

**Thomas Nashe**  
*Pierce Peniless (1592)*

That state or kingdom that is in league with all the world and hath no foreign sword to vex it, is not half so strong or confirmed to endure, is that which lives every hour in fear of invasion. There is a certain waste of the people for whom there is no use but war: and these men must have some employment still to cut them off. *Nam si foras hostem non habent, domi invenient.* If they have no service abroad, they will make mutinies at home. Or if the affairs of the state be such, as cannot exhale all these corrupt excrements, it is very expedient they have some light toys to busy their heads withal, cast before them as bones to gnaw upon, which may keep them from having leisure to intermeddle with higher matters.

To this effect, the policy of plays is very necessary, howsoever some shallow-brained censors (not the deepest searchers into the secrets of government) mightily oppugn them. For whereas the afternoon, being the idlest time of the day, wherein men that are their own masters (as gentlemen of the Court, the Inns of the Court, and the number of captains and soldiers about London) do wholly bestow themselves upon pleasure, and that pleasure they divide (how virtuously it skills not) either into gaming, following of harlots, drinking, or seeing a play: is it not then better (since of four extremes all the world cannot keep them but they will choose one) that they should betake them to the least, which is plays? Nay, what if I prove plays to be no extreme, but a rare exercise of virtue? First, for the subject of them (for the most part) it is borrowed out of our English chronicles, wherein our forefathers' valiant acts (that have lien long buried in rusty brass and worm-eaten books) are revived, and they themselves raised from the grave of oblivion, and brought to plead their aged honours in open presence: than which, what can be a sharper reproof to these degenerate effeminate days of ours?

How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to think that after he had lien two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage, and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times), who in the tragedian that represents his person imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.

I will defend it against any cullion or club-fisted usurer of them all, there is no immortality can be given a man on earth like unto plays. What talk I to them of immortality, that are the only underminers of honour, and do envy any man that is not sprang up by base brokery like themselves? They care not if all the ancient houses were rooted out, so that, like the burgomasters of the Low-countries, they might share the government amongst them as states, and be quarter-masters of our monarchy. All arts to them are vanity; and, if you tell them what a glorious thing it is to have Henry the Fifth represented on the stage, leading the French king prisoner, and forcing both him and the Dolphin to swear fealty, 'Aye but' (will they say) 'what do we get by it?' Respecting neither the right of fame that is due to true nobility

deceased, nor what hopes of eternity are to be proposed to adventurous minds, to encourage them forward, but only their execrable lucre and filthy unquenchable avarice.

They know when they are dead they shall not be brought upon the stage for any goodness, but in a merriment of the Usurer and the Devil, or buying arms of the herald, who gives them the lion, without tongue, tail, or talents, because his master whom he must serve is a townsman and a man of peace, and must nor keep any quarrelling beasts to annoy his honest neighbours.

In plays, all cozenages, all cunning drifts over-gilded with outward holiness, all stratagems of war, all the cankerworms that breed on the rust of peace are most lively anatomized: they show the ill-success of treason, the fall of hasty climbers, the wretched end of usurpers, the misery of civil dissension, and how just God is evermore in punishing of murder. And to prove every one of these allegations, could I propound the circumstances of this play and that play, if I meant to handle this theme otherwise than *obiter*. What should I say more? They are sour pills of reprehension, wrapped up in sweet words. Whereas some petitioners of the Council against them object they corrupt the youth of the City and withdraw prentices from their work, they heartily wish they might be troubled with none of their youth nor their prentices; for some of them (I mean the ruder handicrafts' servants) never come abroad but they are in danger of undoing. And as for corrupting them when they come, that's false; for no play they have encourageth any man to tumults or rebellion, but lays before such the halter and the gallows; or praiseth or approveth pride, lust, whoredom, prodigality, or drunkenness, but beats them down utterly. As for the hindrance of trades and traders of the City by them, that is an article foisted in by the vintners, alewives, and victuallers, who surmise, if there were no plays, they should have all the company that resort to them lie boozing and beer-bathing in their houses every afternoon. Nor so, nor so, good Brother Bottle-ale, for there are other places besides where money can bestow itself: the sign of the smock will wipe your mouth clean; and yet I have heard ye have made her a tenant to your tap-houses. But what shall he do that hath spent himself? Where shall he haunt? Faith, when dice, lust, and drunkenness and all have dealt upon him, if there be never a play for him to go to for his penny, he sits melancholy in his chamber, devising upon felony or treason, and how he may best exalt himself by mischief.

In Augustus' time (who was the patron of all witty sports) there happened a great fray in Rome about a player, insomuch as all the city was in an uproar: whereupon the emperor (after the broil was somewhat overblown) called the player before him, and asked what was the reason that a man of his quality durst presume to make such a brawl about nothing. He smilingly replied, 'It is good for thee, O Cæsar, that the people's heads are troubled with brawls and quarrels about us and our light matters for otherwise they would look into thee and thy matters'.