

Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* and the Representation of Masculinity

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Abstract

This essay examines the representation of masculinity in Stephen Gosson's anti-theatrical pamphlet *The schoole of abuse* (1579). Discussing the author's self-presentation in the prefatory material and elsewhere in the text, the essay investigates the often contradictory and defensive authorial persona and compares it to Gosson's dedicatee Sir Philip Sidney's rhetoric of self-presentation in his *Defence of Poesy*, as well as to Gosson's own, later pamphlet *Playes confuted in fiue actions* (1582). The basic result of the discussion is that Gosson's pamphlet has a conflicted relation to early modern notions of manhood; more specifically, the essay concludes, Gosson's attacks on poetry and theatre as 'effeminate' are conveyed through an authorial persona that itself comes across as excessive, licentious and less than manly by early modern standards.

Keywords: Stephen Gosson; Sir Philip Sidney; masculinity; manhood; Elizabethan literature; anti-theatricalism

It is no exaggeration to say that Stephen Gosson's *The schoole of abuse* (1579) is in crucial respects about gender. In his discussion of the virtues and vices of literary works and the theatre, Gosson's pamphlet is entangled with notions of masculinity and femininity to such an extent that one might do worse than summarize its argument in the words of Andrew Hadfield: 'good literature is masculine and martial, encouraging its listeners to be the same, bad literature is feminine and wanton, teaching its listeners to be ill-disciplined and subversive' (Hadfield 1994: 118). However, while as Laura Levine suggests, *The schoole of abuse* is '[t]he first tract to demonstrate any real concern over the issue of gender' (1994: 19), relatively little has been said about the ways in which the author stages himself in his work, and even less about the ways in which that staged persona embodies, responds to, or even clashes with early modern notions of masculinity. The present essay will attempt to address that issue, focusing on what scholars have identified as central conditions of early modern masculinity, restraint, moderation and control in particular. It argues that the image of himself Gosson projects is very

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much characterised by excess and lack of self-control, and moreover suggests that this excess is an unresolved paradox at the centre of his text, which is never channelled into a means of control either over the text or the enemies depicted in it.

Obviously, the ‘abuse’ referred to in the title of Gosson’s pamphlet is of an artistic kind, though it certainly has wide-ranging moral and sexual implications. To Gosson, plays and other forms of artistic representation ‘aroused sexual desire and presented models of lewd behavior for an audience already predisposed to bawdry’ (Hilliard 1979: 235). However, his polemic does not merely concern ignorance or bad judgement in poetry or music, but also effeminization—a frequently used word in *The schoole of abuse*. Gosson approvingly describes how Plato banished ‘effeminate writers’ from his ideal state; less approvingly mentions the ‘bringing sweete consortes into Theaters, which rather effeminate the minde’ and the ‘effeminate gesture’ that dramatists employ; and decries how the martial prowess of old England has now turned into ‘wallowyng in Ladies laps’ (1579: fols. 3^r; 11^r; 14^v; 16^v). Yet, for all Gosson’s talk of masculine values, his defence of them appears to be just that—defensive. As Levine suggests, it is almost as if femininity is the default position which one is always in danger of slipping into (1994: 8), and hence masculinity becomes a position that has to be maintained, defended, even fortified. Thus, the male body is forever at the risk of being penetrated by the effeminizing sounds of music and poetry, which ‘by the priuie entries of the eare, slip downe into the hart, & with gunshotte of affection gaule the minde, where reason and vertue should rule the roste’ (Gosson 1579: fol. 15^r). At the same time it is in the (perverted) nature of man that despite having reason and sense—or precisely because of it—we ‘are euer ouerlashing, passing our boundes, going beyonde our limites, neuer keeping our selues within compasse’ (1579: fols. 25^v-26^r). This notion of lacking control arguably conflicts with patriarchal ideals of masculinity. Gosson leaves it open as to whom the ‘we’ refers, but since it was a commonplace in the Renaissance that reason and sense were primarily masculine traits, the implication seems to be that masculinity too is under permanent threat from excess. In other words, masculinity is, as Todd Reeser suggests, by and large defined in terms of moderation: ‘throughout Renaissance culture, moderation is either coded as—or assumed to be—masculine, and, conversely, women are coded as inherently nonmoderate’ (2006: 15). Control over oneself therefore

becomes of the utmost importance: as Alexandra Shepard concisely puts it, ‘The self-government expected of manhood was the basis of men’s claims to authority. Men could not govern others if they were unable to govern themselves’ (2003: 70).¹

At the same time, moderation was not simply a matter of masculine virtue as opposed to feminine vice. Shepard’s work in particular demonstrates how various forms of excessive behaviour—drinking, fighting, and so on—were to an extent tolerated. Frequently, they were seen as typical of young men, and as such they were also considered a largely inevitable part of the male life span.² Assertions of masculinity may therefore not necessarily conform with patriarchal ideals of self-control. In Gosson’s case, the manhood asserted is not only deferential vis-à-vis his dedicatee Sir Philip Sidney, it also, as will be demonstrated, carries various associations of excess and licence, not just in the author’s past as a playwright, but in the narrated present of the text. It may seem as if Gosson writes in hindsight, as if talking to his slightly younger self and condemning his immoderate pursuit of artistic creation. However, as we will see, his self-representation in the pamphlet is clearly more complex, because it frequently draws on a rhetoric of immoderation even in the present tense. In fact, his authorial self-presentation explicitly denies both self-government and authority from the very beginning of the work, and his critique of poetry and theatre somehow attempts to seduce the reader by the very means he condemns.³ The preface to *The schoole of abuse*, with its dedication to Sidney, opens with an anecdote of Caligula taken from Dio Cassius’ Roman history, in which the emperor

¹ For masculine self-control in the early modern period, see for example Foyster 1999: 83–84; Reeser 2006: 27–31; Shepard 2003: 28–29; also, for a discussion with particular bearing on John Donne’s satires, Sivefors 2020: 43–67. ‘Moderation’ generally, as Ethan Shagan demonstrates, is a problematic concept in an early modern context since it was understood in partly very different ways from today; however, both moderation and masculinity were ‘ideally defined by self-control’ (Shagan 2011: 63).

² See Sivefors 2020, esp. 13–14 and references.

³ This is a paradox which has not escaped scholarly attention: Efterpi Mitsi, for example, observes how ‘Gosson uses the attraction of ancient poetry to persuade his audience that art is dangerous and illusory; his language seduces readers in order to turn them against the seduction of polluted spectacles, idolatry, and paganism’ (Mitsi 2011: 112).

has gathered his army to invade Britain but eventually only orders his soldiers to ‘gather cockles’ on the beach. Gosson then compares the folly of this undertaking to his own:

I knowe not (right worshipfull) whether my selfe be as frantike as Caligula in my proceedings, because that after I haue set out the flag of defiance to some abuses, I may seeme well ynough to strike vp the drumme, and bring all my power to a vaine skirmishe. The title of my book doth promise much, the volume you see is very little: and sithens I can not beare out my follie by authoritie, like an Emperour; I wil craue pardon for my Phrenzie, by submission, as your woorshippes too commaunde. (1579: The Epistle Dedicatorie)

A ‘frantike’ author in a ‘vaine skirmishe’—Gosson likens himself to a mad emperor without imperial power. The only solution to this quandary is the prodigal act of submission, which also fits well with Gosson’s frequently repeated admission that he has written plays and now repents of them: ‘Now if any man aske me why my selfe haue penned Comedyes in time paste, & inueigh so egerly against them here, let him knowe that *Semel insaniuimus omnes*: I haue sinned, and am sorry for my fault’ (1579: fol. 23^v). This of course looks like an example of the ‘prodigality’ that Richard Helgerson has suggested is characteristic of late Elizabethan writing. According to Helgerson, there are two main forms of prodigal texts: either those that focus on the period of rebellion as something to be indulged in, or those that use the narrative to warn writers against the immoral byways of literature (1976: 1). Now in *The schoole of abuse* the rebellion is not really indulged in, unless of course we consider the preoccupation with playwrighting a form of indulgence. It would seem more obvious to focus on the aspect of warning, which is certainly present in the passages from *The schoole of abuse* quoted above. However, it is necessary to observe that Gosson’s ‘Phrenzie’ and lack of control continue right at the moment of writing. It is *now* that Gosson behaves like Caligula, and repentance, he even hints, may not really be an option. Why, says he, does he ‘finde so many faultes abroad’ when he has ‘at home more spots in my body then the Leopard, more staines on my coate then the wicked *Nessus*’ (1579: fol. 37^v)? The choice of the leopard suggests that there is no cure to be had, as the leopard was proverbially famous for not being able to change: ‘Can the blacke More change his skin? or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do euill’, as the Geneva Bible claimed (Jeremiah

14.23). Nessus, moreover, was the centaur responsible for the death of Hercules (by a poisoned shirt dipped in Nessus' blood and given to Hercules by a woman). In other words, neither point of reference seems to offer a reliable model of repentance.

In fact, the reference to Nessus opens up a gender perspective on the prodigal son narrative, which in itself, as Lorna Hutson observes, is 'irreversibly gendered' (1994: 122). There is a hint here that rather than complete the prodigal scheme Gosson remains an effeminizer, a perverter of manly values, since it is Nessus who brings about the effeminization and death of Hercules. Elsewhere in *The schoole of abuse* Caligula—with whom, we saw, Gosson compared himself at the outset—is cast in precisely the role of the perverter in both moral and sexual terms through his love of poets and actors: 'They [poets and actors] whome *Cæsar* vpheld, were driuen out by *Octauian*: whom *Caligula* reclaimed, were cast of by *Nero*' (1579: fol. 15^r). Caligula's generosity to actors carries suggestions of sexual licence, as the next invocation of the emperor confirms: '*Caligula* made so mucche of Players and Dauncers, that hee suffered them openly to kysse his lypes, when the Senators might scarce haue a lick at his feete: He gaue Dauncers great stipends for selling their hopps: & placed *Apelles* the player by his own sweete side' (1579: fol. 15^{r-v}). Thus, the Caligula with whom Gosson identifies himself in the dedicatory epistle has now taken on the familiar role of corrupt emperor and sexual pervert.

Caligula, we remember, had to atone for his crimes with his own blood, and within such a scheme, order has to be restored by force and, if necessary, violence. As numerous studies show, manhood was crucially footed on violence in the early modern period.⁴ In *The schoole of abuse*, however, violence is not the prerogative of the speaker but is instead directed against him. Gosson repeatedly suggests that control through violence is a masculine trait: 'Among the *Scythians* no man was permitted to drink of their festiuall Cuppe, which had not manfully killed an enemie in fight' (1579: fol. 31^r). Yet, when the 'I' occurs in Gosson's work, it hardly recalls Tamburlaine or other Scythian warriors, for the violence is consistently directed at the speaker himself:

⁴ See, for example, the essays in Feather and Thomas 2013; also, Shepard 2003: 127-51; Foyster 1999: 181-93.

I looke for some such Auditors in my Schoole, as of rancour will hit me, how soeuer I warde; or of stomacke assayle mee, howe soeuer I bee garded; making black of white, Chalk of Cheese, the full Moone of a messe of Cruddes . . . And sith there is neither authoritie in me to bridle their tongues, nor reason in them to rule their owne talke; I am contented to suffer their taunts. (1579: To the reader)

Of course, the modesty expressed is conventional, as is the ‘contented’ attitude in the face of attacks. However, the images of physical assault are not. In certain ways, Gosson’s self-presentation recalls the violent posturing that we find about twenty years later, in for example John Marston’s or Everard Guilpin’s verse satires, where the satirist is fiercely fending off attacks by his enemies.⁵ The difference is that Gosson more consistently attempts to replace aggression with Stoical composure, although his confessed lack of ‘authoritie’ makes it hard to believe that he is in control of the proceedings. Indeed, the parallel to Caligula hardly suggests composure, whether Stoical or not.

This impression of powerlessness is reinforced by the imagery the speaker uses to describe himself: ‘because I haue bene matriculated my selfe in the schoole, where so many abuses flourish, I wil imitate y^e dogs of *Aegypt*, which comming to the bancks of *Nylus* too quenche their thirste, syp and away, drinke running, lest they bee snapte short for a pray too Crocodiles’ (1579: fol. 6^v). Dogs and manhood clearly have a complex relation in the early modern period: as Shepard points out, ‘terms such as “ape”, “beast”, and “dog” suggested a total absence of the reason expected of manhood by deploying the same extreme terms of deviation as conduct writers who equated unmanliness with beastliness’ (2003: 174).⁶ In Gosson’s case, behaving like an unmanly dog is not part of his dissolute past; it is associated with his present attitude towards his detractors. In fact, it is even linked to his self-presentation in the epistle: ‘The Schoole which I builde, is narrowe, and at the firste blushe appeareth but a doggehole’ (1579: The epistle dedicatorie).

Such a failure to separate dissolute past from virtuous present is also what sets Gosson apart from for example his contemporary George

⁵ For discussion, see Sivefors 2020, esp. chs. 2 and 4.

⁶ Gosson is clearly aware of the proverbial idea of dogs as lacking in self-control and needing proper restraint: “a Dogge, let him slippe, he is straight out of sight, hold him in the Lease, hee neuer stirres” (1579: fol. 26^v).

Gascoigne, who recanted for his youthful excesses and revised the racy *A hundreth sundrie flowers* into the more acceptable *Posies*. Gosson fails to exercise a similar degree of control over his writings: of course, his own plays, he admits, ‘are dayly to be seene vpon stages, as sufficient witnesses of mine owne folly, and seuer Iudges againste my selfe’ (1579: To the reader). ‘Author’ and ‘authority’ clearly have a complex relationship in early modern culture, but in the case of Gosson the split between them seems to be absolute: he admits himself to be an ‘author’, but fails to achieve ‘authority’ over his writing.

This is true not only with reference to Gosson’s previous, theatrical works, but is a distinguishing feature of *The schoole of abuse* itself. Gosson defines his own role vis-à-vis the text in patriarchal terms, with himself as schoolmaster and the dedicatee Sidney as its noble protector: ‘you shall see what I teach, which presente my Schoole, my cunning, and my selfe to your worthy Patronage’ (1579: The epistle dedicatorie). Yet, the image of the schoolmaster is mixed up with a variety of other figurations of masculinity. As Arthur Kinney points out, the authorial persona of *The schoole of abuse* appears curiously metamorphic. By constantly putting on different cloaks ‘the critic in *The schoole of abuse* assumes the metaphorical roles of host, teacher, doctor, and military leader. In those roles he may combat those conditions which allow abuses . . . to flourish: lack of interest, ignorance, deceit, and poor judgment’ (Kinney 1967: 47).⁷ So, combat, which is acknowledged in the text to be a fundamentally masculine pursuit, seems to be dependent upon performance, of *acting* the schoolmaster, doctor, and so on. Elsewhere Kinney connects this apparent lack of authorial epicentre to what he considers to be a stylistic failure of the text: ‘this careful sense of structuring falters before Gosson’s wavering style: he remains Protean throughout his work, requiring that his audience likewise shift in his response to him’ (1974: 41). But there is, it seems to me, more than stylistic values at stake here—the question of gender and masculinity in particular. In her brief discussion of clothing and gender in *The schoole of abuse* Levine observes that ‘there is no suggestion here, as in later tracts, that the costume is in itself constitutive, and this suggests that there is still some sense of a fixed gender beneath the costume’ (1994: 20). She further argues that the absence of an essentialist logic in

⁷ See also Kinney 1974: 41.

Gosson's pamphlet is paradoxically due to this sense of a fixed gender, which is still too unshaken for it to provoke much need of defence. However, what Gosson's projection of his own persona suggests is that some of the prime values associated with patriarchal manhood—restraint, self-control and balance—are notably absent. The series of roles associated with the speaker in his pamphlet do not add up to a patriarchal defence of patriarchy.

It is instructive to compare this seemingly fragmented and contradictory sense of masculinity with the one projected in Gosson's dedicatee Sidney's *Defence of poesy*. Of course, Edmund Spenser suggested in a letter to Gabriel Harvey that Gosson was 'for hys labor scorned' by Sidney (qtd. in Hadfield 2012: 106).⁸ It is an open question to what extent Sidney's *Defence* should be seen as a response to Gosson's pamphlet, although it does represent a different position with respect to how it relates masculinity to poetry.⁹ To take just one example, Sidney's text begins by what seems like a reassuring assertion of masculine values: that of horsemanship. Praising the esquire of the stable of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II, John Pietro Pugliano, Sidney says that he will try to convey a sense of the nobility of poets that equals Pugliano's praise of soldiers in general and horsemen in particular. It may, as Ian Frederick Moulton argues, seem that Sidney is asserting the manliness of his own pursuit since he has learned some of his verbal skills from a soldier (Moulton 2000: 89). At the same time Moulton misses Sidney's gently mocking tone: 'if Pugliano's strong affection and weak arguments will not satisfy you, I will give you a nearer example of myself' (Sidney 2002: 212). We are here reminded of Åke Bergvall's point that '[i]rony and comedy rather than heroics' are Sidney's 'chief authorial tool' in the *Defence* (Bergvall 1989: 40). It can be added that Sidney's defence of poetry is based on a less divisive notion of masculine pursuits than Gosson's attack on it. For example, while Gosson tirelessly condemns erotic poetry as effeminate, Sidney reconciles that same poetry with manliness. What is more, poetry is far

⁸ The authenticity of Spenser's remark has been debated: Hadfield suggests that Spenser, rather than giving a faithful report, may even have parodied the manners of his addressee Gabriel Harvey (2012: 106).

⁹ Cf. Moulton 2000: 89. In making this point, I go against some recent criticism that has tended to emphasize the similarities between Gosson and Sidney: see the references to Lehnhof's and Williams' works below.

from irreconcilable with martial activities. In fact, Sidney says, warrior people have always liked poetry: ‘heretofore poets have in England also flourished, and, which is to be noted, even in those times when the trumpet of Mars did sound loudest’ (2002: 241). Hence, Sidney, unlike Gosson, has things both ways: poetry and manliness are not opposed to each other so much as mutually constitutive. His own martial ‘defence’ of poetry results in a rhetorically more convincing positioning of himself than Gosson’s unmanly defender of manhood: Sidney’s self-projection is manly *because* he is a poet, not despite it. Although Sidney and Gosson may, as Kent Lehnhof argues, ‘share considerable common ground when it comes to poetry’ (2008: 24), the gendering of their rhetorical personas differs widely.¹⁰

If we turn back to Gosson’s dedication to Sidney, the projected range of personas is broad to the point of being downright self-contradictory. Gosson explicitly casts himself as a humble school-master to Sidney’s aristocrat: ‘If your Worshippie vouchsafe to enter the Schoole doore, and walke an hower or twaine within for your pleasure, you shall see what I teach’ (1579: The epistle dedicatorie). As we have seen, though, this seems to be only another role in a changing repertoire that has previously included the casting of Gosson as the ‘frenzied’ emperor Caligula. Submitting to Sidney, in short, does not entail that the speaker of Gosson’s preface assumes a stable social position, or indeed control of his previous and present writings. It is telling perhaps that his attempts at making his own mistakes a source of productive moral engagement frequently end in mere clichés such as ‘burnt Children dread the fire’ (1579: To the reader).

In other words, Gosson articulates his own position in terms of submission but seems less than capable of asserting control of his text, stylistically or in terms of his own self-presentation. As an afterthought to the present discussion, it could be added that Gosson’s later anti-theatrical pamphlet, *Playes confuted in fiue actions* (1582), makes what seems like a deliberate effort to tidy up these inconsistencies. Héloïse Sénéchal suggests that in this later work ‘Gosson’s more absolute rejection of artistic pleasures is accompanied by a necessary paring down

¹⁰ See also James Williams, who similarly observes that ‘a close look at the *Apology* reveals the basic similarity rather than inconsonance of Gosson’s and Sidney’s literary and intellectual sensibilities’ (2009: 643).

of his own elaborate style' (2004: 3). Style apart, *Playes confuted* has a dedication to Sir Francis Walsingham, perhaps a more apt recipient of a work that attacks poetry than Walsingham's son-in-law Sidney. Indeed, Gosson now invokes Walsingham as the '*Hercules* in the Court' who might be able to clear the 'stables of *Augia*'—that is, of course, the theatres—from all the filth clinging to them (Gosson 1582: sigs. *4^v, *4^r). In addition to associating his dedicatee with a mythical icon of supermasculinity, Gosson manages to establish an authorial persona of his own with a more definitive separation of sinful past and virtuous present: he sets out 'now with alteration of minde to depely accuse that which so highly I esteemed' (1582: sig. B1^r). If Gosson was capable of realizing the inconsistencies that characterized his previous pamphlet, he is also at pains to correct them in this second work. By comparison, *The schoole of abuse* may to modern eyes be a more contradictory and flawed work, but that also, to an extent, reflects the contradictions, faultlines and vicissitudes of early modern manhood.

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