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## Main content

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One of the principal debates swirling through the field of theater studies these days is the Evidence vs. Theory debate. The quarrel centers on the question of whether past or present theatrical activity is best understood by employing the traditional tools of the historian, or whether the more new-fangled instruments of the theorist are more likely to produce an enlightening result. One example should suffice: at a recent national meeting of theater scholars, seminar members considered at some length whether or not the practice of "counting the nails" in a nineteenth-century stage setting represented an outdated kind of mindless pedantry that ignored theoretical readings of the theatrical past, or whether it constituted sound historical process that could lead to important revelations about artistic production. The problem, of course, is that both sides may be right, depending on the uses to which, and the rigor with which, they apply either "historical" or "theoretical" approaches to the study of theater. Perhaps even more importantly, writers on both sides of the debate need to avoid the trap of "merely theoretical" or "merely historical" scholarship. The lessons of recent publication have taught us that the best work is produced by those who shun neither strategy, but rather seek to combine the two.

A recent book about (what used to be called) Renaissance England, Gail Kern Paster's *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*, is an unequivocal example of how historical detail and theoretical sophistication intermesh to produce astounding scholarship. The book examines textual representations of largely taboo biological processes, as well as fluids, solids, and other (almost) unspeakable products of our material existence. It is divided largely by bodily function. The first chapter, "Leaky Vessels: The Incontinent Women of City Comedy," chiefly examines scenes from Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and Middleton's *Chaste Maid in Cheapside* in order to understand how Early Modern discourse "construct[ed] the female body as effluent, overproductive, out of control" (21). Chapter 2, entitled "Laudable Blood: Bleeding, Difference, and Humoral Embarrassment" probes in detail the surviving (but perhaps no longer literally understood) notion that "blood in the humoral body, differing from itself in purity and refinement, encodes cultural narratives of engenderment" (21). The third chapter focuses on the prevalent medical practice of the "alimentary purge," and on what Paster calls the "Scatological Imperatives of Comedy." Finally, chapters four and five analyze a range of "reproductive embarrassments" focusing on representations of sexual bodily function, through to the critical developmental passages from birth to nursing to the weaning of children.

Paying tribute to Mary Douglas's distinction between the social and physical body, Paster writes that she wishes to complicate distinctions "between physical and social by theorizing a connection between the history of the outer body - physical and social, the body visible in different ways to self and other - and that of the inner body, the physical and social body perceived, experienced, and imaged from within" (3). She does this by investigating the "humoral body" of the...

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