a source of power rather than weakness, and that Hotspur’s lack of acting ability is his real problem. Hotspur appears the same at all times, before all audiences, and is thus an inappropriate leader for a people who understood, as Shakespeare’s richly mixed audience did, that performance plays an integral part in being human. Hal adjusts his “self” according to context, acting one way with Falstaff in the tavern and quite another way with his father at court. Wikander reads Hal’s great “Yet herein will I imitate the sun” speech as a discourse on the actor’s chameleon-like ability to adapt, to change the outside of his true self without distorting who or what he is. Such power underscores what Michael Goldman has termed the actor’s “terrific energy,” terrific in the sense of excessive as well as terrifying.

The terror of illusion—that it will either unmask us or trick us into believing that the mask is real—is not unique to any historical moment. Banned from Rousseau’s cult of sincerity, actors were similarly suspect in its Victorian incarnation. Although Wikander’s argument does not extend past the modern period, we could add that even our current age of post-(post?)-modernism, when the authentic self has been almost completely disenfranchised, theater retains its power. An insistence on either the lack of self, or an inability ever to know it, its “unperformability,” to put it badly, smacks of anti-theatricalism. And while the anti-theatrical prejudice seemed to prevail, momentarily, with the closing of the public theaters in 1642, we know in hindsight that drama merely moved underground, though investors in the large theaters were ruined. The substantial profits gleaned by shareholders in spaces like the Globe, real money made from the audience’s addiction to illusion and the revelations contained therein, was too much for Puritan leaders. But as Wikander notes, “With the closing of the theaters, the wooden Os of the Bankside and Shoreditch, the institution that Shakespeare perfected and critiqued in his plays ceased to exist. All that awaits now ... is the dissolving of the great Globe itself” (145). Without theater to show us to ourselves in our myriad identities and lack thereof, our very notion of the

human, not to mention the nation-state, risks dissolution. Like the actor who pops back to life for one more curtain call, after miming his or her symbolic murder by the audience with each bow, theater remains in a state of eternal resurrection. ✱