CHAPTER 7

Rhetoric against the Theatre and Theatre by Means of Rhetoric in John Chrysostom

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As into a furnace, the devil throws the city into the theatre.¹

It is generally known that the polemic against spectacles plays a leading role in John Chrysostom’s works, to such an extent that it can be regarded as a cornerstone of his preaching:² this tendency, however, is linked with another, namely his marked propensity to theatrical rhetoric. The fact that he keeps evoking themes and images of the theatre in his speeches makes this plainly evident, while, among other things, he frequently employs motives, examples, and modes of expression that can in different ways be traced back to the very world of spectacles that he rejects and condemns.³ His rhetorical production

¹ John Chrysostom, De paenitentia homiliae, 6,1 (PG 49, 315): Καθάπερ γὰρ εἰς κάμινόν τινα εἰς τὸ θέατρον τὴν πόλιν ἐμβαλὼν ὁ διάβολος ...  
² To thoroughly deal with the topic, and list of references, see Lugaresi (2008: 695–812), which supplies the interpretative framework within which this essay is to be placed. To the critical literature there quoted, it is now possible to add Jacob (2010), the result of research work conducted in the early 90’s, published posthumously many years after the author’s premature demise in 1996.  
³ Recent historiography seems by now to share the emphasis on this aspect of Chrysostom’s rhetoric, at least starting from Leyerle’s book, that pointed out how (Leyerle 2001: 206) “the use of theatrical imagery was a powerful polemical strategy” in his fight against the so-called spiritual marriage (i.e. male and female ascetics living together). Leyerle affirms that (2001: 208–209) “Chrysostom captures the vigor of spoken word by his sustained reliance on theatrical tropes and images. He refutes the performance of the couples with a performance of his own”. From that point of view, one exceeds the statement—that can be shared—with which Miles concludes his article (2003: 114–115): “The theatrical imagery used by John emerges from this survey as a startling indicator of the extent to which the Church fathers naturally turned to the cultural icons of the classical, non-Christian past in order to communicate
appears therefore to express a way of thinking radically opposed to all kinds of theatrical performance in forms that often lean towards “theatricality”. However, there is no contradiction between ideological content and communicative form, since both contribute, wholly in accordance with the author’s cast of mind, toward the attainment of a well-defined cultural and pastoral goal.

This article aims at establishing a clear picture of the connection between the fight against spectacles as a fundamental theological-ethical theme in

with their own congregations”. Hartney (2004: 49–50) speaks of “a sense of Church preaching as an entertainment medium on the part of the Christian laity”, which leads preachers like Chrysostom to adopt “the style of oratory best calculated to interest and entertain the secular audience” that entails, among other things, the use of “vivid imagery”. He goes as far as to define what Chrysostom prepares for his audience (2004: 140) “a kind of microcosmic theatre, contained within a sermon”. Piccaluga (2005: 482) speaks of an “assunzione, per lo meno sul piano formale e stilistico, da parte dell’omileta, di quella stessa teatralità che continua, per altro, a combattere tenacemente in ambito dottrinario”. In spite of the title, Permar Smith’s analysis (2007: 65–79), besides being fairly superficial, does not treat this aspect. Finally, see Rylaarsdam (2014: 228–269) on the visualization of images in Chrysostom’s homiletic technique.

4 Defining theatricality, as generally known, is a complex and somehow evasive task, if we recognize with Burns (1972: 13) that from the socio-cultural perspective “Theatricality is not [...] a behaviour or expression, but attaches to any kind of behaviour perceived and interpreted by others and described (mentally or explicitly) in theatrical terms”. More recently, the editors of an important collection of essays on this subject do agree that it is impossible to provide a univocal definition and declare instead their intention (Davis-Postlewait 2003: 3) “to investigate the wide range of possible applications (and misapplications)” of the concept. For a comprehensive overview and a specific bibliography, see the monographic issue (98–99) of SubStance (31) 2002, edited by Feral. In the latest decades the concept of theatricality has been widely and in different ways applied in the study of the Hellenistic-Roman and late antique world: suffice it to recall here Bartsch (1994), the articles by Slater (1995) and Chaniotis (1997) and more recently the book by Samellas (2010: 19–66). In the context of this article the term is not used so much to refer to the performative dimension (actio) of Chrysostom’s oratory, as in connection with his tendency to produce virtual performances by means of rhetoric (often employing materials from the world of spectacles), conceived to be set in motion by his listeners on their “interior stage”. That way, in the orator’s intention, they become spectators-interpreters in a kind of mental theatre, whose success crucially depends also on the use of elements of theatre technique in his performance. But here we merely touch on that aspect. About the attention directed by Chrysostom and other fourth century Church fathers toward the performative dimension of rhetoric and their resumption of precepts concerning the actio, also in order to stress the ascetic and doctrinal distance between orthodox “good bishops” and heretical or pagan “bad teachers”, who preach in a basely theatrical way, see Quiroga Puertas (2013c).