Conclusion

As John Jeffries Martin argues in *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (2004), the Reformation was instrumental in the rise in the sixteenth century of a new ideal of sincerity that 'made the revealing of one's beliefs and convictions a matter of great urgency, even an ethical imperative'.[1] This imperative of sincerity is arguably not to be understood exclusively in terms of a burgeoning sense of individualism but also in the light of post-Reformation religious pluralism and its concomitant emphasis on confessional group identities. In an age of competing versions of Christianity, proclaiming the truth of the Gospel and taking sides in the great religious debates of the day gained unprecedented urgency. This imperative to be truthful manifested itself, in its most radical form, in martyrdom and the martyrological literature which it inspired on both sides of the confessional divide, but also in stern warnings against the dangers of outward conformity, or Nicodemism, as it was frequently called by Protestant theologians of the period. As many English preachers and theologians declared, Nicodemism was the sin against the holy Ghost that cannot be pardoned, or even a symptom of reprobation.[2] Being truthful was not only a matter of life and death; it was a matter of salvation and damnation. And yet, in post-Reformation Europe, dissimulation was as universally practised as it was condemned.

Religious dissimulation was firmly anchored in the Elizabethan and Jacobean life-world, ranging from clandestine religious lay movements, such as the spiritualist Family of Love, and Catholic conformists over members of the clergy, such as the many Marian priests who compromised with the Elizabethan settlement at the onset of her reign, to the highest social echelons and even Queen Elizabeth, the 'arch-Nicodemite of magisterial Protestantism'.[3] During the reign of her Catholic sister Mary,

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[1] Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* 38.   [2] Gunther, *Reformation Unbound* 103–4.
[3] MacCulloch, *Silence* 182.

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Elizabeth was, as William Camden puts it, 'gouerning her selfe as it were a ship in a stormy weather, heard diuine Seruice after the Romish Religion, and was often confessed, yea at the rigorous sollicitation of Cardinall Poole, professed her selfe for feare of death a Romish Catholicke'.[4] However, this is not how Elizabeth was usually remembered.

Those who were keen to celebrate the Queen after her death tended to drastically rewrite her conduct during her house arrest and imprisonment under Mary. The poet and prose writer Nicholas Breton, for instance, recounts in his 'Character of Elizabeth' how 'for her love to the word of god' she 'was persecuted by the devills of the world' and 'tost from piller to post, imprisoned, sought to be put to death, yea and disgraciouslie vsed even by them that were not worthy to serve her'.[5] As Breton claims, Elizabeth was suffering for the Protestant faith, and in this faith she never wavered: 'was shee not as she wrote herself semper eadem alwaies one? Zealous in one religion, believinge in one god, constant in one truth?'.[6] The Nicodemite Queen thus paradoxically became an icon of uncompromising Protestantism that was frequently held up as an unflattering mirror to her more ecumenically inclined successor. This view of Elizabeth was also perpetrated in dramatic renderings of her life and reign in the years following her death.[7] In Thomas Heywood's biographical history play *1 If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1605), which dramatises Elizabeth's imprisonment during her sister's reign, the future monarch fully expects to die '[a] Virgine and a Martyr both' (l. 342) and narrowly escapes this fate only through supernatural intervention. In a dumbshow, two angels miraculously drive back a friar, who is apparently charged by the notorious persecutor Stephen Gardiner to kill the princess in her sleep, and place an English Bible into her hands (ll. 1048–67). In Heywood's play, Elizabeth is not a Nicodemite but a virtual martyr, whose heroic death is forestalled only by divine providence. Rather than admitting, let alone justifying, Elizabeth's conformity as a prudent, or at least excusable, course of action under political duress, Heywood celebrates the Queen's alleged constancy in her Protestant faith.

The aim of this book has been to explore the political and religious pressures that could produce such a distortion of history and the ways in which these pressures shaped early modern drama. The discrepancy between the widespread condemnation of religious dissimulation and its equally widespread practice reveals a fundamental tension in early

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[4] Camden 9.   [5] Breton 5.   [6] Ibid.
[7] For Elizabeth's dramatic afterlife, see Dobson and Watson 43–78.

modern religious life that had a counterpart in the theatre, which was wrestling with similar contradictions. While dissimulation was the foundation of the theatre, its legitimacy was by no means taken for granted, neither by the critics of the theatre nor by its practitioners, and was often viewed with deep suspicion and ambivalence. As I have argued in this book, debates on the legitimacy of theatrical dissimulation were inextricably bound up with debates on religious dissimulation. Both discourses were informed by the same questions concerning the relationship between inwardness and outwardness, idolatry, spiritual and moral pollution, and the Pauline theology of things indifferent. When religious dissimulation was represented on stage, it did not only bring one of the most pressing ethical dilemmas of the period to the forefront. In staging religious dissimulation, the theatre also inevitably addressed its own moral and religious status.

In *Mixed Faith and Shared Feeling: Theater in Post-Reformation London* (2018), Musa Gurnis has shown that the professional stage in early modern London was capable of giving voice to a multitude of confessional perspectives. The six case studies of this book are attuned to this confessional heterogeneity of the Elizabethan and Jacobean commercial stage and further suggest that this religious diversity is also reflected in a wide variety of conceptions of theatricality that can be related to different attitudes towards religious nonconformity and dissimulation, respectively. In short, even though contemporaries perceived close connections between theatrical and religious dissimulation, the theatre did not imply one particular stance towards religious dissimulation but was a highly malleable medium that could be put to the service of many different religio-political agendas.

As I have argued in my reading of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays in Chapter 2, the theatre could be aligned with the Elizabethan policy of outward conformity, that is, the Queen's alleged refusal to sound the depths of her subjects' conscience. Shakespeare's Falstaff, in contrast to his historical model the Lollard martyr John Oldcastle, not only embodies the political quietism and willingness to dissemble that was expected from religious dissenters under Queen Elizabeth but also revalues dissimulation both as a life-giving principle and as *raison d'être* of the theatre. With his consistent refusal to distinguish between being and seeming, between life and mimesis, Falstaff is fashioned as an anti-martyr as well as an embodiment of theatricality, who refuses to privilege sincerity over dissimulation and highlights how the two are constantly interwoven.

However, while Jeffrey Knapp has suggested that there was a natural alliance between the theatre and the Elizabethan policy of outward conformity, it is worth pointing out that the stage could also be a vehicle for a Puritan nonconformist agenda.[8] As I have shown in Chapter 3, *1 Sir John Oldcastle* takes issue with Shakespeare's rewriting of Oldcastle and not only restores the proto-Protestant martyr to his former glory but also refashions him as a model for Elizabethan Puritan dissent. However, the play betrays substantial unease with dissimulation, which is projected on the play's Catholic villains, while Oldcastle is largely stripped of Falstaff's playful theatricality. Oldcastle too dissembles, but when he does so in order to spy on a conspiracy in the making, his aim is not to conceal but to reveal treason. The same rationale underlies the play's vision of theatricality. The self-conscious theatricality of the play's villains is not simply to be understood as an indictment of the theatre as the breeding ground of dangerous dissimulation; it also highlights the theatre's ability to expose dissimulation and to instruct audiences not to trust appearances.

Catholic sensibilities, too, continued to be expressed on the commercial stage, as has been amply demonstrated by scholarship under the auspices of the so-called religious turn. Shakespeare, for instance, has been credited with an incarnational aesthetic that survived Protestant iconoclasm or a profound engagement with the sacrament of confession in his late plays.[9] However, the relationship between Catholicism and theatricality was not simply a matter of sacramental nostalgia or theatrical appropriation of pre-Reformation rituals and modes of representation. In Chapter 4, I have read *Sir Thomas More* and its dramatisation of More's political downfall in the light of the moral dilemmas of Elizabethan Catholics, who wished to keep their faith to themselves as loyal subjects but were forced to declare themselves vis-à-vis a Protestant state that regarded Catholic secrecy with deep suspicion. Silence, as a middle ground between sincerity and deception, became an increasingly untenable position at a time when the political stakes of religious dissent were raised by fears of a foreign invasion and assassination plots. Intriguingly, the play explores the seemingly paradoxical relationship between a recusant ethos of martyrdom and theatricality in a protagonist who is a passionate role-player but simultaneously refuses to lie about his most cherished beliefs and convictions. As the play suggests in its portrayal of More's martyrdom, which is coded in

[8] Compare with Knapp.
[9] See, for example, Beckwith; Groves, *Texts and Traditions*, especially ch. 2.

explicitly theatrical terms, nonconformity can be just as profoundly performative as religious dissimulation.

However, it would be misleading to assume that Catholic recusants consistently viewed the theatre more favourably than Puritan nonconformists. Ben Jonson's Roman tragedy *Sejanus His Fall*, which I have discussed in Chapter 5, is a case in point. What Jonson's play shares with *Sir Thomas More* is a critique of late Elizabethan attempts to access the inwardness of Catholic dissenters. This critique, however, is translated back into the factional conflicts of the early Roman Empire. At least in this classical setting, Jonson seems less concerned with theological arguments about dissimulation than with neo-Stoicist conceptions of selfhood as a model for the split between inward and outward self which persecution forced on dissenters such as Jonson himself, who had adopted the Catholic faith in the late 1590s. That being said, Jonson's play is sceptical about dissimulation, which is portrayed not only as an instrument of self-protection in the treacherous world of the early Roman Empire but also as a weapon in the hands of the tyrannical emperor Tiberius and his ill-fated favourite Sejanus. Even more, their political style is portrayed as deeply theatrical and condemned as such in the play – in contrast to *Sir Thomas More*, where theatrical self-dramatisation is the dissenter's privilege. *Sejanus* is thus indicative of Jonson's notorious scruples concerning theatrical representation. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that these scruples do not necessarily imply an unconditional ethos of sincerity on the part of persecuted dissenters. Jonson's views on sincerity thus gain considerably in complexity and ambivalence when his well-known views on theatricality are juxtaposed with his attitude towards religious dissimulation.

I have argued in Chapter 3 on *1 John Oldcastle* that concerns about dissimulation could be mitigated by flaunting the theatre's ability to expose and analyse dissimulation with a meta-theatrical insistence on its own status as mere representation. This ethos of exposure could also reinforce government propaganda *against* religious dissenters, as I have illustrated with my reading of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* in Chapter 6. In the 1580s and 1590s, the Elizabethan government intensified its attempts to ferret out the treasonous designs of supposedly dissembling Catholics and Puritans alike. Dramatists such as Marlowe followed suit by portraying religious dissenters as deliberately theatrical characters and by showcasing the theatre's ability to reveal, at least on stage, the dangerous secrets of religious dissenters. Thus, a number of Marlowe's

innovative dramatic techniques of disclosure, such as his sophisticated use of audience address in soliloquies and asides or his contribution to the character type of the stage Machiavel, can be related to an obsessive fascination with the supposedly subversive dissimulation of religious dissenters and a desire to render transparent their hidden iniquity.

Finally, the theatre could also be considered an ally in the project of establishing confessional unity in more inclusive ways, as is suggested by Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, written after his re-conversion to the Church of England. Jonson's comedy mostly sidesteps any sensationalist claims to expose the inward self of religious dissenters and suggests that the age of bloody persecution is over. Rather than isolating and exposing religious dissemblers, Jonson's comic dramaturgy tends towards inclusion. Nonetheless, the play retains an intolerant dimension insofar as it devalues principled dissent as sectarian delusion. In addition, the social assimilation of the Puritan Busy-Zeal-of-the-Land at the play's eponymous fair, which culminates in his conversion during a puppet play, suggests that the theatre might ultimately also function as an institution that erases differences by transforming its spectators and undermining their nonconformist identities against their will.

In the light of such diverse approaches to religious dissent and dissimulation, it is difficult to give a meaningful answer to the question of whether the early modern theatre generally promoted religious toleration and toleration for religious dissimulation, or whether it rather reinforced confessional prejudice and the rhetoric of hate and paranoia that was so prevalent in contemporary religious polemics. The theatre was not a single, homogeneous institution but a heterogeneous multiplicity of different playhouses, companies, patrons, playwrights, actors, and shareholders, who could differ significantly in their religious attachments, commercial interests, marketing strategies, and aesthetic preferences, so any generalising answer will inevitably be inadequate. That being said, it might nonetheless be worthwhile to attempt to take stock and consider the role of the theatre in early modern cultures of religious coexistence more generally.

On a spectrum from toleration to persecution, scholars such as Jeffrey Knapp, B. J. Sokol, and, most recently, Brian Walsh have tended to place the theatre rather on the tolerant side.[10] Walsh, for instance, states

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[10] Knapp; Sokol; Walsh.

that '[d]espite the many ways Puritans are mocked or generally "othered" on stage, in the end these plays that feature godly characters offer an integrationist rather than an exclusionary approach to the problem religious dissenters posed for English society'.[11] While such integration is often precarious, Walsh nonetheless concludes that 'the clash of intra-Christian religious others that was intermittently staged from the late 1590s through the middle Jacobean years tended to yield troubled comedy and tragio-comedy, rather than tragedy'.[12] However, Walsh's observations also raise questions concerning the role of generic expectations and conventions in shaping the representation of religious conflict.

This book covers a similar time period as Walsh's *Unsettled Toleration* but yields a darker picture of the theatre's representation of religious conflict, which is, among other things, a consequence of its somewhat different generic focus. Puritans, for instance, were mocked not only as deluded but ultimately harmless hypocrites in comedies from the late 1590s onwards. Anti-Puritan satire made its debut on stage earlier than that, in history plays such as Marlowe's *Edward II* or generic hybrids such as *The Jew of Malta*, which represent Puritanism as a far more serious threat to the social and political order. While the stage Puritan of later comedies is frequently reconciled to society at large, albeit often in an uneasy truce, the same does not hold true for the stage Machiavel of the early 1590s, who could serve as a vehicle for a more vicious type of anti-Puritan satire than the comparably harmless stage Puritan.

Even in comedy, the social integration of Puritans, if at all successful, may come at the cost of their confessional identity, as is the case with Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. After his 'conversion', the otherwise so loquacious Busy falls entirely silent. Can one really speak of toleration if its precondition is that dissenters give up their distinct identity? The question poses itself with even greater urgency in a play like Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, which is classified as a comedy in the First Folio and characterised as a 'comicall History' in Q1 (A2r), but strains the principle of comic inclusion to the breaking point. Like Busy, Shylock remains silent after his conversion for the rest of the play, which not only raises obvious doubts about Shylock's commitment to his new faith but also makes clear that the inclusive impetus of comedy is by no means

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[11] Walsh 11.   [12] Ibid. 190.

inherently tolerant, especially if we conceive of toleration as an acceptance of real diversity.

It is fundamentally problematic to consider social integration, by default, as the touchstone of successful toleration. Imposing such an ideal of communality on dissenters themselves is liable to lead to anachronistic distortions. Catholic and Protestant minorities alike often placed great importance on limiting social contact with those whom they perceived as heretics and were keen to dramatise their difference from them. A number of plays from the period, which give voice to Puritan or Catholic rather than establishment perspectives on religious conflict, may not be quite so radical in their emphasis on social segregation, but are still far from propagating social integration. The protagonists of plays such as *1 Oldcastle* and *Sir Thomas More* yearn, above all, to follow the dictates of their conscience. They may be at pains to assert the compatibility of their religious dissent with political loyalty, but otherwise do not seem to concern themselves greatly with social acceptance. *1 Oldcastle* is at best ambivalent about the ideal of good fellowship, which according to Knapp undergirded the theatre's inclusive outlook.[13] The disgraced protagonist of *Sir Thomas More* even ends up cherishing his social isolation and detachment from the political world, in which he previously moved with such ease and grace. If anything, social and ecclesiastical integration was not the aim of religious dissenters, but the aim of the Established Church, as formulated by Richard Hooker, who insisted that 'it is and must be the Churches care that all maie in outward conformitie be one'[14] and that dissenters should not be able 'to winde them selves out of law and to continewe the same they were'.[15] Hence, the representation and resolution of religious conflict in the register of comedy is by no means necessarily an expression of a tolerant mindset. On the contrary, comedies such as *Bartholomew Fair* rather reflect the policies of coercive inclusion that guided much of Elizabethan and Jacobean ecclesiastical politics.

Nonetheless, the theatre could also lower the potential for conflict in religious difference with meta-theatrical gestures that de-emphasised moral and theological absolutes and instead highlighted the deliberate artificiality and entertainment value of the theatre's modes of representation. In doing so, the theatre could translate religious and political tensions into aesthetic energy, as is suggested with helpful clarity in the

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[13] Knapp 23–57.   [14] Hooker 2:352.   [15] Ibid. 2:353.

exchange between Cassius and Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* after the assassination of the supposed tyrant:

CASSIUS. … How many ages hence
　　Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
　　In states unborn and accents yet unknown?
BRUTUS. How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport
　　That now on Pompey's basis lies along,
　　No worthier than dust?   (3.1.111–16)

A similar, at least partial transformation of politics into aesthetics, of bloody violence into entertaining 'sport', is arguably also at work in the transformation of Oldcastle into Falstaff. In Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, the acrimonious historiographical debate about Oldcastle and his martyrdom or dissimulation, respectively, which polarised Catholics, conformists, and Puritans throughout the sixteenth century, is not polemically amplified through the popular medium of the theatre but primarily exploited as raw material for theatrical illusion and entertainment. The theatre could thus be an agent of trivialisation that temporarily unified confessionally heterogenous audiences in a shared aesthetic experience in London's bourgeoning entertainment industry and consumer culture.[16]

　　To be clear, the reconciliatory potential of such aesthetic experiences should not be overstated when considering, for instance, the ease with which Marlowe's plays could be instrumentalised in xenophobic fantasies of massacring continental fellow-Protestants who had fled from persecution in their homeland. Jonson, too, seems deeply suspicious of the ways in which the theatre can stir its audiences to frenetic excitement and even violence, as is suggested by the deliberately theatrical terms in which the dismemberment of Sejanus at the hands of a delirious mob is reported in *Sejanus His Fall*. Nonetheless, Jonson is heavily invested in a trivialisation of religious conflict in a self-consciously meta-theatrical register in *Bartholomew Fair*. In Jonson's comedy, the Gunpowder Plot or the destruction of Jerusalem do not stand for the looming spectre of murderous religious violence, threatening to break out at any moment, but have been reduced to the subject matter of a puppet play. The Puritan Busy is not trying to take down the monarchy or the Church of England, but has chosen a more modest target, namely, the damnable trade of the puppet theatre.

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[16] On the potentially reconciliatory aspects of such theatrical communities, see Sterret, especially ch. 7.

Jonson also exploits the theatrical nature of Puritanism itself when he playfully likens alleged Puritan shibboleths to the mechanics of theatrical representation in the debate on the theatre between Busy and the puppet Dionysius. Just as Puritans allegedly claimed to be merely a mouthpiece for divine inspiration, puppets do not speak for themselves, and just as Puritans insisted on their Christian liberty that transcends secular social and biological categories, the puppets are equally unmoored from such restrictive markers of identity as gender, as Dionysius demonstrates by lifting its garments. Although I have put a spotlight on the coercive and authoritarian aspects of the play, Jonson ultimately does something similar in *Bartholomew Fair* to what Shakespeare does with Falstaff, when he repeatedly exploits religio-political conflicts and debates for theatrical purposes. That is to say, he reconsiders Puritanism from an aesthetic point of view and acknowledges, at least for a fragile moment, its mimetic kinship with the theatre and the extent to which his own dramatic art is animated by the religious and political tensions for which Puritans came to stand in a culture that simultaneously condemned and practised dissimulation with such high stakes. Jonson is certainly keener than Shakespeare to break the spell again by insisting on a fundamental opposition between Puritanism and the theatre and by projecting unease with dissimulation on his godly scapegoats, but the theatrical vitality of his anti-Puritan satire is always liable to subvert this opposition.

The process which I am describing here may recall Stephen Greenblatt's circulation of social energy, an attempt to explain how the early modern theatre harnessed the tensions of its ideological contexts and material circumstances for its enduring aesthetic appeal.[17] However, there are also differences. With regard to religion, Greenblatt famously argues in his essay on 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', the transformation effected by the stage was primarily one of ontological erosion, an 'emptying out' of faith.[18] According to Greenblatt, the theatrical representation of religious ritual would have been perceived by the English Protestant establishment as an 'external and trivialized staging of what should be deeply inward; the tawdry triumph of spectacle over reason; the evacuation of the divine presence from religious mystery, leaving only vivid but empty ceremonies; the transformation of faith into bad faith'.[19] The common New Historicist assumption that the early modern theatre was therefore by and large a secular or secularising institution has been widely

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[17] See Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, especially ch. 1.   [18] Ibid. ch. 4.   [19] Ibid. 113.

discussed and challenged over the last two decades.[20] However, I take issue not so much with the question of whether the theatre could function as a medium of religious experience, or whether it allowed for the presence of the sacred on stage in any meaningful way, but rather with the imperative of sincerity that Greenblatt takes for granted, the assumption that, for the early moderns, 'the difference between true and false religion is the presence of theater'.[21]

In a culture that was as deeply saturated with religious dissimulation as that of early modern England, Greenblatt's claim that '[p]erformance kills belief' is to be qualified.[22] '[B]ad faith', as characterised by inward disengagement and 'empty ceremonies',[23] was not necessarily a symptom of an incipient process of secularisation. It was a consequence of intolerance, a practice adopted by Catholics as well as radical Protestants who were not free to practise their faith openly but were forced to conform to a state-imposed religion. Acknowledging the omnipresence of such religious dissimulation in early modern religious life yields fresh perspectives on the political, ethical, and religious implications of staging faith, beyond the frequently rehearsed scholarly distinction between the supposedly secularising effect of theatrical illusion on the one hand and the more recent insistence on the continued presence of the sacred on stage on the other.

This is not to say that the theatre was an institution that was by default tolerant of religious dissent and religious dissimulation. My point is rather that the early modern stage could engage in complex and manifold cultural transactions that ran the whole gamut of contemporary attitudes towards religious dissent and dissimulation. So much has become evident even from a relatively circumscribed analysis of commercial drama from c. 1590 to 1614, a period in which the Elizabethan settlement often looked unstable and seemed to be threatened by competing visions of religious reform. The theatre could thrive on paranoia about the secret inwardness of supposedly treasonous dissenters, but it could also align itself with the Elizabethan policy of outward conformity and even offer a sympathetic portrayal of the moral plight of Puritans as well as Catholics, who faced a choice between denying their faith or suffering adverse consequences for the sake of their conscience. In all these cases, however, the phenomenon of religious dissimulation stimulated self-reflection on the nature of theatrical representation and its political and religious significance.

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[20] For a programmatic challenge to the secularisation thesis, see Jackson and Marotti.
[21] Greenblatt 126.   [22] Ibid. 109.   [23] Ibid. 113.

The theatre's kinship with one of the most controversial practices in the religious life-world of early modern England thus means that any account of early modern theatricality and the controversies surrounding it will profit from situating the theatre in a religious culture that forced many of its members to dissemble their true beliefs. By the same token, any account of religious dissimulation in early modern England will be enriched by considering the theatre's unceasing reflections on what it means to pretend to be someone else.