



Scène  
**Européenne**

---

Theta  
Théâtre anglais

# Theta XIII

## Forms of the Supernatural on Stage: Evolution, Mutations

---

Textes réunis par  
Richard Hillman

---

## Référence électronique

---

[En ligne], Roberta Mullini, « Representing God and Christ in John Bale's Biblical Plays », dans *Theta XIII, Forms of the Supernatural on Stage: Evolution, Mutations*, éd. par Richard Hillman, 2018,  
« Scène Européenne, Theta, Théâtre anglais »  
mis en ligne le 09-07-2018,

URL : <https://sceneeuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta13>

La collection

**THETA**

---

est publiée par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,  
(Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 7323)  
dirigé par Benoist Pierre

### Responsable scientifique

Richard Hillman

### ISSN

1776-1026

### Mentions légales

Copyright © 2018 – CESR.

Tous droits réservés.

Les utilisateurs peuvent télécharger et imprimer,  
pour un usage strictement privé, cette unité documentaire.

Reproduction soumise à autorisation.

Contact : [alice.loffredonue@univ-tours.fr](mailto:alice.loffredonue@univ-tours.fr)

# Representing God and Christ

## in John Bale's Biblical Plays

**Roberta Mullini**

University of Urbino "Carlo Bo"

Even before any attempt by city guilds to have their cycle plays rewritten according to Reformist tenets, as happened in Norwich in the 1560s when the Grocers' episode of Man's Fall was adapted to Protestant doctrine,<sup>1</sup> the biblical plays John Bale wrote in the late 1530s show the new religion at work. In *God's Promyses*, *The Temptacyon of our Lord*, *Johan Baptystes Preachynge*, and the extremely satirical and vitriolic *Thre Lawes*, the very strong legacy of the Catholic mystery plays is still evident, but the divine characters they contain appear to be different from their contemporary cycle homonyms.<sup>2</sup> This results not only from the content of what they say, obviously derived from Protestant principles and often caustically satirical of popish doctrine and traditions, but also from the structure of their speeches. Pater Coelestis in *God's Promyses* is a character easily talked to by some of the Old Testament protagonists of the play, who sometimes interact with him in relaxed and comfortable terms in spite of the spiritual weight of what is being discussed (mankind's salvation). In *Temptacyon* the long speeches of both Christ and Satan are interpolated with short exchanges that imitate colloquiality. My paper will analyse the persistence and/or change of the traditional features of sacred personages represented in Bale's biblical plays, limiting the investigation to *God's Promyses* and *Temptacyon*. To do that,

---

**1** See Mullini, "Norwich Grocers' Play/s".

**2** The following are the full titles of these plays: *A Tragedye or enterlude manyfestyng the chefe promyses of God*; *A brefe Comedy or enterlude concernynge the temptacyon of oure lorde and saver Jesus Christ*; *A brefe Comedy or Enterlude of Johan Baptystes preachynge in the wyldernesse*; and *A Comedy concernynge thre lawes of nature, Moses and Christ* (see Bale, *The Complete Plays*, ed. Happé, vol. II, from which quotations will be drawn). For the sake of brevity, the plays will be mentioned as *God's Promyses*, *Temptacyon*, *Johan Baptystes Preachyng*, and *Thre Lawes*.

the rhetorical structure of their dialogue will be studied to verify how and how much this contributes to the theatricality and performability of the dramatic texts.

### A Short Summary of Criticism on Bale

All Bale's critics have highlighted the playwright's transformation of the mystery play tradition into his own Reformist cycle of biblical plays. I think that it is neither necessary nor possible to mention all of them, but that nevertheless it may be helpful to outline the main issues that have arisen in criticism on Bale.

In his critical edition of Bale's plays, Peter Happé, when writing about Bale's canon, shows that the creation of a new cycle was a constant preoccupation in the playwright's mind (pp. 8-9). He also discusses the "Sources and Analogues" of Bale's biblical plays, that is, the episode of the Prophets from the N-Town and from the Chester cycles as foundations for *God's Promyses*, the John the Baptist plays in York, Towneley and Chester for *Johan Baptystes Preachynge*, and York, N-Town and Chester for *Temptacyon* (pp. 12-13). Happé also notes that, in general, Bale's biblical plays are longer than their corresponding sources. These analogues are then widely examined in the notes to each play in the second volume of *The Complete Plays*. In his later book, *John Bale*, Happé devotes a whole chapter to these plays, underlining the fact that, "though they heartily embody the new Protestant doctrines, [they] do not set forth their ideas in quite such an adversarial way as *Three Laws* and *King Johan*" (p. 108), once again pointing to the persistence and, at the same time, the transformation of the Catholic tradition. As well as studying the extant plays, Happé has investigated Bale's canon in search of the dramatist's possible "phantom plays", while renewing his interest in the structure and language of the surviving dramas ("John Bale's Lost Mystery Cycle"). In a paper originating in the fourth Tours "Table Ronde" on Tudor drama ("*The Temptation of our Lord*"), Happé offers a detailed analysis of *Temptacyon*, studying not only Bale's Protestant standpoint as it emerges in the text, but also the play's dramatic structure, its use of monologues and its various rhythms.

In a 2007 essay, Cathy Shrank specifically deals with Bale as "reconfiguring the 'medieval'" when he offered his readers his polemical works and his audience a new theology. Shrank's discussion of Bale's plays is particularly interesting for the present topic, in that she argues that

However much Bale is indebted to medieval drama in his prose works, his adaptation of it on-stage, in his bible plays, is (unsurprisingly) distinctly anti-dramatic. *God's Promyses* is probably the most striking example. (p. 185)

It is true that the structure of this play is "repetitive", as Shrank claims, with all its seven characters (six from the Old Testament plus John the Baptist) asking God to save mankind in spite of its trespasses, at first having to negotiate with him, and then praising

him for his concession. It is also true that, while the various cycles of mystery plays have prophets and other personages from the Old Testament as protagonists of events which are shown on-stage (thus Adam is created and eats the apple from the forbidden tree, Moses receives the tables of the Law, Noah builds the ark, etc. — and all this when something theatrically relevant occurs on stage), Bale's play shows these same characters only in the act of talking. There is no dramatic action in *God's Promyses*, but only the story of man's salvation, which — as Bale underlines — comes from faith and God's election, not from man's works. Baleus Prolocutor, the expositor's role Bale wrote for himself in this and the other biblical plays, declares that the "knowledge" of the Gospel is necessary if people want to belong to "the faythfull chosen sorte" ("Praefatio", l. 13). But I consider that *God's Promyses* is an *ante litteram* play of ideas, where "*discourse*, not representation, is the way to enlightenment", as Shrank herself affirms (p. 185; my italics). It was this preponderance of discourse over action, and the way words and dialogue are used, that struck me first when I re-read the play. Therefore, while siding with Shrank about the lack of physical action, I do not subscribe completely to her statements that "[a]ll opportunity for dramatic representation is consequently removed" from *God's Promyses* (p. 185) and that Bale's "plays . . . are explicitly aligned against spectacle" (p. 186).<sup>3</sup>

One also has to consider Paul Whitfield White's opinion concerning what late twentieth-century critics have written on Bale's plays — that is, that their interest in "technical and performance aspects of the drama", while illuminating "our understanding of Reformation interludes", has isolated "theatrical practice from the concrete historical conditions which produced it" (p. 5). To take into consideration Shrank's and White's criticism allows one to see that the plays are, on the one hand, the object of theatre and performance studies, and, on the other, of historical and ideological investigations. I recognise the legitimacy of both attitudes, especially because, when dealing with a cultural object such as a play, the "how", I think, goes hand in hand with the "what" and "why". White himself, in spite of his critique of those scholars who have been concerned mainly with the theatrical dimension of Reformist plays, highlights Bale's career as a player and the leader of "his felowes" performing in various parts of England in order to spread his own beliefs and reinforce Thomas Cromwell's propaganda.<sup>4</sup> In this way White shows his own interest in "things theatrical + historical". In the last chapter of his book but one, White

---

3 We might wonder at this point whether Southern avoided discussing Bale's plays for this reason, that is, judging them non-dramatic, even though he adduces a more elevated excuse for his omission. He writes that his book does not deal with Bale's plays since they "have already received much study chiefly because of their particular literary, religious and historical significance" (p. 304). Paradoxically, then, he does not analyse Bale's plays in a book mostly devoted to possible performances because they have been studied from other points of view.

4 See White, esp. pp. 16-27.

also tries exactly to reconstruct the performance of *God's Promyses* in St Stephen's Church, Hackington—that is, in a church setting (pp. 149-58)—and of Bale's other biblical plays in similar venues (pp. 158-62), letting his interest in performance surface anyway. As for Bale's theatrical activities, one must also remember that on 20 August 1553, on the occasion of Mary Tudor's accession to the throne, Bale provocatively performed his biblical plays in Kilkenny, thus “living” their performability himself.<sup>5</sup>

The question remains of whether Bale's biblical plays are almost completely non-theatrical, as Shranks argues, or are “real” plays. The same question has long been at the basis of critical discussion (my own included) of John Heywood's drama, and has usually been answered affirmatively, confirming that, besides being “plays of ideas” themselves, they work well when performed.<sup>6</sup> And, of course, with the performance of Heywood's *The Play of the Wether* at Hampton Court (2009), the “Staging the Henrician Court Project”, involving Tom Betteridge and Greg Walker as principal investigators, has amply shown that theatrical discourse and dialogue, even when a traditional plot is lacking, are performable with great success.<sup>7</sup>

As stated above, in approaching Bale's plays, my curiosity was aroused by the way such a usually stately and dignified character as God is made to speak in *God's Promyses*, and by Christ's verbal behaviour in *Temptacyon*, two features that, in my opinion, contribute to the theatricality of the plays. In what follows, I will try to evaluate that impression through analysis, even if—as Happé writes about *God's Promyses*— “[i]n strict terms there is no story and no plot to be developed” (*John Bale*, p. 111).

### ***God's Promyses, or When God Speaks in a Friendly Manner***

First of all, one must keep in mind that Bale “was writing drama not primarily for an elitist audience . . . but for the socially diverse audience that the Lord Privy Seal's Players [Thomas Cromwell's] would have been expected to address”; that the “‘plain style’ of the dialogue and speeches . . . was sufficiently close to the language of the contemporary parish pulpit for both learned and illiterate to understand”; and that “the frequent use of familiar proverbs is a clear sign of the plays' popular interests” (White, pp. 28-29).

<sup>5</sup> See Happé, ed., I: 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Writing about Heywood's and Rastell's plays as “plays of mind” and “debates”, Altman says: “These plays reflect the curious amalgam of delight in disputation—in the opportunity to entertain opposing ideas and to discover how they might be defended—and an embracing piety characteristic of a culture that assumes the wide morality of such inquiry” (p. 107).

<sup>7</sup> I realised this myself not only when directing students' performances of Heywood's *The Pardoner and the Frere* and *Johan Johan*, but also when studying less theatrical plays, so to say, such as *The Four PP* and *The Play of Love* by the same playwright. (For the texts, see Heywood, ed. Axton and Happé.)

Concerning the use of proverbs, Happé places Bale in the “humanist tradition”, together with Erasmus, Heywood and Udall (Happé, ed., pp. 16-17), while highlighting the playwright’s East Anglian regionalisms and parallels with the language of his times (p. 17).<sup>8</sup> In this linguistic context, the character of Pater Coelestis starts speaking in a very formal way, with five rhyme royal stanzas in the first act (ll. 36-70), three in the second, third and fourth acts (ll. 183-203, 301-21, 429-49), and two in Acts Six and Seven (ll. 682-95, 803-16), whereas he pronounces only one introductory rhyme royal stanza in Act Five (ll. 556-62). Later on, although now and then resuming this rather ceremonious stanza, the divinity speaks in more colloquial lines, using rhyming couplets or even just one single line of a couplet matched with a line spoken by another character. Happé observes that in Bale’s plays “the change from rhyme royal to couplets . . . is usually associated with a new character or a different tone” (Happé, ed., p. 18). Let us now see how God’s speeches reveal this “different tone” and, possibly, how this makes Bale’s God different from the same figure in some parallel mystery plays.

As mentioned above, *God’s Promyses* draws from the Prophets episodes in the mystery cycles, since Bale occupies each act with a dialogue between God and personages from the Old Testament, starting from Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses, moving forward to David and Isaiah, and ending with John the Baptist from the New Testament. To each of them God laments the degenerate state of mankind, which is guilty especially of idolatry, threatening hard punishments, until the human figure obtains mercy after negotiating with the divinity. It is exactly in the negotiating process that Bale makes his Pater Coelestis speak differently from the corresponding figure in the mystery cycles. God’s speeches—all of them, like the other characters’, of pentameter-like length,<sup>9</sup> divided by a strong caesura after the first five syllables—sound less ceremonial after the initial stanzas. Some examples will now be examined.

### Act One: God and Adam

After God has expressed all his wrath because of Adam’s disobedience in Eden and menaced “greater ponnysment” (l. 68), Adam—at the end of a rhyme royal stanza—laments, “Alas, I am frayle: my whole kynde ys but slime” (l. 77). God then retorts, “I wott it is so, yet art thou no lesse faulty / Than thou haddest bene made of matter much more worthy”

8 Happé comments that Bale shares some linguistic forms with Tyndale, Coverdale and More because of the “stress” of “religious controversy”, which “allowed mutual influence by the participants” in the struggle (Happé, ed., p. 17).

9 The syllables in Bale’s lines often number more than ten; however, they tend to have five stresses, as if they were pentameters. Rather than being based on a regular number of syllables, they draw on the “English tradition of alliterative verse which relied upon a fixed number of stresses, but tolerated variation in the number of syllables” (Happé, ed., p. 19).



(ll. 78-79), while the formal stanza gives way to both speakers' rhyming couplets. God's sharp reply is but a foreboding of his later ironical one-line answer to Adam's attempt at an excuse for his trespass:

*Adam Primus Homo.* Soch heavye fortune hath chefelye chaunced me  
For that I was left to my owne liberte.  
*Pater Coelestis.* Then thu art blamelesse, and the faulte thu layest to me?  
(ll. 83-85)

These lines show how direct and unhedged by any politeness God's answer is (and, of course, how the playwright has chosen to mark God's language in this way). At the same time, the divinity's nearly joyful irony stands out through the easy parataxis.

Then Adam admits his sin, due, according to his words, to God's absence from Eden. He ends with "Good lorde, I axe mercy" (l. 98). God is not yet ready to give in and three times reiterates his unwillingness to be merciful to man, even after Adam's repeated requests:

*Pater Coelestis.* Thu shalt dye for it with all thy posteritye.  
*Adam Primus Homo.* For one faulte good lorde avenge not thyself on me,  
Whych am but a worme, or a fleshelye vanyte.  
*Pater Coelestis.* I saye thu shalt dye, with thy whole posteritye.  
*Adam Primus Homo.* Yet mercy, swete lorde, yf anye mercy maye be.  
*Pater Coelestis.* I am immutable; I maye change no decree.  
Thu shalt dye, I saye, without anye remedye. (ll. 99-105)

God will relent only after Adam's fourth prayer not to "throwe away the worke which thu has create / To thyne owne image" (ll. 107-8). The change in God's mind surfaces through his following words, a question which presupposes forgiveness, or at least a fresh turn in his attitude: "But art thu sorye from bottom of thy hart?" (l. 109). The character of God, whom Bale very aptly names *Pater Coelestis*, actually reveals fatherly feelings toward Adam, in spite of the toughness of his initial threats. He also seems subject to a touch of vanity, so to speak, since he grants Adam's prayers only after Primus Homo's mention of God's creation of man "to thyne owne image".

### Act Three: God and Abraham

While Noah in Act Two appears to be the most obliging character among the Old Testament personages of the play, Abraham is certainly the most responsive one. He "banter[s] with God", as Happé writes (*John Bale*, p. 116), about the number of just men to be found in order to save mankind from the divinity's wrath (reducing the number from fifty to ten), but what is more relevant is that God accepts the "game", so to speak. And not only



that: the dogged pressing of Abraham's requests makes God answer according to a colloquial rhythm given by single lines (ll. 365-77). Abraham, in order to move God to mercy, also uses specific pragmatic strategies able to pay deference to God's positive face (that is, to his desire to be appreciated by others<sup>10</sup>), for example, in lines 350-53:

Be it farre from the soch rygoure to undertake.  
I hope there is not in the so cruell hardenesse,  
As to cast awaye the iust men with the rechelesse,  
And so to destroye, the good with the ungodlye.

On the one hand, certainly Bale's text in this phase of the play is more or less an exact translation of Genesis 18:22-32, this showing the playwright's will to adhere to Scripture but to use Abraham as a character differently from what the mystery cycles made of him, when they represented only the touching episode of Abraham and Isaac. On the other hand, the adaptation of biblical dialogue to stage dialogue happens to be very efficacious, especially when each speaker uses single-line speeches:

*Abraham Fidelis.* What if the cytie maye fortye ryghteouse make?  
*Pater Coelestis.* Then wyll I pardone it for those same fortyes sake.  
*Abraham Fidelis.* Be not angrye, lorde, though I speake undyscretelye.  
*Pater Coelestis.* Utter thy whole mynde and spare me not hardelye.  
*Abraham Fidelis.* Paraventure there maye be thirty founde amonge them.  
*Pater Coelestis.* Maye I fynde thirty I wyll nothyng do vnto them.  
*Abraham Fidelis.* I take vpon me to moche lorde in thy syght?  
*Pater Coelestis.* No, no, good Abraham, for I knowe thy faythe is ryght.  
*Abraham Fidelis.* No lesse I suppose than twenty can it have?  
*Pater Coelestis.* Coude I fynde twenty that cytie wolde I save.  
*Abraham Fidelis.* Ones yet wyll I speake my mynde, and than nomore.  
*Pater Coelesti.* Spare not to utter so moche as thou hast in store.  
*Abraham Fidelis.* And what if there myght be ten good creatures founde? (ll. 365-77)

In comparison with the bible verses, God speaks three times more (ll. 368, 372, 376), using words that are not biblical. Actually, Bales splits Abraham's verses 30, 31, and 32 in Genesis 18 so as to multiply God's responses. At l. 368 ("Utter thy whole mynde and spare me not hardelye"), God orders, rather invites, Abraham to speak boldly to him, without any fear; at l. 372 ("No, no, good Abraham, for I knowe thy faythe is right"), God calls his interlocutor by name and acknowledges his faith, also using a colloquial repetition of the initial negation "no"; at l. 376 ("Spare not to utter so moche as thou hast in store"), God

<sup>10</sup> See Brown and Levinson, p. 61.

reinforces his invitation to Abraham to speak freely to him. These three added speeches portray the divinity as truly a heavenly father, all in all very similar to a human one, friendly to a child of his and ready to please it.

### **Act Four: God and Moses**

In Act Four, there is nothing like what has just been analysed. Nevertheless, there is a passage in which the paternal and friendly relationship between God and man is once again present, above all when the sin of idolatry, so abominable to Bale the Reformer, is introduced:

*Pater Coelestis.* Never wyll I spare the cursed inyquyte,  
Of ydolatrye for no cause—thu mayst trust me.  
*Moses Sanctus.* Forgeve them yet, lorde, for thys tyme if it maye be.  
*Pater Coelestis.* Thynkest thou that I wyll so sone change my decre?  
No, No, frynde Moses, so lyght thou shalt not fynde me.  
I wyll ponynysh them: all Israel shall it se. (ll. 507-12)

After reaffirming his decision to punish idolaters, God addresses Moses, who has just prayed for forgiveness, with a friendly and colloquial, albeit firm, tone, conveyed by the repetition of the negation (as with Abraham) and by calling him “frynde”. Therefore, even though speeches showing God as an easily approachable figure are fewer in Act Four than in Act Three, we see the dialogue between man’s representative, in this case Moses, and the divinity take place in fairly amicable terms. In other words, God threatens while being tender. In the following acts, the relationship between Pater Coelestis and David, Isaiah and John the Baptist is more formal and less inclined to imitate conversation, but the examples discussed previously manifest the attempt on the playwright’s part to show God’s compassionate attitude towards mankind on the basis not only of what he says, but also of how he speaks. That is, God’s mercy also passes through his way of interacting with man.

### ***The Temptacyon of Our Lord, or Christ’s Patience***

The play, after the introduction by Baleus Prolocutor, starts with Jesus talking to the audience. It is a way of differentiating this drama from the mystery cycle tradition, given that the three cycles containing the Temptation episode (Chester, York and N-Town) all have Satan speak first.<sup>11</sup> Christ’s speech has, at its very beginning, the apparent purpose of informing the audience of the dramatic situation: “Into thys desart the holy Ghost

---

<sup>11</sup> For a thorough analysis of the doctrinal and theological issues of this play, see Happé, “*Temptation*”.

hath brought me, / After my baptyme of Sathan to be tempted” (ll. 36-37). These two lines, though, have various additional functions: they look back to the previous play (in a possible sequential performance), that is, Christ’s baptism by John; present the location of the following action (the desert); announce Satan as the other protagonist; and summarise the action itself — the temptation. Christ speaks three rhyme royal stanzas, the second and the third of which are devoted to explaining the meaning of his fasting in the desert. Contrary to the Catholic doctrine about fasting as a devotional practice, Jesus claims that his abstinence from food serves “Sathan to provoke to worke hys cursed intent” (l. 46). Bale, therefore, uses Christ at this point in the play (and later as well) to stress Protestant doctrine and oppose Catholic teachings.

Nevertheless, the last lines of the third stanza go back to the present action and highlight Christ’s being a man, who feels hunger in “Thys mortall bodye” (l. 56). Soon after Satan enters, in his turn pronouncing three rhyme royal stanzas, the content of which is parallel to what can be found in the mystery plays (his doubts about Christ’s divinity and his desire to tempt him). The phases of the temptation are the same as those in the cycles; first, Jesus will be tempted to change stones into bread, then to plunge down from the pinnacle of the Temple, and at last to accept Satan’s worldly gifts and to adore him. That is, according to the tradition linking the temptation to the seven deadly sins, he is tempted to commit the sins of gluttony, vainglory and covetousness. For brevity’s sake, my investigation will be limited to some aspects of the interaction and focus on the traits of character emerging from the conversation, as well as on some details resulting from the pragmatics of the exchange.

Satan’s first words to Christ praise him as a “virtuous” “yonge man”, living in “godly contemplacyon” (ll. 79-80). The devil presents himself “*simulate religione*” (l. 77 SD), very probably in a monastic habit strikingly different from the fantastic costume possibly worn by the cycle Satan.<sup>12</sup> Satan arrives as if he were a wanderer, or rather he presents himself as a travel mate to Jesus, who soon accepts his company, although he defines as “your fantasye” what the devil can say: “Your pleasure is it to utter your fantasye” (l. 82). The term chosen, in fact, is not at all a positive one, since “fantasy” is a word having largely unfavourable meanings. According to the *OED* definitions, it may simply mean “Inclination, liking, desire” (def. 7.), or, more pungently, “A supposition resting on no solid grounds; a whimsical or visionary notion or speculation” (def. 5.a), and “Caprice, changeful mood; an instance of this; a caprice, whim” (def. 6).<sup>13</sup> In other words, Christ accepts Satan as

<sup>12</sup> Especially in Chester: see Happé, ed., II: 152n77, and Happé, “*Temptation*”, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> *OED* def. 7, examples for which are attested between Geoffrey Chaucer and Walter Raleigh, considers “fantasy” as “obsolete”; def. 5.a cites sources between 1440 and 1878, while def. 6 ranges between 1450 and 1883, with most examples from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

an interlocutor, even if he well knows in advance the nature of his discourse. Satan then starts the process of temptation, claiming to want “to talke with yow of goodnesse, / If ye would accept my symple companye” (ll. 84-85). Jesus’s reply manifests his willingness to listen to godly matters, when he says: “I dysdayne nothyng whych is of God trulye” (l. 86). But Satan, in order to better negotiate the terms of the dialogue, adds, “Than wyll I be bolde a lyttle with yow to walke” (l. 87), thus also indicating the physical action of the actors on stage, while trying to ingratiate himself with Christ by admitting to his own boldness. (In pragmalinguistic terms, he plays on Christ’s negative face, acknowledging that he is intruding in the other’s desire to be alone.<sup>14</sup>) Later, Satan again uses very polite phrases, such as “I yow praye” (l. 96) and “Well shall it please ye any farther with me to walke?” (l. 163), to which Christ always acquiesces.<sup>15</sup> For much of the text the tempter does not assault his “victim” but gradually weaves his web to attract him. His antagonist, however, is well equipped not only to resist him, but also to counterstrike, and this while expressing all his patience in tolerating Satan’s proposals to walk and talk together. Christ is not there anyway to accept what the devil says. On the contrary, he is always ready to rebuke and counterattack him, adding Reformist scriptural readings to the traditional quotations from the bible present in the cycle plays—for example, when citing Psalm 90 (ll. 208-44) and phrases from Deuteronomy 6 and 10 (ll. 249 and 318, respectively).

The two protagonists’ speeches evolve along a debate about the power of God and of the devil, but the debate structure does not correspond to a regular and formal use of stanzas. Sometimes the pace changes and the speakers share a rhyming couplet, thus strengthening the dialogic rhythm of the play. This is particularly efficacious in ll. 85-88, 97-100, and 251-54.<sup>16</sup> Here is an example:

*Jesus Christus.* Fourty dayes and nyghtes, without any substenaunce.

*Satan Tentator.* So moch I judged by your pale countenaunce;  
Than is it no marvele, I trowe, though ye [be] hungrye.

*Jesus Christus.* My stomach declareth the weakenesse of my bodye. (ll. 97-100)

As for the personal pronouns used by the two debaters, it is interesting to notice that up to l. 300 (the whole play is 433 lines long), the protagonists use the forms of the second-person plural pronoun: in this way, they do sound like debaters who are discuss-

<sup>14</sup> Brown and Levinson define the negative face as “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction—i.e. the freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (p. 61).

<sup>15</sup> Happé affirms that, especially in ll. 78-81, Satan “patronizes Christ outrageously” (“*Temptation*”, p. 73).

<sup>16</sup> As Happé points out, “This metre facilitates rapid exchanges, for couplets can be divided between speakers at times” (“*Temptation*”, p. 77).

ing their issues in a polite dialogue. But in l. 301, for the first time, Satan addresses Christ with “the”, after which the latter answers with “thou”. From now on, till l. 350, when the defeated Satan presumably leaves the stage (even if there is no stage direction to sanction this), the two address each other only by second-person singular pronouns. It seems reasonable to wonder whether this has a dramatic meaning.

When Satan first thous Jesus, his purpose is to convince him to adore the devil instead of being faithful to God: “Forsake that father which leaveth the without confort / In thys desolation, and hens fourth to me resorte” (ll. 301-2). As earlier in the play, when the tempter wants to sound caring and sympathetic to Jesus’s hunger, Satan stresses his interlocutor’s human status. During the first temptation, after alluring Christ to change stones into bread, he still gets a polite, albeit firm, answer from Christ, which—while adding to the scriptural words to be found in both Matthew 4:4 and Luke 4:4—subsumes the negative Reformist attitude to miracles:<sup>17</sup> “No offence is it to eate whan men be hungrye; / But to make stones breade it is unnecessarye” (ll. 105-6). Here, towards the end of the play, Satan’s superficially paternal and friendly offer to meet what he considers Christ’s needs receives only a complete and violent refusal:

*Jesus Christus.* Avoyde thou Sathan, thou devyll, thou adversarye!  
For now thou perswadest most damnable blasphemye.  
As thou art wycked, so is thy promise wicked. (ll. 309-11)

Christ has put aside his patience and attacks Satan by calling him by his negative biblical names (“devil” and “adversary”), overtly accusing him of blasphemy and wickedness, and, as is clear from the use of the second-person singular pronouns, showing all his contempt for him. Certainly, if Satan’s employment of “thou” might still sound like an attempt at catching Christ by endearment, Christ’s “thou” implies only scorn and rebuke. Christ has abandoned his forbearance and turned into the definitive winner in this mid-term, so to speak, confrontation with Satan. (The first ends with Lucifer’s fall into the newly created hell; the final one is at the centre of the Harrowing of Hell episode, which also finishes with Satan’s discomfiture.<sup>18</sup>)

While in the York, N-Town and Chester episodes of Christ’s Temptation, the character who speaks most lines is Satan, with a distinct imbalance to Christ’s disadvantage, in Bale’s play the latter pronounces 146 lines and the former 169—still more than Jesus,

<sup>17</sup> As Happé writes, we can find in the play “a deep suspicion of hagiology and the miraculous” (*Temptation*, p. 60).

<sup>18</sup> See Mullini, “Action and Discourse”.



therefore, but with a percentage (46%) very similar to that of his antagonist.<sup>19</sup> In this way, the playwright balances the protagonists' speeches, so that Satan is not given any particular dominance as far as the quantity of his lines is concerned (and therefore Christ's dramatic importance is enhanced). Christ, furthermore, as already mentioned, enriches his speeches with quotes from the whole bible, thus adding to his status as a biblical hero and stressing the importance of the knowledge of the Scripture. Of course, this does not mean that the cycles diminish Christ's personage, but rather that Bale is particularly concerned to make him a more active and less formal combatant in the debate with Satan.

## Conclusion

*The Temptacyon*, especially because of the movements the characters have to make on stage, and possibly because of the costumes of the two protagonists, appears to be more "theatrical" than *God's Promyses*. I think, though, that the performability of both plays is determined not only by the physical action they contain, but also—to a large extent—by how Bale constructed the dialogues between the protagonists. In comparison with the cycle episodes, a calmer and more obliging Christ is staged up to a certain point, so as to better mark his change of attitude towards Satan when this happens. He is also allowed dialectically and rhetorically to stand his ground by being given many biblical quotations. In *God's Promyses*, Pater Coelestis is shown being transformed from the stubborn and resolute divinity of the Old Testament towards a more fatherly figure, always firm and steadfast, but familiar and colloquial in his dialogues with the prophets and thoroughly determined to help man towards salvation. Bale, in other words, composed two plays which, without denying the previous and still contemporary rich dramatic tradition of the cycles, not only incorporate Protestant beliefs and tenets, but also re-interpret two of

---

<sup>19</sup> This calculation takes into account the fact that of the total of 433 lines of Bale's play, thirty-five are attributed to Baleus Prolocutor at the beginning of the play, plus another thirty-five at the end; to this the dialogue between Christ and the angels must be added (forty-eight lines), thus leaving only 315 lines to the debaters. The Chester Temptation episode, combined in Play 12 with the "Woman taken in Adultery" story (*The Chester Plays*, vol. I), occupies the first 216 lines, the last forty-eight of which are spoken by the Doctor, so that the dialogue between Satan and Christ is 168 lines long. In it Satan has 140 lines (83%), Christ only twenty-eight (17%). The corresponding York play (The Smythis, *The York Plays*, vol. I) has 210 lines, only 180 of which, however, are devoted to the protagonists' interaction. Here Satan speaks 134 lines (74%), and Christ forty-six (26%). Only in the N-Town *Temptation* (Play 23, *The N-Town Plays*) do the two protagonists pronounce a better balanced number of lines: Christ speaks forty-three lines (33%), Satan eighty-seven (66%). In this version, the confrontation between Christ and Satan is preceded by a sixty-five-line "Parliament in Hell", where the future temptation is discussed by the devils. This 221-line play thus leaves only 156 lines to the biblical narrative; from Christ's sixty-nine lines, however, the final twenty-six must also be subtracted, since they are a summary and a doctor-like speech. This justifies the previous ascription of only forty-three lines to this character.



the major protagonists of the mysteries. He wrote for the popular audiences of his times, which were accustomed to watching the pageants. And for those audiences Bale, still believing in the propagandistic and homiletic power of drama, re-invented the mystery plays from a Reformist point of view, enriching his texts with those complex and powerful rhetorical features which he had learnt and cultivated during his “Catholic” life.

## Bibliography

### *Primary Sources*

- BALE, John. *The Complete Plays of John Bale*. 2 vols. Ed. Peter Happé. Tudor Interludes. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985-86.
- THE CHESTER MYSTERY CYCLE. Ed. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills. 2 vols. Early English Text Society, SS 3 and 9. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the E.E.T.S., 1974.
- HEYWOOD, John. *The Plays of John Heywood*. Ed. Richard Axton and Peter Happé. Tudor Interludes. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991.
- THE N-TOWN PLAYS. Ed. Douglas Sugano. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007.
- THE YORK PLAYS. Ed. Richard Beadle. 2 vols. Early English Text Society, SS 23 and 24. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the E.E.T.S., 2009-13.

### *Secondary Sources*

- ALTMAN, Joel B. *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- BETTERIDGE, Thomas, and Greg Walker. *Staging the Henrician Court Project*, 2009: <<http://stagingthehenriciancourt.brookes.ac.uk/>>. (Accessed 15 June 2017.)
- BROWN, Penelope, and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- HAPPÉ, Peter. *John Bale*. Twayne's English Authors Series, 520. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "John Bale's Lost Mystery Cycle". *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 60 (2001): 1-12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Temptation of our Lord: Bale's Adaptation of the Structural Narrative". *Narrative and Drama*. Ed. André Lascombes. Theta – Théâtre Tudor, 2. Bern: Peter Lang, 1995. 57-78.
- MULLINI, Roberta. "Action and Discourse in *The Harrowing of Hell: The Defeat of Evil*". *Medieval Theatre* 11 (1989): 116-28. (Volume also published as *Evil on the Medieval Stage: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre, S.I.T.M.* Ed. Meg Twycross. Lancaster: Lancaster University, 1992.)
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Norwich Grocers' Play/s (1533, 1565): Development and Changes in the Representation of Man's Fall". *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama 1350-1600*. Ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüskén. Ludus, 14. Leiden: Brill, 2016. 125-48.
- OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY. Online version: <<http://www.oed.com/>>. (Accessed 22 August 2017.)
- SHRANK, Cathy. "John Bale and Reconfiguring the 'Medieval' in Reformation England". *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*. Ed. Gordon McMullan and David Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 179-92.
- SOUTHERN, Richard. *The Staging of Plays before Shakespeare*. London: Faber and Faber, 1973.
- WHITE, Paul Whitfield. *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.