

Brome's *The Antipodes* and Rubens's paintings: Illusionistic and Self-Reflective Pieces
of English Baroque Culture

Seventeenth-century England was a place of intense cultural turbulence. Religious wars raged throughout Europe, accelerated scientific investigation led to revolutionary new theories, and traditional conceptions of political systems and governance were violently reevaluated. Through all of this, a style of art known as the Baroque developed in Catholic Italy and slowly spread throughout Europe. Though not generally associated with Protestant England, the Catholic Baroque style found a clear place in the British court when Charles I commissioned a series of Baroque panels from Peter Paul Rubens that self-consciously glorified his own and his father's kingly reigns. The paintings were hung on the ceiling of Charles I's Whitehall Banqueting House, which was intended largely as a setting for the performance of elaborate court masques and plays. Although the term Baroque is most clearly defined as a style of art or music, some of these masques and plays might also be called Baroque for their extravagant, multimedia nature and for a certain conscious self-glorification (Strong 7). Indeed, numerous scholars have investigated the many thematic ways that the Baroque can be extended past Italy and beyond visual art, and many of their overarching conclusions about the Baroque as a cultural phenomenon have centered on the period's interest in extravagant illusion and conscious self-reflection (Braider 5-8). Such Baroque themes are clearly apparent in the English play *The Antipodes*, written by Richard Brome in 1636, just two years after Rubens's paintings for Whitehall were completed. With motifs of illusion and layered performance that create repeated self-reflections on the nature of

truth and theatric form, *The Antipodes* displays motifs that are strikingly similar to the work of Rubens, certain cultural controversies of pre-Civil War England, and the general themes of the Baroque.

The Antipodes contains a repeating theme of reality and illusion, truth and misunderstanding. The very basis of the story is that Peregrine is so absorbed in the fictional, illusory world of the Antipodes that he ignores and does not even fully notice the real world around him. Similarly, Martha's entire existence is wrapped up in her desire for a child, even to the point that she is going mad for the want of one, and yet she does not understand the way that they are in reality produced. Her misunderstanding of the world of conception and childbirth stretches so far that she has actually searched in "parsley beds, / strawberry banks, or rosemary bushes" for her unconceived children (18). When Barbara says that she herself has two children, Martha responds by asking, "are you sure on't? / Or does your husband only tell you so? / Take heed o'that, for husbands are deceitful" (17). Barbara responds that she is "o'the surer side. I am sure / I groan'd for mine and bore 'em, when at best / He but believes he got 'em" (17). Yet Martha still remains unconvinced, saying that "both he / and you may be deceiv'd" (17). In this way Peregrine and Martha are so wrapped up in their own mistaken beliefs and hopes that they do not understand the basic nature of the world around them. Furthermore, these ideas of uncertainty regarding children's conception reach beyond Martha's naiveté. Barbara's point about a man's greater uncertainty also remains telling for the rest of the play.

Indeed, *The Antipodes* displays a familiar motif involving the fear of cuckoldry and men's own illusions about the conception and parenthood of their wives' children.

Martha's confusion about her unconceived children is considered unusual, forming great comic material for the play when she suggests that her husband could deceive her about the existence of her own children. The doctor deems her misunderstandings and extreme innocence so strange that they lead him to judge her "madder" than the delusional Peregrine (14). On the other hand, men's skepticism about such matters seems to be considered more normal. Most of the male characters in *The Antipodes* actually seem to entertain intense doubts about their wives' truthfulness and fidelity. Joyless' constant, unfounded conviction that his wife is disloyal forms a central plotline of the play, and extends so far that he is uncomfortable with Diana ever so much as being in the same room as another man, even when he himself is present as well. Even Blaze announces that he has previously suffered from similar jealousy, and it is he who actually tries to help Joyless battle this obsession by introducing him to the doctor. Letoy's baseless past conviction that he has been cuckolded goes so far that, in a desire to balance the scales and deceive his wife in return, he actually gives up his own child Diana, trading her for another infant after birth so that even his wife will not know that she is raising somebody else's baby. This wife actually dies unknowing, implicitly calling into question the seeming ridiculousness of Martha's claims that she may not know of the existence of her own children. Thus do characters in *The Antipodes* remain unclear as to the reality of their own children, repeatedly unable to distinguish truth from fantasy, and unsure whether they are being deliberately lied to by others.

The characters are continually misled in several other ways as well. Diana is actually led to flirt with a man she does not know is her own father. Joyless is unknowingly tricked into being cured by a doctor he does not even know is treating him.

Peregrine is led on by all the other characters in concerted action so that he actually believes he is in the Antipodes, a world where everything is literally turned upside down. Indeed, there is a general, thematic interest in the confusions of deception, illusion, and gullibility throughout the play.

This theme of truth, falsehood, and illusion can be linked to general cultural interests of the time. When *The Antipodes* was written in 1636, just before the English Civil War, England was awash with conflicts between different religious groups, and in particular the Puritans campaigned against plays of all kinds, claiming that they taught sin and lies. Earlier, in 1583 the Puritan Philip Stubbes wrote:

If you will learn falsehood; if you will learn cozenage; if you will learn to deceive; if you will learn to play the hypocrite, to cog, to lie and falsify; if you will learn to jest, laugh and fleer, to grin, to nod and mow; if you will learn to play the Vice... you need to go to no other school, for all these good examples may you see painted before your eyes in interludes and plays. (Stubbes)

Thus not only did Puritans like Stubbes consider theatres general places of sin that distracted from religious learning, but there was even a fear that spectators and actors might “learn falsehood” so much as to actually be unable to distinguish between theatrical truth and actual reality, much as Peregrine is apparently unable to distinguish between the land of Antipodes and the fictional play created in front of him. The old playhouses, considered places of sinful illusion, were closed for good in 1642 after the Puritans gained power. Yet at the same time members of other religious groups were deliberately exploring means of creating illusion in art.

Inigo Jones, a Catholic and the Surveyor of Works to both James I and Charles I, was renowned for his ability to create the illusion of a richer reality in theatre through elaborate set designs, intricate costumes, and innovative stage tricks. Brockett and Hildy

point out that “as much as 80 percent of Shakespeare’s plays can be done on a bare stage, suggesting that the stage was most often treated as a neutral space” in Renaissance theatre (129). Yet Inigo Jones turned this tradition upside down, adding not only spectacular costumes and set designs to theatre, but also splendidly coordinated music and dance to create a full sensory effect. Even the theatres moved from simple outdoor structures to ornately decorated indoor settings, such as the Banqueting House at Whitehall complete with elaborate baroque ceiling paintings that Jones and Charles I commissioned from Peter Paul Rubens. During the Renaissance, theatre had left the impression of the setting’s sensory details largely up to the playwright’s poetic description and the spectator’s imagination. However, during this pre-Civil War period, English theatre moved into a celebration of illusion and detail that created rich visual and auditory settings for court masques and plays. It is indicative of this shift in focus that the most prestigious seats in theatres moved from the back to the front of theatres, sacrificing breadth of view for close-up visual detail and the richer illusory qualities that came with it. Thus, as Purveyor to the Anglican King Charles I, Jones made plays and court masques an escape into exactly the sort of richness and detail that the Puritans disdained, creating a complete artistic world with poetry, acting, dance, music, painting, and architecture all combined into one dramatic creation that the Puritans likely would have referred to as a false illusion and a lie.

Likewise, an overt focus on illusion can be observed in the Catholic painting of the period. One of the many ways that Jones had created increased visual effects in theatre was through the extended use of linear perspective to give the illusion of great depth on stage. He added slanting and layered flats to increase the apparent depth of the

stage itself, as well as using exaggerated lines of linear perspective in his elaborate set designs, such as in those for *Britannia Triumphans*, *Luminalia*, or *Salmacida Spolia* (Appendices 1, 2, and 3). Baroque ceiling painting of this period created deeply similar effects, also using extensive linear perspective. For example, both Andrea Pozzo's *Allegory of the Missionary Work of the Jesuits* and Guercino's *Aurora* (Appendices 4 and 5) are classic examples of seventeenth-century Italian ceiling painting that include architectural features drawn in sharp perspective, continuing upwards for an enormous illusory distance to end in a false painted sky, thus extending the apparent space and height of the room. This Baroque style of ceiling painting was generally associated with Catholicism, and particularly with Italy (Dunn 196-198, Minor 142, 144). Indeed, both Pozzo and Guercino were Italian and Catholic, and the Pozzo painting glorifies the work of the Jesuits, while *Aurora* was painted for Pope Gregory XV. However, despite the religious and national divides involved, these same ceiling perspective effects can be seen even in seventeenth-century Protestant England. For example, the paintings that Catholic Peter Paul Rubens created for the Banqueting House in London use these techniques to similar effect. Although Rubens's *The Apotheosis of James I* (Appendix 6) lacks illusionistic painted architecture, it does again use perspective to create the painted illusion of a sky floating far above the actual ceiling. It accomplishes this with bodily perspective and a vanishing point deep in the clouds, much like in *Allegory of the Missionary Work of the Jesuits*. Thus baroque painters like Rubens and Guercino repeatedly explored the use of visual illusion in painting, much as Inigo Jones did in English theatre.

This cultural concentration on illusion during the early seventeenth century is particularly interesting in England, where the interests and concerns of different religious groups came into stark contrast. The Anglican King Charles I commissioned illusionistic art from Catholics like Jones and Rubens, and Jones and Rubens themselves were heavily influenced by the Italian Catholic Baroque style. The traditionally Anglican English also enjoyed a long tradition of Renaissance Theatre. Yet at the same time in early seventeenth-century England the Puritans were claiming that such acting and illusory art constituted sinful lies. Religious controversy was clearly at high stakes when *The Antipodes* was written in 1636, two years after Rubens completed his Catholic-style Banqueting House paintings, only six years before the Civil War would break out, and when the Thirty Years War had already been raging on the Continent for eighteen years. Brome can be said to use the acted-out Antipodes to examine London social relations within *The Antipodes*, considering which societal practices are natural and which cultural, which ones make sense and which are in fact corrupt, nonsensical, or upside down. Given that the play thus already appears political, Brome's exploration of truth, falsehood, and illusion within *The Antipodes* could be seen as a sort of reflection on the cultural controversies of religion and truth within pre-Civil War England.

Indeed, several events in *The Antipodes* can be seen to represent particular religious and cultural views, fears, and interests. Characters repeatedly experience exactly the inability to tell theatre and reality apart from each other that the Puritans feared. Not only are Peregrine and Martha unable to distinguish between the play put on for them and the real Antipodes, Peregrine can't even recognize his own wife Martha after she is dressed up like a queen. Similarly, Diana fails to recognize Byplay as himself

after he changes robes to take on a different role within the play, even though she knows he is an actor and she has even had a special, admiring eye for him. When Martha hears a play mentioned, her misunderstanding runs so deep that she responds, “The play? What play? It is no children’s play, / Nor no child-getting play, pray, is it?” (43). There is even a reference to the Puritan idea that theatre is sinful when Joyless says that “Kissing indeed is prologue to a play / Compos’d by th’ devil and acted by the Children / Of his Black Revels. May hell take ye for’t!” (43). At the very time that he says this, Joyless is unable to distinguish between Diana’s pretended flirtatiousness and real infidelity. Yet even while these characters experience exactly the sort of inability to distinguish truth from reality that the Puritans feared, other characters embrace acting and illusion as the Catholics or Anglicans might have. Letoy refers to the “perfection” that the stage “now shines with” (37), and the doctor tells Letoy that “if your play takes to my expectation... your fancy shall be cried up / Miraculous” (33). Furthermore, by its very existence as a play *The Antipodes* seems to show some support for the Anglican and Catholic view, since presumably Brome would not have written it if he had considered all theatre sinful by definition. Thus with characters, statements, and events on both sides of the issue Brome considers acting, illusion, and falsehood on multiple levels as the problems of religious, social, and artistic fixation that they were in his day. The nature of acting and drama, the trustworthiness of both women and men, and the very meaning of understanding truth, location, and society are all explored.

Furthermore, the unique interests and themes of seventeenth-century English art and culture can be seen in *The Antipodes* in other ways as well. Christopher Braider has examined the seventeenth century Baroque period as a broader artistic, literary, and

cultural era, united by specific common interests and concerns. Within this scheme *The Antipodes*, like Rubens's paintings, might be considered Baroque art. Braider writes:

There is a well-documented *specularity* of baroque culture, a self-regarding temper whose most explicit expression is the era's obsession with mirrors as both a source of intriguing optical effects and an inexhaustible reservoir of analogies and examples. The mirror motif is related to the widespread taste for *mises en abyme*, elaborate framing devices (interpolated tales, pictures of pictures, plays within plays) that enable a work to incorporate its own image in the body it depicts. (8)

Indeed, what Braider terms specularity is clearly evident in the period's art.

A particularly telling example is Rubens's *Venus at a Mirror* (Appendix 7), linking Baroque illusion with this specularity of self-examination. Painted in 1615, *Venus at a Mirror* not only prominently features a mirror and a woman self-consciously regarding herself in it, but it actually uses this setting to expose illusion and truth. In the apparent reality of the painting the woman Venus appears slightly unhappy and nervous, with her back somewhat modestly exposed to the viewer. However, her reflected image is visible head on to the viewer, where she somehow looks serenely joyful, confident, and even seductive. On top of this illusory contradiction there is the fact that the angle of light coming from the mirror does not even appear to be physically possible. Based on the location of the mirror (apparently situated approximately parallel to the plane of the painting) it looks as though it should be reflecting only Venus's left shoulder to the viewer, not the perfect view of her entire face that it in fact displays. Hence the reflection itself seems to be an invented illusion. Thus, in *Venus at a Mirror* all of the Baroque themes of mirrors, images within images, illusion, and unabashed self-examination simultaneously appear.

Although *Venus at a Mirror* was not one of the English paintings that Rubens created for Charles I, similar themes of framing and self-reflection are visible in his paintings at the London Banqueting House as well. The ceiling paintings of the Banqueting House are arranged in the common Baroque format of repeated framing, with a series of nine paintings actually combined to create one total visual image (Appendix 6). Smaller paintings are used to frame larger ones, and elaborate gilded work separates each panel from the others, forming one enormous frame for the image as a whole. Furthermore, a certain self-conscious self-reflection appears in the subject matter commissioned by Charles I. The central image of the ceiling paintings is titled *Apotheosis of James I* (Appendix 6), literally displaying King James I's ascent to godhood, and as Minor writes, "while few observers... would have believed literally in the deification of James I, most would have understood the magnitude of Stuart claims, their claims of divine right, their wealth, and their power" (222). Thus the *Apotheosis of King James I* symbolically reflects upon the current king, Charles I, to support his own claim to divine right and privilege. Another panel, called *The Peaceful Reign of James I*, was hung directly above Charles I's own throne in the Banqueting House, visually connecting the powerful seats of James I and Charles I again as reflections of each other. *The Peaceful Reign of James I* depicts King James I seated on a throne, crowned by angels from above and surrounded by allegorical figures celebrating his reign. James I looks directly down to where the real throne would sit, juxtaposing his allegorically represented past reign with Charles I's real, contemporary one. This self-conscious association between the power of Charles I and his father is underscored by an eighteenth-century keyplan for the ceiling paintings, which describes this panel as "the

KING on his THRONE Pointing to PRINCE CHARLES who is CROWN'D KING” (Appendix 8).

In this way the Banqueting House paintings self-consciously frame and reflect on the nature of the current king and the present time.

Similar sorts of framing and self-reflection appear in *The Antipodes*. The most striking example might be the multiple internal plays within a single main play. *The Antipodes* contains a play within a play within itself, all in addition to a separate internal masque just before the end. At one point the audience watches Diana, Letoy, and Joyless as they watch Peregrine’s reactions to performers who in turn are acting out the fictional world of the Antipodes before him. Diana and Letoy actually comment on the quality of the acting, much like the real audience likely does. The flirtation between Diana and Letoy can even be considered a separate sort of play as well, since Diana and Letoy are acting out mutual attraction and a possible affair in order to cure Joyless of his jealousy. Joyless comments on their behavior just as Diana, Letoy, Peregrine, and the real audience comment on the actors before them, though these participants may or may not know the true nature of the performance. In this sense, one could even say that *The Antipodes* creates a play within a play within a play within a play. Furthermore, there is yet another layer of performance in the fact that while Diana believes Letoy is flirting with her only to help her and the doctor to cure Joyless, he actually has further goals and secrets of his own. Pretending to be an unknown lord when he is really the father that Diana has never met, Letoy thus acts out his own scene of attraction in order to test Diana’s fidelity for his personal purposes. If this layer of acting is considered yet another separate play, with Diana as the unknowing audience, then *The Antipodes* forms no less than five separate levels of plays layered inside of one other.

By containing so many plays within itself *The Antipodes* is able to further meditate on its own theatric form. The effect is similar to that on the ceiling of the Banqueting hall, where nine different paintings are arranged together to create one whole picture in repeating forms (Appendix 6), just as many separate mini-plays make up *The Antipodes*. This raises questions about the very nature of a piece of art or literature, leading us to consider what it is that forms a complete and independent image or play. Each of Rubens's individual panels or Brome's mini-plays is in some sense a form unto itself, but none of them were meant to stand alone. Rather, they form parts of a greater system or story involving the ceiling or larger play as a whole. Thus the viewer or audience is led to consider what actually defines and composes these forms at all, since apparently paintings and plays are not necessarily pieces unto themselves.

The play-within-a-play system in *The Antipodes* also involves the self-reflection of *Venus at a Mirror*. In *Venus at a Mirror* we as the viewer are able to see Venus examining herself in a separate reflected image within the main painting, both of which we in turn examine ourselves. Likewise but on many more levels, the audience of *The Antipodes* is at one point left to watch Joyless watch Diana flirt with Letoy pretending to be someone he is not, all while watching Peregrine watch trained actors. As well as raising the same questions about the nature of an image or play, this also calls to mind the sort of self-conscious contemplation and "self-regarding temper" that Braider describes as common to Baroque art and literature (8). The plays within themselves in *The Antipodes* thus are important not only for the way that they form parts of a whole but also for the way that they enable nested self-consideration.

Such examination of art's existence by art itself entails a certain self-conscious consideration of form, since for a play or painting truly to investigate itself naturally entails highlighting its own existence as a play or painting (as in plays within plays or framed, painted images within paintings). Interestingly, this conscious acknowledgement of art form as apparent within a work sharply contrasts with dominant notions of the Renaissance. Renaissance artists believed that the form of a painting should actually be as unnoticeable or even invisible as possible. They argued that the ideal painting should appear just like a window through which the viewer might peer, so that despite its flat surface it appears just like reality. Such ideals are directly violated within Rubens's Whitehall paintings. The framing of several paintings into one whole image makes it impossible to imagine all of the images together as panes of glass since, for example, James I's reign and his ascent into heaven could not in actuality be visible right next to each other, given that he is young and alive in one and dead in the other. Yet on the Whitehall ceiling they hang neatly juxtaposed, nested between numerous playful cherubs and the allegorical images of Temperance and Bounty. Rather than behaving like a window, this framing of pictures within pictures thus calls attention to the techniques of the form itself, forcing the viewer to see the painted images as the created art that they actually are.

At the tail end of the sixteenth century, William Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like*

It that

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts. (II.vii.)

In so doing, Shakespeare identifies his actors with his audience and the play on stage with the reality around it (much like Renaissance painters associated their own art with reality). He calls attention to the dramatic form at hand and then dismisses it, arguing that the form itself is only a lifelike version of reality and that the audience is not truly different from the actors on stage. On the other hand, when Richard Brome discusses and portrays the form of a play within *The Antipodes* it is more the staged audience than the actors with which Brome's real audience is left to identify. Rather than being compared to normal people, the actor-characters within *The Antipodes* are considered to possess great and unusual skills of illusion. Letoy refers to them as "perfect" and able to move "mirth in me 'bove all the rest" (33). Diana applauds the ability of Byplay to act extemporaneously as a great and uncommon talent. There is some level of fluidity between actor and audience, since characters such as Peregrine, Letoy, and Diana all seem to take both roles, though sometimes unknowingly. However, the real audience is always left in its position as an audience, because the audiences on stage never allow them the opportunity to forget that this is a play. Thus, while Brome is clearly investigating the nature of acting and illusion within *The Antipodes*, the goal does not seem to be achieving this illusion so well that the audience forgets that it is witnessing a fictional drama. Rather, Brome's interest is in a self-conscious, open examination of what it actually is to be a play.

Hence it seems ironic that it was during this period rather than the High Renaissance that religious groups like the Puritans gained influence and protested against the supposedly sinful illusion of theatre and art. While these Baroque works by Brome and Rubens seem to have been more self-consciously involved with illusion than art and

literature had been during the Renaissance, they were less preoccupied with actually executing this illusion so as to make the viewer unable to distinguish fiction from reality. For example, although *Venus at the Mirror* displays a certain focus on illusion, the painting does not seem so much to trick us as viewers as to intrigue us. If we were intended to take the illusion as truth, the strange juxtaposition of a happy reflection from a despondent face would likely not be so stark. Indeed, if anyone is caught in the illusion of this impossible mirror, it is not the viewer but the attendant cherub and servant within the painting, who look at Venus and her reflection with apparent admiration and wonder. Thus Rubens, like Brome, does not attempt to mislead his audience but rather to encourage them to consider what it is to be misled, a question that was clearly of immense cultural importance in their day of violent religious strife over ideas of truth and falsehood.

Of course, Brome and Rubens did work in entirely different forms, and hence their ways of displaying these common motifs were naturally somewhat different. There is always a certain difficulty in comparing such different creative forms as literature and painting. However, the same self-conscious consideration about the nature of art can be seen repeatedly in their open use of tools of illusion and in their nested self-images, whether through mirrors, paintings in paintings, or plays within plays. Furthermore, a comparison of these different forms seems particularly appropriate to the Baroque, which was known for its spectacular combinations of different artistic media. The Banqueting House is a prime example as one great artistic building where architecture, painting, and gilded sculpture were all built seamlessly into a single space that in turn was intended to host elaborate masques featuring poetry, acting, dance, music, intricate costume design,

and ornate sets all at once. Indeed, this combination of different artistic methods could be considered yet another contemplation of form, exploring the dividing lines between different artistic media.

Hence one can appropriately say that Brome's *The Antipodes* and Rubens's Whitehall paintings, as well as Rubens's *Venus at the Mirror*, all share a similar concern for the self-reflective abilities of framing and illusion, which Braider describes as common to the Baroque period in general. However, this shared theme is more than just an interest that Brome and Rubens had in common. It had deep political and social implications relating to the cultural conflicts and preoccupations of this pre-Civil War era, when Catholics and Anglicans were investigating the creation of new illusions in art while Puritans were rejecting art altogether as sinful falsehood. Furthermore, by so self-consciously reflecting on their own works, Brome and Rubens were exploring questions about what actually makes a play a play or a painting a painting. And as the Banqueting Hall was erected, a space combining nearly every artistic form into one arena, even the lines between painting and drama might have been becoming slightly blurry. Certainly, Inigo Jones was combining them both with the set design and poetry placed together in his court masques. Through their self-reflection on the nature of framing and illusion, Brome and Rubens were exploring all of this, moving toward a deep and self-conscious understanding of the intrinsic nature, meaning, and value of art.

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