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In flesh and bone: bodily image and educational patterns in early Reformation theatre

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> Es ist nichts Newes in diesen tagen /
> Daß man Spilweiß Geistliche sachen
> Fürbringen thut / vnd offt mit lachen… [1]
> (Frischlin, *Phasma*, 1580)

1. Early Reformation theatre: the community as stage, the stage as battlefield

The Protestant Reformation was, by all means, a turning point (and probably *the* turning point) in the Early Modern history of education. With its emphasis on literacy and daily reading of the Bible as a necessary sign of one's own salvation, reformers changed the role of schooling and the relationship of the lower classes with literacy and books and drew forever a cultural border, in Europe, between the mainly Reformed countries and areas and the Catholic countries, which on their side developed – especially with the Jesuit order – a rich and manifold educational counteroffensive.

The reformers' educational action wasn't all about reading and writing and the development of national languages. The role of music, especially of Luther's *Chorale*, in shaping the identities of the community and fostering unity and respect, is well known. But the most powerful educational tool outside formal schooling, in the first decades of the Reformation, was probably the theatre, especially the popular and street theatre promoted and organised in German-speaking cities and villages by the local government or groups of notable citizens.

The tradition itself, as we will see later, dates back to the Middle Ages, and its sacred version had a strong ritual-processional inspiration, turning around the celebration of the Passion or Corpus Christi:

> In the devotional theater of medieval Germany, passion plays (*Passionsspiele*) were the traditional genre to represent Christ's act of salvation on stage, while Corpus Christi plays (*Fronleichnamsspiele*) made Christ's sacrifice present by parading the consecrated host through the streets of the local community in theophoric ('God-bearing') processions.[2]

Devotional German theatre, in its two versions (*Passionsspiel* and *Fronleichnamsspiel*), was in itself a part of the community: it gathered the whole population around a religious symbol and celebrated the existence of a common ground of values. This sense of community would continue in Reformation theatre, reinforced by the feeling of a collective conversion and a common fight against the Roman Catholic enemy.

Moreover, the educational value of this *Gemeinschaft* had been reinforced, all through the 15th century, by the festival plays, in which the greatness of the prince and the developing humanist culture of German courts were celebrated. As summarised by Cora Dietl,

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[1] "It is not a new thing nowadays / That sacred things are brought on scene, / and often with laughter".

[2] Glenn Ehrstine, "The True Cross in Kunzelsau: Devotional Relics and the 'Absent' Crucifixion Scene of the Kunzelsau Corpus Christi Play," in *Power and Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Theater*, ed. C. Dietl, C. Schanz and G. Ehrstine (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 73.

> A special characteristic of the festival play are the open borders between the play and the (courtly, university or civic) feast during which it is performed. The close interlinkage between the feast and the performance could be regarded as a late medieval feature of these *spectacula*, [...] However, they are clearly Humanist and are often explicitly set to stress the importance of the *studia humanitatis*.[3]

Early Reformation theatre was, very clearly, a theatre of "open borders" in which all the classes and components of society participated actively in a sort of big self-recognition ritual – but also, as such, a theatre of "closed borders" against religious and cultural enemies. To reinforce its militant character it also incorporated the other form of popular German theatre, the *Fastnachtspiel*, a very rough and grotesque Carnival performance, adapted and re-written in order to act as a weapon against Catholics, Roman society and the tenets of non-Protestant faith. The convergence of this diverse popular tradition with court drama and the more cultivated *Schultheater*, often in Latin, created a language of its own, in which the body regained a central role and was designed to convey a variety of messages and examples. We will analyse some of the reasons for this new centrality of the body in Reformation theatre. The main one, we think, is theological and pertains to the very essence of Protestantism: the body as a "living temple" of God. As persuasively explained by Jennifer Waldron,

> [...] the body offered many reformers a living and breathing instance of God's works in the world, a seemingly natural sign of divine creativity with which to combat the unnatural "idols" of Catholicism.[4]

Recently, much excellent scholarship has focused on different aspects of these performances from the point of view of the history of the theatre, neo-Latin studies or cultural studies. The strong pedagogical flavour of all these experiences has been always taken into account by scholars, but an educational history of this theatrical tradition is still lacking.

In this article we will try to give an account of the educational patterns of Early Reformed theatre (ca. 1523–1550), focusing on the perspective of the body and tracing the geographical limits of the research around Switzerland, drawing examples from the works of Niklaus Manuel (1484–1530) and Hans von Rüte (1550– ca. 1558), both active in Bern,[5] and of Sixt Birck – Xystus Betuleius (1501–1554), active in Basel and later in Augsburg.

In Switzerland, the relative isolation of the cities made them ideal places for the "Reformed-*polis*" experiment: a city governed by a Bible-inspired local government and the active participation of the (faithful) citizens, as proclaimed by Oekolampad:

> At nos incomparabiliter feliciorem asseveraverimus civitate(m), cui magistratus contingunt, qui non brachio humano, sed deo ipso vere fisi, plebem, ut deo placitum est, moderantur (Oekolampad, *Prophetam*, a4r).[6]

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[3] Cora Dietl, "Neo-Latin Humanist and Protestant Drama in Germany," in *Neo-Latin Drama in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jan Bloemendal and Howard B. Norland (Brill: Leiden-Boston, 2013), 132.

[4] Jennifer Waldron, *Reformations of the Body. Idolatry, Sacrifice, and Early Modern Theater* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), 2.

[5] The reference work about Reformed theatre in Bern is the book of Glenn Ehrstine, *Theater, Culture and Community in Reformation Bern, 1523-1555* (Brill: Leiden, 2002).

[6] The passage is quoted by Judith Pfeiffer and is explained as follows: "In this context, the term *respublica christiana* designates a certain ideal of a Christian community as discussed in the city of Basel and elsewhere during the Protestant Reformation. By pursuing the formation of a *respublica christiana*, the Reformer of Basel, Johannes Oekolampad, aimed at guiding a demoralized community to a moral reformation based on the Bible, a so-called *regnum Christi*. Oekolampad described the features of a real Christian community in the preface of his commentary on the prophet Iesaia (*In Iesaiam Prophetam Hypomnematō*) which he dedicated to the magistrate of Basel in 1525. The reformer was convinced that faith has to take shape within the realm of

We will also have a look at the Italian Protestants living under the Zurich government in Valchiavenna, whose fugitive status and the clandestine character of their proselytism towards Italy generated a very interesting transformation of the Swiss experience. In Francesco Negri's *Tragedia intitolata Libero Arbitrio* (published in 1546 and in a second, enhanced edition in 1550), all the pedagogical and artistic features of the German model are transcribed as text, because his play couldn't be freely performed and could only be read in secluded places. The effort of translating a complex network of messages normally acted in actual space – with and for the bodies – in a wholly verbal performance, further unveils the essential features of the reformers' pedagogy of the body, emphasising its strengths and giving insights into some of its paradoxes. Popular religious theatre is, in general, a still mysterious *dispositif* from an educational point of view, and the early Reformation case, for its relative pureness and radicalism, is surely worth the price of an analysis.

2. A twofold heritage

As briefly sketched above, Reformed theatre merged different traditions along two main lineages: the cultivated tradition of the *Schuldrama* and the various traditions of street theatre, bringing some of the pedagogical features of the Latin-speaking court and college theatre onto the much more popular stage of Swiss cities.

Pedagogical reflection on theatre had been fostered by the great reformers themselves: Luther and Melanchthon had expressed their interest in theatre as an educational tool and discussed what should be required and avoided in performances suitable for the new faith. Luther especially stressed the importance of going beyond the emotional and passive experience of medieval *Passionsspiele* and *Fronleichnamsspiele*,[7] because the expectation of receiving grace and salvation through the mere ritual and re-enacting of Christ's deeds was ungodly and had opened the door to practices such as the selling of indulgences connected to the plays.

> By the late Middle Ages, passion and Corpus Christi plays had emerged as the most popular forms of religious theater. Both reenacted the passion, not just the resurrection, and Corpus Christi plays further incorporated the host itself in elaborate procession. [...] By reenacting the passion, players, sponsors, and spectators hoped to participate in Christ's saving grace. Far from being morbid, the late medieval fascination with the savior's body, both on stage and elsewhere, grew out of a very real desire for spiritual sustenance. Indulgences were granted for play attendance or participation, further evidence that the portrayal of Christ's passion was believed to offer an audience real salvation. [...] Plays or processions were also performed in connection with the sale of indulgences by members of the clergy.[8]

Luther's suspicions about the ritual character of popular religious theatre could be overcome by staging plays in which Protestant tenets were clearly explained and, most of all, through the civic dimension of Reformation popular theatre, in which all citizens engaged and felt themselves as co-

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ethics." "The Changing Function of Swiss Reformation Drama as Relates to Language and Mockery," in *Power and Violence*, ed. C. Dietl et al., 177.

[7] "Da kumpt es, das man die passion ßo vill stund vorzeugt, weyß gott, ab es mehr zum schlaffen ader zum wachen erdacht ist. In dieße rote gehenn auch die, die erlernet, wie große fruchte die heylige meße habe, und yhrer eynfeltigkeit nach achten sie gnug, wie sie die messe hören, da hyn man uns furet durcht etlicher lerer spruch, das die messe opere operati, non opere operantis, [....], so doch die messe nit umb yhr selbs wirdickeyt, sondernn unß zuwirdigen ist eyn gesetzt, ßonderlich umb des leydens Christi willen zu bedencken." "Eyn Sermon vor der Betrachtung des heyligen leydens Christi," in *Martin Luthers Werke*, vol. 2, 136–7, quoted by Ehrstine, *Reformation Bern*, 23.

[8] Ibid., 17–8.

builders of a representation in which the very essence of the community was celebrated. The extant texts boldly declare their embodiment of community values all through the plays and especially in the prologues. The body of the hero is the core of the example given to all the citizens:

> *Darumb ich für ain faßnacht spyl*
> *euch für die augen stellen wil*
> *Ain redlich / männlich tapffer weib*
> *die hat gewaget ihren leib*
> *Zů retten ihr volck / statt und land*
> [...]
> *Darumb ir trewen Burger gůt*
> *stellend zů uns hie ewren můt*
> *Und lernend in der gfarligkait*
> *umb Gottes ehr willig sein bhrait.*[9]
>
> "So for a Carnival play
> I will offer to your eyes
> An honest, manlike, brave woman
> who has risked her own body
> To save her people, State and country.
> [...]
> So, you honest, good citizens,
> show us your courage,
> and learn to be ready in perils
> to follow God willingly".

Moreover, in the most popular festival plays, the presence of allegorical characters such as the "Bernese bear" helped to give a visual identification to these values and make "the body politic" a constant presence on the Reformed stage.

Both Luther and Melanchthon, however, had no doubt about the value of theatre as a part of the school curriculum, and promoted the study and reading or performance[10] of classical plays in colleges and schools. Melanchthon, for example, included the performance of classical comedies in his *Kursächsische Schulordnung* (1528), sanctioning the continuity, for the Reformed culture, of a pedagogical tradition dating, in the German-speaking world, from the early humanists of the 15th century.

The educational role of classical theatre had received a fundamental impulse from the rediscovery of Aelius Donatus' commentary to Terence by the Italian humanist Giovanni Aurispa. A sentence from Donatus was often quoted, also by Melanchthon, as evidence that theatre also had educational aims for the Ancients: "Comoedia est fabula diversa instituta continens, affectuumque civilium ac privatorum: quibus discitur, quid sit in vita utile, quid contra evitandum." The choice of Roman comedy as an educational genre in schools came from the valuable insights into morality and human relationships offered especially by the works of Terence, but also by the more light-hearted texts of Plautus and Statius.

Expurgated of obscene content, Roman comedies, at the time of the Reformation, had a century-long experience on college stages and had consolidated the role of theatre as a school of manners and morals. In German-speaking countries as in Italy and Central Europe, a vast repertory of *Schuldramen* was

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[9] Sixt Birck, *Ivdith. Ain Nutzliche History* (Augsburg, s.e., 1539), "Vorrede diser Tragoedi", lines 23-7, 35-8.

[10] Classical texts and Neo-Latin dramas, especially in schools, were often read as "semi-dramatic dialogues". Dietl, "Neo-Latin Drama in Germany," 106-15.

written by Latin teachers in order to revive the glory of classical theatre and celebrate their own time. Of course, these *Schuldramen*, being aimed at the higher classes, focused on the *civis* as individual, and public virtues were seen as the fruitful consequence of an inner discipline, in the path of the most renowned humanist pedagogy. Pupils were encouraged to identify themselves with a hero whose outstanding strength, morality and piety stood as an example for the good leader.

Continuing and transforming this tradition, reformers focused on biblical heroes, bringing forth the idea that virtue was indistinguishable from real faith and that the Scriptures contained all that was needed to build the personality of the new Christian leaders and citizens. Joseph and Ezekias became the new title roles, and women such as Susanna and Judith joined them as protagonists of Reformed dramas both in Latin and German.

It is interesting to notice that this sort of Reformed cultivated theatre, choosing the Bible as its source, placed the "chosen people" at the background of the drama, enhancing the community significance of this theatrical tradition and merging the individual body of the hero in the collective body of his people. The analogy of the chosen people of the Old Testament with the community of the Protestants was clear, and this feature made easier the interchanges between biblical cultivated drama and popular civic theatre with religious content. A Swiss biblical play, Six Birck's Judith – on which we will focus later – exemplifies very well this central role of the city-community. The author adds to the original plot a city council, which has to decide if the kingdom should engage or not in the war against Holofernes, and whose role as moral guide of the people is emphasised. Judith acts, according to Protestant tenets, not as an individual with free will, of course, but guided by the hand of God, and is also the interpreter of the deliberations of the council.[11] With these modifications, the history of Judith and her people could be read by the spectators as Biblical sanction of the civic constitution of Protestant Basel, in which city government proclaimed itself as inspired by the Scriptures.

> The doctrine of Birck's Judith play consists in the demonstration of a city society whose public life is guided by the interpretation of Scripture, a *respublica christiana*, when the community is threatened by war.[12]

Birck's *Judith*, as with many Reformed biblical plays, was performed both in German, in the open air, for the general public and in Latin for school performances and cultivated audiences. In Swiss cities, both these sorts of play and the more popular, often scurrilous *Fastnachtspiele* by Niklaus Manuel were performed, enriching the landscape of Reformed theatrical tradition. The physical disposition of the plays in public spaces recalled the medieval tradition of processional plays and their identification with the hierarchic structure of the civic government:

> The path of participants often physically traced the ties that bound the late medieval city together as a *Sakralgemeinschaft*, a community founded upon 'civic religion'. For the 1381 Corpus Christi procession in Würzburg, Künzelsau's home diocese, representatives of the city's clergy, guilds, and eight administrative quarters gathered in the cathedral and then travelled via the marketplace and along the city walls to other symbolic sites throughout the town, thus reproducing 'the bonds of authority and dependence within and between the ecclesiastical and civic structures'.[13]

The town was the place in which the merging of the two theatrical traditions took place, and the empowerment of the town scenario as representation of the essence of the Reformed community was mediated by the dialogue between the individual bodies of the actors and the spectators – all of whom were local citizens – and by the collective body of the "chosen people" as protagonists of the plays,

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[11] Pfeiffer, "Swiss Reformation Drama," 179-81.

[12] Ibid., 176.

[13] Ehrstine, "True Cross in Kunzelsau," 79.

especially in the popular *Fastnachtspiele*, in which "everyman" characters embodied the Protestants in their entirety and their revolt and revenge against the Catholic clergy. In this context the majority of the pedagogical tools of classical theatre, focused on text, shifted onto the body, its language and its symbolic role – also because many of the spectators in large open-air spaces couldn't actually hear the words. A pedagogy of the body was building itself inside Reformed theatre, and would have been largely "stolen" and cleverly reformulated by early Counter-Reformation school theatre, especially by the Jesuits.[14]

3. Representations and avatars of the body

Given the richness and diversity of sources on which Protestant playwrights could draw, the body was represented in a multiplicity of ways and could also be represented indirectly with a variety of avatars, in situations in which the character doesn't own an actual body (as with allegorical figures) but the actor does, or vice versa, like in Francesco Negri's "read-only" theatre.

We must start by saying that Reformed theatre, following Luther's indications and distinguishing itself from the traditional processional theatre, never brought the body of Christ and his Passion directly on stage (sometimes Christ was enlisted among the characters, like in Naogeorgus' *Pammachius*,[15] but his role on stage was limited to a long introductory speech to Petrus and Paulus detailing the decadence of the times and the absurdities of Catholic rites). The Eucharist and relics, so important in pre-Reformation religious theatre, were no longer shown because of the renewed significance of the sacrament itself.

> [...] the sacrifice was to become corporally absent, and inaccessible to earthly senses. The sight of the consecrated Host had been a sight of God, and this, like the (rarer) vision of the sacrificed infant, was to perish with the alteration of the Mass.[16]

This absent body, given the central role of Christ's sacrifice in salvation according to Protestant theology, somewhat reflects himself in the present bodies: where the play has a more solemn tone, as is common in Biblical plays, the hero is clearly an avatar of Christ and concentrates in his body the religious and moral messages, mostly not through self-immolation (death was generally not represented on stage according to the precepts of classical tragedy) but through an ordeal in which the strong faith of the hero can prove itself (like in the episode of Susanna and the Elders). When the play has a farcical tone, the role of Christ is anyway sustained by the community of the Protestants, who suffer the vexations of the Roman clergy – but are at the end able to revolt and punish the wicked for his abuses, like in Niklaus Manuel's *Der Ablaßkrämer* ("The Indulgence Peddler").

This basic moral structure of the plays didn't prevent a more articulate presence of bodies and the possibility for the common spectator to identify him/herself with characters less exceptional than the "Christlike hero". It is worth recalling that, in Switzerland as in most German-speaking countries, plays were acted (and technically built) by citizens in the weeks or months preceding the performance and, as a

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[14] The renowned (and very controversial) early Jesuit playwright Miguel Venegas draw heavily on the male body, its beauty and its moral implications, depicting the virtuous love between the biblical heroes David and Jonathan in his college drama *Saul Gelboaeus*. A similar, but even more sophisticated, pedagogy of the body was later implied in another masterpiece of Jesuit educational theatre, Bernardino Stefonio's *Crispus*. See Luana Salvarani, "La didattica delle passioni. Peculiarità e paradossi del teatro gesuita delle origini," *Studi sulla formazione* 17, n. 1 (2014): 203-18.

[15] *Tragoedia nova Pammachius, autore Thoma Naogeorgo Straubingensi*. *Cum praefatione luculenta* (Vitebergae 1538), "Interlocutores". See also Id., *Tragoedia nova Mercator seu iudicium, in qua in Conspectum Ponuntur Apostolica & Papistica doctrina, quantum utraque in conscientiae certamine valeat & efficiet, quid utriusque & futurus sit exitus* (Basel 1540).

[16] Benjamin Griffin, "The Birth of the History Play: Saint, Sacrifice, and Reformation," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 39, no. 2 (1999): 221.

consequence, theatrical illusion was virtually absent: everybody was always fully aware of the fictional nature of the play and no real enchantment could be expected. So the bodies in a scene were always *at the same time* the familiar bodies of friends and neighbours and the sacred bodies of the religious play, an ambiguity that reinforced the sensation of the citizens to be "chosen people" taking part in the history of salvation, while lowering the overall tone of the play and multiplying the occasions for jokes and mockery.

This ambiguity of the body – typical of every form of community theatre but enhanced by the peculiar religious and civic context of the early Reformation – strengthened the perception of the positive characters of the play as exemplars, and made their pedagogical action all the more direct, because a fellow citizen embodied, during the play, the virtues of his/her role. The educational message was always aimed both at the individual and at the collective body of the city as a whole. And so were the bodies on stage.

The *individual* body came on stage as the bearer of virtues (or vices) to be learnt and followed, so inheriting both the features of the classical hero/antagonist as brought about by humanist pedagogy and the salvation role played in medieval theatre by the (now absent) body of Christ or by the Eucharist and relics shown in the *Fronleichnamsspiele*. In early Reformation theatre, the individual body was present not only in the typical form of human, physical characters but also as allegory. Forceful examples of allegory were to be found especially in the most polemic plays in which the vices of Catholicism and of corrupted humanity were attacked: in Hans von Rüte's *Abgötterei* [Idolatry], performed in Bern in 1531, Frow (Frau) Wirrwärr [Lady Confusion] represents human rationality ("Jch bin des menschen vernunfft…") and, even if we have no evidence of her visual rendering on stage, it is plausible that the real body interpreting the role was exaggerated and made grotesque in order to fully convey her extremely vicious and awkward personality. A tradition of drawings and engravings of monstrous creatures representing Catholic clergy and the monks, like the infamous *Munchkalb*,[17] accompanied Protestant propaganda from its beginnings, and some of the sketches by the artist and playwright Niklaus Manuel[18] confirm that anthropomorphic but non-realistic costumes were used to represent vices and virtues in the plays. Allegories are essential in Francesco Negri's *Tragedia intitolata Libero Arbitrio*, in which the visual presence of the body couldn't be expected; in a mental scenario, such as the one imagined by the individual reader or a small gathering, allegories are more easily represented and their educational and religious message couldn't be misunderstood. It is very interesting to notice how Negri, in order to balance the actual absence of the body in allegories that weren't to be embodied by a physical actor, makes extensive use of bodily mockery and scurrilous jokes with a heavy presence of the lower body, as we will see later.

The large field of bodily mockery covers a substantial part of the occurrences of the *collective* body. Inheriting not only the sense of community of the Passion plays and processional theatre, but also the "common sense" wisdom of the people as seen in classical comedy, this dimension of the body is substantial in early Reformation theatre. The community was the common ground of actors and spectators who funded the performances, collected the revenues through markets, food and beverages sold in the festive context and – in the Reformed cities – embodied the political and religious choice of

[17] The *Munchkalb,* according to a widely circulating popular tradition, was a deformed calf born in Freiburg with strange features and something like a monk's cap hanging from the neck. A pamphlet printed in Wittenberg in 1523 under the names of Luther and Melanchthon (*Deuttung der zwo grewlichen figuren Bapstesels zu Rom und Munchkalbs zu freyberg in Meyssen funden*) depicted the semi-legendary animal, together with the even more legendary *Papstesel* (another monstrous beast born in Rome), as a symbol of the physical and moral deformity of Roman clergy and religious orders. Both the figures were widely reproduced in anti-Catholic engravings.

[18] Manuel was an excellent painter and engraver (his *Berner Totentanz* marks the beginning of this art genre); his satirical plays were part of his activity as politician and campaigner of the Reformation in Bern. He also sketched some of the characters of his plays, often allegories portrayed with a very popular, lively style. See the catalogue of the 1979 Bern exhibition: Cäsar Menz, Hugo Wagner (ed.), *Niklaus Manuel Deutsch. Maler, Dichter, Staatsmann* (Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern, 1979).

their governors. We have already outlined the newly created role of the city council in Sixt Birck's *Judith*; other plays, such as his *Ezechias*, portrayed Biblical episodes in which an assembly of governors or the people as a whole had a crucial role, with their piety and faith, in triggering God's necessary intervention. But the most frequent embodiment of the collective dimension was the farcical one in the Carnivalesque tradition of *Fastnachtspiel*. Niklaus Manuel's plays, like *Der Ablaßkrämer*, *Vom Papst und Christi Gegensatz* or *Vom Papst und seiner Priesterschaft*, represent this tradition at its best. All performed in Bern in 1522–1525 and in subsequent years, these plays divided the space into two sections – the Protestants and the Catholics – and put on stage no heroes, but many examples of common people, first suffering the abuses of the clergy and later mocking priests and indulgence peddlers with ferocious jokes. Here the "everyman" characters act as collective bodies, bearing as individual actors the identity of the community and strengthening its bonds against the enemy. In Francesco Negri's theatre, the same action is performed indirectly through scurrilous allusions and malicious gossip, while any direct revenge action is excluded because the play itself is situated in Rome and the Italian Protestants must be educated to pursue their new faith with prudence and secrecy. In both places the repertory of (often gross) mockery acted as a marker of a common identity and helped the spectator to identify himself, not with an individual, but with the "good" part of the community as a whole.

4. The educational role of the body

Focusing on the educational functions of early Reformation theatre, we can summarise them as follows: providing examples of morals and virtues and persuading believers to follow them; building and enhancing the sense of community among all Protestants and especially in a local dimension; promoting literacy by encouraging the daily reading of the Bible. The first and second of these aims are particularly apt to be reached with the help of the bodily representation and through an appropriate pedagogy of the body, while literacy depends upon the quality of the texts and the presence in town of facilities to acquire basic reading skills.

The pedagogy of the virtuous body has strong connections with a network of symbols, allusions and taboos dating from Plato's times and further complicated, during the Renaissance, by the superposition of classical culture and Christian doctrine. Sources such as Diogenes Laertius' *Life of the Philosophers* and various historical accounts had built the image of the virtuous as temperate, taking care of his/her body for dignity and strength but without vanity and able to endure suffering, and this classical image is to be found again in the biblical or sacred heroes portrayed in Protestant theatre. The bodily profile of the virtuous is distanced from the more emotional representation of late-medieval religious plays: unnecessary self-harm as a form of corporal punishment or the exhibition of suffering and blood, so common in *Passionsspiele*, are nowhere to be found in extant plays, and Luther himself implied they should be avoided in condemning the passive and emotional fruition of the performances.

The body is, in Reformation theatre, a tool for giving evidence of one's one faith and of God's will, all this being useful to the community; as a consequence, the body of virtuous characters is always represented in full health or enduring the hardships of the battle or the siege, and the decaying body or, on the contrary, beauty and sexual attractiveness are absent from the stage as not functional to the educational aims of the play. As is well known, in German Protestant culture the material well-being of a community and the prosperity of its business was never seen in contradiction with the status of true believer, rather as a confirmation of it, and this idea was further emphasised passing from Luther to Calvin and Zwingli; so a strong, healthy body transmitting a sense of general well-being not only identified the virtuous character on stage, but provided to fellow citizens the elements of a basic physical education grounded on hygiene and temperance. (Of course, the landscape is always more nuanced than

in the abstract intentions of the playwright and his public, and putting on stage beautiful women such as Susanna and Judith played on attractiveness as much as on moral perfection: later, Jesuit theatre would consciously and intensely centre on male beauty in the exemplarity of its heroes.)

The exemplary body must also be always ready for endurance and self-sacrifice, and to be "given away" for the superior interest of the community, which is in turn an expression of God's will. As Judith states in Sixt Birck's drama,

> *Wer bin ich das ich nit dem Küng*
> *mit meinem Leib solt dienen ghring?*[19]
>
> "Who am I not to serve my King
> with my poor little body?"

(Moreover, as quoted above, Judith is presented from the beginning like "A manlike woman able to give away her body for her people's sake".)

It must always be remembered that while in *Schuldrama* performances, especially if in Latin, the exemplarity of the hero was mainly expressed through words, in popular theatre the text wasn't to be heard or understood (even if in German) by the majority of the spectators, and the body of the protagonist was the only place of transmission and identification of the proposed ideals. The distribution of characters on stage, dividing into separate sectors the "good" and the "wicked", made understanding the drama even easier and facilitated the perception of the virtuous body in its context and with its expected set of values.

Another pedagogy of the body was expressed by its collective representations. As we have already seen, the representation of the community as a whole through mass scenes or, more commonly, through "everyman" characters (as in Niklaus Manuel's *Vom Papst und seiner Priesterschaft*) is generally connected with the satirical-farcical tone of anti-Catholic jokes, polarising the comic content of pre-Reformation popular theatre against the new common enemy. Judith Pfeiffer, quoting Thomke's studies, makes clear this shift in mockery and points to the fact that jokes were also present in more serious Biblical dramas:

> In later dramas, e.g. the carnival plays *Vom Papst und seiner Priesterschaft* and *Vom Papst und Christi Gegensatz* by Niklaus Manuel, performed in Bern in 1523 following the spread of the Zwinglian Reformation, laughter still served to expose immoral behavior. The difference to Gengenbach's plays is that Manuel's peasant protagonists project their anger concerning immorality and peccability wholly onto representatives of the Roman Church, i.e. the Pope, cardinals and priests. [....]
>
> [Quoting Thomke] The extent and function of laughter differs significantly in the plays performed after the official introduction of the Reformation in Bern and Basel, though laughter did not vanish completely. [...] Hence, laughter in biblical dramas had the function of supporting the dissemination of doctrine by keeping the audience attentive.[20]

Here we can recall the denomination of "Comicotragoedia" chosen by Birck for several of his Biblical dramas, and the frankly comic tone of Negri's *Tragedia intitolata Libero Arbitrio* in spite of the title (the qualification as "tragedy" was probably adopted because the negative protagonist, the allegory of Free Will, is killed at the end by Justifying Grace).

The reason indicated by Pfeiffer ("keeping the audience attentive") is very plausible and directly connected with the educational aim of the play. If the theatrical representation had only a ritual role – as is very common with religious theatre – this aim would have been accomplished with the mere

[19] Birck, *Ivdith,* cap. 12.
[20] Pfeiffer, "Swiss Reformation Drama," 170.

attendance at the play and a general emotional involvement in the event, as pointed out by Luther. If the play was only aimed at community building, the amusement triggered by the scene and by the vision of movement and costumes would (and in effect did) suffice to this effect. But the attention of Protestant playwrights to the moral education of the actors and spectators implies, if not full comprehension of the text, an attentive and active attitude, after which the play should be meditated upon and compared to one's own experience.

> In *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage*, Diehl proposed that theaters could claim an acceptably Protestant identity if they downplayed the truth-value of material objects and events on the stage and instead emphasized the spectators' efforts of interpretation and evaluation. As the Chorus of Shakespeare's Henry V urges the audience, "Eke out our performance with your mind" (3.0.35).[21]

By all means, an intellectual attitude isn't required: body and mind should collaborate for the full fruition of the educational and religious messages of the play (this is of course all the more true if we turn from Shakespeare to popular theatre).

> The audience is required to awaken faith, but it is also required to strain the eyes and ears while focusing on the body of the actor. The experimental and even empirical dimensions of performance do not conflict with faith but are jointly active in bringing it to life.[22]

In this context, it is unlikely that early Protestant theatre was so attentive to active fruition and clear transmission of the message only to convey a general contempt for Catholic clergy or to diffuse scurrilous jokes among the people. The educational message of the collective body goes beyond polemic against the religious enemy and implies a full revaluation, at least in the very early Reformation, of the lower classes, their concreteness and natural mistrust for elaborate and fictitious human rules and rituals. Together with the promotion of universal literacy, this attitude translated in politics the anti-hierarchical motives of the Reformation and gave to the local and city governments, as expression of the community, further legitimacy. Of course, the farcical and Carnival plays continued to perform their normal role as a safety valve of social tensions and conflicts, while proclaiming Evangelical attention to the poor and the consecration of daily physical and working life as service to God.

Educating the lower classes to perceive and cultivate their natural conformity to God's will, celebrating their pragmatism and endurance: this can be summarised as the main content of the pedagogy of the collective body in early Reformation theatre. A brief passage of Niklaus Manuel's *Vom Papst und seiner Priesterschaft* gives a lively example of it:

> *Do ward ich ganz von zorn entrüst*
> *und han den arß an brieff gewüscht*
> *Nachbaur Růfli ich můß dirs klagen*
> *es leyt mir noch in meinem magen*.[23]
>
> "So I was suddenly in a rage,
> and with the indulgence brief I wiped my ass.
> Rufli, my friend, let me complain,
> I have this all stuck in my stomach."

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[21] Waldron, *Reformations of the Body*, 13.
[22] Ibid., 79.
[23] Niklaus Manuel, *Ein Fastnachtspyl vom Bapst und seiner Priesterschafft [Ein Faßnacht spyl, so zů Bern uff der Herren Faßnacht in dem M.D.XXII. jar, von burgers sünen offentlich gemacht ist, Darinn die warheyt in schimpffs weyß vom Babst u. siner priesterschafft gemeldet wirt]*, (Bern? after 1522). The original edition has no reference numbers; the passage is at page 43 of the 1836 Bern edition.

The Byzantine norms and rites of Catholicism are represented like a heavy, toxic food that can be easily digested and excreted by the healthy body of a peasant, celebrating his renovated freedom with a gesture of mockery and rebellion. Faecal metaphors were especially popular, distinguishing the "wicked", the avid clergy and especially the monks, whose lazy life was seen as the epitome of all vices:

> *[...] ogni giorno, come i fonghi da letame, ne nasce qualchuno di novo sotto l'ombra di questi già detti.*[24]
>
> "every day new monks and new orders sprout up, as mushrooms from manure, under the shade of the others that are already there."

The popular community, given its familiarity with hard work and the materiality of life, was the most entitled to "put their hands" in the faecal matter of wickedness, get rid of it and build from scratch a new civilisation. From this perspective, the educational role of the body – out of the traditional aspects of moral enhancement and its properly religious content – addresses a whole social class, and perhaps it is not improper to affirm it aimed at creating a sort of class conscience. The events of the middle 1520s – especially the Peasant's War – put very early under discussion the role of the lower classes in building Protestantism, but this "pedagogy of the body politic" was likely fundamental in building the middle class-centred moral of later Reformation, the one we, after Weber, are accustomed to call "the spirit of capitalism".

5. New bodies, a new language: some open questions

The conclusions of this reflection on early Protestant theatre on education are better expressed, like in all historical accounts, in the form of questions and proposals for further studies.

Approaching this theme from the point of view of the history of education has proven fruitful, and could help to explain some weaknesses (especially in the rhetorical and stylistic structure of the texts) and strengths (especially in the construction of simple but effective dramaturgical solutions) of a huge and partially unexplored repertory. The educational perspective can complete the analysis of a theatrical phenomenon that isn't fully understandable in literary, theological, sociological or anthropological terms, even if all these disciplines are necessary to study popular religious performance arts in every context.

This outline emphasises the construction of a *visual pedagogy* and of a *civic pedagogy* developed around the presence on stage of the individual and collective body. Taking into account the two fundamental tenets of Protestantism (*sola fide, sola Scriptura*), two questions are immediately posited: if *sola fide* emphasised the individual relationship of the believer with God, why so much interest in a civic pedagogy? And if the true religion had to be founded on *sola Scriptura*, why did the early Protestants (Niklaus Manuel, e.g., was both painter and playwright) try to build a visual pedagogy strongly compromised with the ritual/emotional approach to faith condemned by Luther himself? Political and social reasons, and the need for an immediately effective proselytism of the illiterate, can provide partial answers to these open questions. But also the educational techniques of Protestant theatre need to be studied in more detail, in order to address its paradoxes and unveil the resources of one of the most powerful moral and cultural builders in Early Modern Europe.

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[24] Francesco Negri, *Tragedia intitolata Libero Arbitrio*, ed. Cristiano Casalini and Luana Salvarani, (Roma: Anicia, 2014), 121.