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## *Commentators, Mediators, Subversives Within and Without John Bale's Nonconformist Play World*

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**T**HE AGON of good and evil that lies at the centre of John Bale's nonconformist plays is presented in the same form in his treatises and pamphlets: as an attack on the religious orders, which he saw as the principal breeding grounds of religious deviancy. His quarrel was with the admissibility of the vow, and with the Roman Catholics' fondness for the accoutrements of the traditional religion. The ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church were considered to be man-made observances intended to conceal the pure unmediated word of God that the Bible conveys. Although written within the morality convention and on religious subjects, Bale's plays are more sectarian than religious. A zealous, militant theologian, he produced a drama whose conscious standards are overwhelmingly homiletic, in which an ardent hate of popery, portrayed through the satiric jesting of his stage villains, is countered by the earnest nonconformist declarations of his virtuous figures. The nonconformists considered the world of play to be a barrier between the believer and his God. Although Bale overcame the nonconformist reluctance to write stage plays, anxiety about the dangers of theatrical representation can still be detected in his drama.

This paper will focus upon what may be considered as John Bale's ambivalent attitude towards the theatre: the dramaturgist himself can be seen to be an insider of the theatrical community who at the same time has reservations about the propriety of theatrical representation. Fears that in the heat of performance the audience might mistake the dramatic world for the spiritual world it figured haunted his nonconformist mind, and pressure from nonconformist outsiders undermines the play world he creates. An examination of the way in which commentators, mediators and subversives function inside and outside *A comedy concerninge thre lawes, of nature, Moses, and Christ, corrupted by the sodomytes, pharysees and papystes* (1538; hereafter *Three Laws*) will reveal how the Reformer was enabled to overcome his Lollard-tainted reservations about the drama in order to exploit its potential for religious and political propaganda.

It is useful to be reminded of the fact that John Bale (1495–1563) was formed by traditional religion and spent more than twenty-five years as a Carmelite friar until his conversion to the reformed view in the 1530s. When he looks back on his youthful days as a votary, he is full of resentment and anger. His own published account of his conversion in his 1557 *Catalogus* reveals the grudge he bore against clerical life. The following entry explains, in part, his viciously satirical stance:

I, a boy of twelve years, was thrust by my parents, who were both weighed down by numerous offspring and deluded by the tricks of pseudo-prophets, into the abyss of the Carmelite order in the city of Norwich. . . . There and at Cambridge I wandered in complete barbarism of scholarship and blindness of mind, having neither mentor nor Maecenas: until, with the word of God shining forth, the churches began to be recalled to the purest springs of true theology. But in that splendour of the rise of the new Jerusalem, called not by monk or by priest but by the distinguished Lord Wentworth, as though by that Centurion who said that Christ was the Son of God, and earnestly aroused, I saw and acknowledged my deformity for the first time. . . . And lest henceforward in any way I might be a creature of so bestial a nature I took the faithful Dorothy to wife, listening attentively to this divine saying: let him who cannot be continent marry. (trans. Peter Happé; *Complete Plays*, 1: 147)

Here we see Bale describing his personal conversion as a shift from monastic scholasticism (“the barbarism of scholarship”) to the new learning, a change that is motivated by the secular patron of humanist learning, Lord Wentworth, and not by any spiritual revelation mediated “by monk or priest”. At the same time, it will be noticed, Bale brings up the subject of his own incontinent sexuality, which he made innocuous by marrying the “faithful Dorothy”. Bale places in a problematic nexus sexual impropriety, the English Reformation, the new learn-

ing and patronage, all of which are dramatised in his plays, pamphlets and own personal narrative.

Visibly emerging in the work of Bale and other Tudor nonconformists is an attempt to create a new type of Biblical play in opposition to the plays performed at the time: Roman Catholic miracles, mystery cycles, moralities and the more secular interludes. Using the drama, and dramatic discourse in his pamphlets, Bale strove to demolish previous views about sacred history through satire and iconoclasm, as well as to assign new meaning to, and impose a new shape on, ecclesiastical, liturgical and dramatic tradition. Bale's in-depth knowledge of traditional religion enabled him to construct a mirror image of what he rejected. Out of a system of oppositional differences, a new system was evolved which defined aspects of the traditional truth as heresy and elements previously considered heresy as truth. What is new for the drama is the identification of traditional religion itself with the devil, the enemy of Christ and of Christ's followers. In all of Bale's five extant plays, the Roman Catholic clergy are presented as players within the context of a play. This conscious use of theatricality to parody the abuses of Catholic observance masks the deeper anxiety he shared with Lollard predecessors about the use of drama for theological ends.

Such anxiety tended to cluster around the experience of the cycle plays: the transfixion of the spiritual imagination in a realm of unsanctified symbols, the re-enactment in public of spiritually significant events which tended to demystify the unfathomable deity. As Ritchie D. Kendall has pointed out in a stimulating analysis of the poetics of nonconformity, "The history of nonconformity is an attack on the fixed and solidified image, whether carved in stone, voiced in metaphor, or enacted upon a stage. In the fusion of a transcendent truth to its temporal signifier, the artist seduced his audience into loving the human over the divine" (p. 62).

The mystery plays were considered to be demonic creations because they had the power to transport their audience out of the present and into a timeless universe of the artist's creation, thereby blurring the distinction between the fictional and the historical. For the reformers, the reduction of the universal and mysterious to the human and familiar was anathema. For them, the only reliable vehicle for divine revelation was the Gospels—all the signs and symbols man needed were given by God in His book of truth. Simply by committing his heart to an understanding of God's words, man was assured of finding the path to the deity, unaided by unreliable human escorts, but aided by the Holy Ghost, the

only reliable guide. Other reasons why Corpus Christi plays came under attack included the fact that they promulgated the Catholic vision of sacred history and mixed moments of transcendent seriousness with comedy, thereby cheapening the divine message transmitted by Christ's redemptive sacrifice.

How could Bale make use of the dramatic medium when his Reformist convictions warned him of the dangers of compromising the authenticity of his spiritual vision? The Prologue of *Three Laws* is spoken by Bale himself, Baleus Prolocutor, the godly playwright who announces the play's theme and the happy outcome of the struggle between good and evil, represented here as a *psychomachia* between the true and the false church. At the outset, Bale intervenes to control the audience's reception of what unfolds on the stage. He explains the nature of law, with learned references to Cicero, and then outlines the first four acts of the play, in which the three laws are to be corrupted by Infidelitas, an incarnation of false doctrine. Bale stresses the fact that the role of God will be played by an actor and gives him his cue: "He is now in place" (35). But he then stresses the importance of the words the actor will speak, not that of the visual representation: "marke therfor what he sayth" (35). Deus Pater comes onto the stage and presents himself, insisting first of all on the purely abstract quality of his deity, and warning the audience against any carnal understanding of the entity impersonated: "I am Deus Pater, a substaunce invysyble, / All one with the Sonne and Holy Ghost in essence. / To Angell and Man I am incomprehensyble" (36-38).

Bale uses the convention of self-representation to drive a wedge between the actor and the God represented, in order to destroy any delusion on the part of the audience. The tensions are only partially dissipated, however, since a human actor necessarily evokes responses in human terms from the audience. One of the central aspects of the divine is its unseen nature, and a visual representation necessarily perverts its substance.

In the first act of the play, God reminds the laws of their true commission and then sends them all out to guide Mankind along the path of righteousness. The ensuing three acts demonstrate how each law in turn is corrupted by different, paired Vice figures. The pattern is repeated in each act: the law concerned describes his nature and function, and is then interrupted, ridiculed and driven out by Infidelitas, the chief Vice character. The Vices then devise new plans to pervert the law until the latter returns in a pitiful state to report on the misdeeds of his enemies and to appeal to the audience, and especially to the Christian prince (Henry VIII), to redress his wrongs.

We witness here a series of variations on a theme, the repetitions being devised in order to make the interpretation of the action unambiguous. This does not necessarily make for good drama, but it does enable Bale to hammer his message home, and, as we will see, through the framing drama of the virtuous characters, Bale is able to contain the negativity associated with the theatre within the demonic play of the Vices, who represent deceit, delusion and a world that rivals God's universe. The Vice characters are definitively driven out of Bale's purified drama at the close of the play.

Infidelitas, the chief of the Vice characters, as a demonic product of Roman Catholicism provides Bale with a convenient commentator on the drama. He also serves Bale's purpose as an incompetent, fraudulent commentator of Roman texts. In keeping with Bale's binary way of thinking, the virtuous characters are mouthpieces for Bale's reading of a reformed subtext in the Roman texts. His Virtues represent the competent, correct interpreters of the Scriptures, who uphold the true faith on the somewhat humourless, conceptual stage of Bale's sacred drama of nonconformity.

As in the interludes and morality plays of the previous decades, the Vice figures are gamesome and readily display their evil nature; they constantly boast of their deceitful ways, and of their irreligious nature, thereby providing a commentary that enables Bale to paint the portraits of both churches, one in white, one in black.. His Vices differ from those of previous plays, in that their aggressiveness is motivated and in that they are identified as the minions of Antichrist. Evil now sits in the seat of Peter himself, and the true followers of Christ are exhorted to join in the struggle against the archenemy—the Roman Church, the Whore of Babylon, the Antichrist.

For details of the Protestant Antichrist myth, we can turn to Richard Brightwell's (that is to say, John Frith's) *A Pistle to the Christen Reader The Revelation of Antichrist* (1529) This polemic, based on Luther, fixed for the whole century the characteristics of the myth. Behind the outward show of piety of the Roman Catholic church, Frith says, are hidden corruption, idolatry and deceit. Rome's true nature lies in the abuses she fosters—greedy, lecherous clergy, multiple sacraments, auricular confession, the cult of saints, prayers for the dead, costly altars and vestments, pardons, privileges, and disputations.

*Three Laws* is steeped in the Antichrist myth, and the influence of the author of the biblical Revelation is also clearly present in Bale's impassioned rhetoric, which is studded with apocalyptic imagery. To St. John the Divine, pagan Rome-

Babylon was the great harlot drunk with the blood of saints. Under her rule, idolatry, immorality, false prophesy, and persecution were allowed to flourish. However, it was promised that the sufferings of the faithful would be short. The martyrdom of two witnesses to the truth would presage the final engagement, when God's archangel Michael would come, with the terrible rider on the pale horse, and cast the beast of Antichrist into the pit. The true prophets would be vindicated and Christ would claim the true church as His Bride. Echoes of this myth abound in *Three Laws*, testifying to the importance Bale accorded to the Revelation of St. John the Divine.<sup>1</sup>

Bale works many of the abuses of the clergy into *Three Laws*, not only those that were attacked by numberless medieval predecessors like Chaucer, but also, as Ruth Blackburn (p. 44) has pointed out, many of those attacked by Luther in the Ninety-five Theses. Bale also weaves into the fabric of the play two of Luther's most strongly recommended arms against abuse: the power of the Christian ruler and the power of the Bible. Two scenes in *Three Laws* close with appeals to the king to destroy idolatry and clerical celibacy, and to curb the greed and ambition of the clergy. Thereby revealed is Bale's use of the subversive ideas of Luther's *To the Christian Nobility*, an exhortation to the German princes to establish a more Protestant Christian order. Bale's virtuous Laws also borrow from the subversive Luther, when they use the Scriptures as a weapon against the false church. When Infidelitas and his acolytes are outraged by Evangelium's "preaching", they arrest him and mock him, despoiling him of his robe, treating him in the manner in which they claim they had treated Christ. But it is shown that the Gospel cannot be destroyed, and Bale encourages his spectators to read and follow it, "For non other way there is unto salvacyon / But the worde of God in every generacyon" (1614-15).

Bale treats the hotly debated issue of the celibacy of the clergy with particular vehemence in all his works. The Carmelite hagiographer who wrote several saints' lives turned into the Reformist gossip columnist of *The actes of Englysh votaryes*, giving all the inside information about sexual activity behind monastery walls. This type of gossip pervades the second act of *Three Laws*, in which Natu-

1. In the preface to *The Image of Both Churches* (p. 255), Bale considers it to be his «bound duty, under pain of damnation, to admonish Christ's flock by this present revelation of their perils past», the admonishment taking the form of a detailed commentary on the Book of Revelation, into which Bale weaves much of his contempt for the Roman Catholic Church and clergy.

rae Lex is subjected to the viciousness of Idolatria and Sodomismus, who are represented as being inseparable. The paired Vices boast of their exploits, which encompass the abuses the early radical reformers targeted. The damning lines Bale gives to Infidelitas merely elaborate with propagandistic license on a well-known and much-loved medieval *topos*—the lecherous and sodomitical clergy:

Within the bownes of Sodomye  
Doth dwell the spirytuall clergie,  
Pope, cardinall and pryst,  
Nonne, chanon, monke and fryer,  
With so many els as do desire  
To reigne under Antichrist. (728-33)

Pederastic prelates had for centuries been an object of anti-clerical satire, which created reservoirs that, during the 1530s, when *Three Laws* was being performed, Henry VIII and Cromwell could tap in their campaign to curb the power of the clergy. Reports made after visitations to ecclesiastical houses testify to the fact that the criticism was, in some cases, justified.

The plot of the second act of *Three Laws* is conveniently summarised by Naturae Lex when he comes back on stage, afflicted with leprosy, as the stage directions indicate, to explain how he has been outwitted by man and suffered a double-pronged assault on the flesh and on the soul by Sodomismus and Idolatria:

I wrought in hys hart, as God bad earnestlye,  
Hym oft provokyng to love God over all  
With the inner powers. But that false Idolatrye  
Hath hym perverted by slayghtes dyabolycall,  
And so hath Sodomye through hys abuses carnall,  
That he is now lost, offendynge without measure,  
And I corrupted, to my most hygh dyspleasure. (759-65)

Alan Stewart (pp. 56-57) has recently pointed out that a clear association exists between the two characters: Sodomismus does not exist as a stage-entity without Idolatria (and vice-versa). One of Sodomismus' self-commentaries makes the relationship explicit:

In the fleshe I am a fyre,  
And soch a vyle desyre,  
As brynge men to the myre  
Of fowle concupyscence.



We two togyther beganne  
To sprynge and to growe in manne,  
As Thomas of Aquyne scanne  
In the fort boke of hys sentence. (563-70)

Idolatria further defines the relationship when she boasts to Sodomismus:

Within the flesh thou art,  
But I dwell in the hart,  
And wyll the sowle pervart  
From Gods obedyence. (687-90)

Bale uses costume to underscore the nature of Idolatria: stage directions indicate she is dressed as a necromancer. Furthermore, she can tell men's fortunes, cure toothache, fever and the pox. By listing all her skills, Bale economically collapses Catholicism and its image worship with superstition, witchcraft, and women in general into the body of Idolatria, which is coupled with that of Sodomismus.

When Infidelity instructs Sodomismus on how to fight against Naturae Lex, he encourages an attack during confession:

Here is a stoole for the  
A ghostlye father to be  
To heare Benedicite,  
A boxe of creame and oyle. (675-78)

Here Bale plays on the traditional sexual reputation of the confessional. The merchandising of devotional aids also comes under attack; it is presented as a means to lead the Christian believer astray when Infidelitas gives to Idolatria "beades, rynges, and other gere" to "deceive Man properlye" (664-66). A subversive portrait of the traditional religion as one of false piety and organized deception is created on stage by means of the exchanges between this unholy pair of middlemen.

In the third act, Avaritia boasts of how widows and orphans are exploited, thereby embedding a commentary on the ruthlessness of the Roman Catholic clergy in their collection of tithes. He is paired with Ambitio, who is proud of corrupting the Scriptures. Moseh Lex is attacked in this act, and, in lines 1109-34, we find systematic perverting of the ten commandments. One telling inversion—"God hath inhybyted to geve false testymonye, / Yet we wyll condempne the Gospell for heresy" (1125-26)—reaches out beyond the play-world to the courtroom scenes of the heresy trials and prepares us for Avaritia's list of clerical

and doctrinal aberrations. It is recommended that “The byshoppes must holde their prestes in ignoraunce / With longe Latyne houres, least knowledge to them chaunce” (1145-46), and that English be introduced into the services only if this engenders increased financial gain for the clergy: “If they have Englysh lete it be for advauntage / For pardons, for dyrges, for offerynges and pylgrymage” (1157-58). The demonic speeches of these Vice figures, in which they recite their litany of unholy, deceitful practices, provide a subversive account of what the Reformist playwright considered to be the false religion of Antichrist.

As Greg Walker (p. 190), has pointed out, Bale gives his Reformers all the best arguments and makes the Roman Catholics falter and admit their fraudulence, ignorance, and shortcomings. The dramatist has the advantage of being able to control both sides of the debate enacted on the stage, but when the “truth” is in dispute, one wonders how we are, in the phrase of Thomas More, “to fynde out whyche chyrche is the very chyrche” (p. 480), given that we have only Bale’s passionate assertions about which is the true and which is the false one.

At the end of the third act, the controlling presence of the playwright is clearly felt in *Infidelitas*’ commentary on the offstage action. He explains how a veil has been cast over Moseh Lex in order to hide him from view to stop him spreading the word of God. *Infidelitas* provides Bale’s textual gloss on the future appearance of Moseh Lex, who mimes blindness and lameness, so that there can be no doubt in the spectator’s mind of what the transformation signifies. Bale leaves nothing to chance and carefully polices audience response. Fear that the play-world of the imagination might usurp earnest instruction stands foremost in his mind. Bale will not let *Infidelitas*’ words speak for themselves, nor will he trust his spectators’ apprehension of them: he constantly directs and controls the spectator’s perception, to an exasperating degree. It is as if we are privy to the director’s heavily annotated prompt-book in which all thoughts about staging are recorded alongside the dialogue. The interpretative scope of the spectator is restricted and his imaginative freedom repressed. Here Bale’s drama demonstrates that, in spite of the Reformers’ insistence that the Scriptures were “open”, it was presumed that God’s word was often not plain and needed an intercessor to interpret it. Tyndale attacked allegories for being the source of blindness in which the nation found itself, maintaining that scriptural meaning was always the literal sense. As Bale amply illustrates, however, this literal sense was regularly signified by proverbs, similitude, riddles, and allegories which made it necessary to negotiate its meaning.

In the fourth act of *Three Laws*, Evangelium is persecuted for his pulpit oratory and, in a re-enactment of Christianity's primal drama, the Vices treat him as Christ was once treated by the Pharisees. Infidelitas first interrogates him, feigning to misunderstand the doctrinal points he expounds and turning them in typical Vice fashion—by mistaking the word—into grotesque travesties. Bale uses the chief Vice character to demonstrate that the false church provides incompetent interpreters of the holy texts. The following exchange illustrates the way the Vice's mistaking of the word becomes a game played in deep earnest:

*Evangelium.* The Corinthes first epystle hath thys clere testimony:  
*"In Christo Jesu per Evangelium vos genui —*  
 I have begote yow in Jesu Christ", sayth Powle,  
*"By the Gospel preachynge to the confort of your sowle."*  
*Infidelitas* Than are ye a cuckolde, by the blessed holy masse! (1370-73)

The dialogue between Evangelium and his tormentor Pseudodoctrina invokes the experience of the heresy trials, versions of which Bale was to publish at a later date when his career as a dramatist abruptly halted. In fact, by the time he was writing *Three Laws*, he had already had a hand in editing *The Examination of Master William Thorpe*, an autobiographical account of one Lollard's appearance before Archbishop Arundel in August 1407. Kendall explains how "The violence of the archbishop's language becomes at once the hallmark of unregenerate speech and, in its sputtering incoherence, an emblem of the impotence of evil in the face of godliness" (p. 60). In *The Examination*, Kendall notes, Thorpe comments on the way that he felt himself aided by the Holy Ghost, who furnished him with the words to answer the hostile archbishop (*Examination*, p. 112). Bale's play seems to be informed by the account of such a trial. Evangelium finds the words to defend his faith in the course of his trial but is condemned as a heretic when the Vices, expressing their anger in loud, unregenerate speech, drag him off to the stake because he refuses to abjure.

In the final act, when Infidelitas boasts to *Vindicta Dei* that his victory over divine law has cleared the way for his gaming—"And now I persever amonge the rank rable of papystes, / Teachyng ther shorlynges to playe the Antichrystes" (1835-36)—Bale once again uses an evil character to point out the rectitude of his own dramatic vocation, thereby demonstrating how a play can be the purveyor of the devil's teaching if it is only loosely controlled by the playwright. Bale's fear that game might usurp earnest is shown clearly through the tight structure

adopted for the play. The representatives of nonconformist virtue control the stage in the first and last acts, and within the central body of *Three Laws*, their pious interventions are made to frame the demonic sport of the Vice characters. Thus Bale's purified drama can be seen at all times to restrict the boundaries of unholy drama. Throughout the play, self-commentary is used to clarify any ambiguity, and to prevent the spectator from forgetting himself by sharing in the vice-characters' demonic pleasure.

The conventional morality play, then, is subverted by the Reformer Bale: the entertainment quotient is reduced in order to give priority to the didactic propagandist element, which was intended to serve Henry VIII and Bale's patron, Thomas Cromwell, in their campaign to rid the country of papal control in secular affairs. The subversive potential of the theatre was fully recognised by Bale and Cromwell, but the former proved to be too radical in his undermining of traditional religion and, after the downfall of his patron, was obliged to flee to the continent for fear of reprisals on the part of more conservative Reformers.

Bale's divided drama, with its carefully demarcated ideological zones, is emblematic of the ambivalence that lies behind the playwright's attitude towards the dramatic medium on the whole. *Three Laws* attacks playing and exposes the dangers of commonly held conceptions of drama, whilst trying to offer a safer alternative. Bale boasts of his own theatre as being capable of bringing men to Christ, "From ceremonyes domme / As to their heavenly gyde" (1246-47), but his figures of mediation, commentators and subversives are all too vociferous and tend to transform the stage into a pulpit for preaching what Bale calls in *King Johan* "the lyvyng wurde of the Lorde" (1119).

With such a divided approach to the drama, Bishop Bale did not produce memorable, living theatre, and he has gone down in literary history mainly as a Protestant propagandist whose "bilioous bark"—fortunately for the English drama—proved to be worse than his bite.

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