

## Feminised Idolatry and the Subversion of Religious Orthodoxy in John Bale's *Three Laws*.<sup>1</sup>

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‘Sex’ is thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all - that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility [...] The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation (Butler, 1993, p.2-3)

On at least one occasion during the turbulent year of 1538 the ex-Carmelite and ardent reformer John Bale may or may not have staged a performance of his blatantly anti-papal festive morality play *Three Laws*. The play is a work singularly distinguished by its combination of an appropriation of the conventions of medieval dramatic tradition and a furiously argued and heavily didactic polemic that illuminates the multiplicity of (not always compatible) agendas underpinning the English Reformation(s). This article will briefly consider how the feminised character of Idolatry in *Three Laws* plays a pivotal role in the formation of a Protestant English subjectivity.

For reformers like Bale who believed in the primacy of the Bible as the foundation of true Christianity, the principle of *scriptura sola* came to be the chief means of reforming selves verbally. He showed all the zeal of the enthusiastic convert, following his conversion at the hands of Thomas, Lord

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws upon my recently completed PhD thesis entitled “Carnavalesque and Grotesque: Transgression in the Writings of John Bale”. Of the more than two dozen plays that Bale wrote in his lifetime, only five (*God's Promises*, *John the Baptist's Preaching*, *King Johan*, *The Temptation of Christ* and *Three Laws*) are extant. Throughout I cite directly from the most recent critical edition of the extant plays, Peter Happé's landmark 1986 two-volume work *The Complete Plays*.

Wentworth, at an early point in the early 1530s. His preaching against medieval orthodoxy and the unsuccessful Pilgrimage of Grace in the Suffolk parish of Thornden aroused local hostility and led to his imprisonment in early 1537 by Bishop Stokesley of London. However, the advocacy of his fellow antiquary John Leland and the intervention of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's reformist chief secretary, secured his release (Fairfield, 1976, pp.32-49). Bale came from an order with a long history of involvement in plays and pageantry in East Anglia, and in his time as a Carmelite, had developed a high degree of dramatic skill (Mepham, 1946, pp.169-75). Cromwell recognised the ex-Carmelite with his fervent reformist views and dramatic expertise, as ideal for the prosecution of the anti-Roman and pro-Tudor monarchy propaganda campaign he was envisaging. A broad outline of the campaign emerges in a brief treatise entitled *A Discourse Touching the Reformation of the Laws of England* composed by his energetic secretary and Bale's probable colleague Richard Morison (Anglo, 1957, pp.176-9).

In the early stages of the campaign at least, Bale was running far ahead of the mainstream of official government policy on both the issues of images and the veneration of saints (Fairfield, 1976, pp.43-7). Out of personal zeal or the necessity of state propaganda or, most likely, a combination of both, the plays trumpet strident condemnations of an idolatry redefined as transgression perpetrated not just against Christian truth, but also against the unified bodies of monarch and nation. Margaret Aston notes how it became the cardinal sin of the official propaganda campaign against the material culture of the pre-Reformation Church:

In the sixteenth century, idolatry became deeply engraved on the English conscience [and the] Reformation made it the deadliest of sins and it was one which no believer could be unaware of. (1988, p.343)

In September 1538, the Royal Injunctions instructed parish officers to remove images from their churches:

Such feigned images as ye know of in any of your cures to be so abused with pilgrimages or offerings of anything made thereunto, ye shall, for avoiding that most detestable sin of idolatry, forthwith take down and delay.<sup>2</sup>

The reformers' assertion of *scriptura sola* led to a focussing of collective wrath against the plurality of rituals, ceremonies and objects of devotions that until the 1530s were the fount of popular religious expression in England as elsewhere in Europe. Thus, as Brian Cummings and Carolyn Dinshaw have separately noted, iconoclasm changed from a dissident and illegal practice into a measure sanctioned and performed by the Tudor Establishment (Cummings, 2002, p.185; Dinshaw, 1999, pp.59-61). The issuing of the royal decrees against images approximately coincides with the presumed compilation of the five extant plays (although *King Johan* may have been written at an earlier stage in the 1530s). Bale was no doubt deeply aware of the impact of the Injunctions, and the official sanction they gave to his own peculiarly fervent brand of iconoclastic propaganda.<sup>3</sup>

It is against this political context that one comes to consider the deliberately feminine character of *Idolatry* in *Three Laws*; that *Idolatry* was designed largely to fulfil the ideological exigencies of the brief moment of iconoclastic crisis that the 1538 window of opportunity created seems, in the circumstances, a reasonable supposition to make. The likely composition of the play between January 1537 and September 1538 corresponds to the period during which Cromwell instigated and executed his radical policy against pilgrimages, relics, images and the honouring of saints. As the

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Cummings, "Iconoclasm and Bibliophobia in the English Reformation" in *Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, eds. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson & Nicolette Zeeman, 185. *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation*, eds. Howard Froce and McClure Kennedy, ii.38 (no7).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Happé, *John Bale*, p.xiv. The chronology of Bale's life which Happé includes dates the plays' composition to 1538, which suggests they were written largely (with the possible exception of *Three Laws*) to fulfil the requirements of Cromwell and Morison's propaganda campaign. Also Whitfield White, pp.12-15.

introduction noted, an obvious target had been the cult of St Thomas a Becket and the pilgrimage to Canterbury in the saint's honour.

In order to counter widespread popular resistance to Henry VIII's ecclesiastical reform and Protestant ideas, Bale adapted existing genres of morality and Biblical plays in order to propagate his views in a more allusive, less combative fashion. Hence 'papist' idolatry is constructed as a social vice that has recurred throughout visible church history. Bale's Biblical drama *God's Promises*— a play based upon the eponymous seven ages—retells the Old Testament history of the Israelites— and therefore the history of England under the false Church— as a constant battle against the breaching of the First Commandment of the Decalogue. All but the first two of its seven acts commence with divine anger at the falling away from truth perpetrated by successive generations: 'the cursed inyquyte of ydolatrye' (ll.507-8: *GP*, C3v) afflicts the Jews after their flight from Egypt, God complains to David that 'I can not abyde the vyce of ydolatrye' (l.584: *GP*, D1), and that 'Whan Josue was dead that sort from me ded fall/ To the worshyppyng of Asteroth and Baal,/ Full uncleane ydolles and monsters bestyall' (ll.586-8: *GP*, D1). Isaiah and John the Baptist are not spared rages against 'the wicked synne of fylthye ydolatrye' (l.732, *GP*: D4) and the lapses caused by the 'Thre score yeares and ten' long Babylonian captivity (l.824: *GP*, E1v). Moses decries how 'thy people hath wrought abomynacyon,/ Worshyppyng false goddes to thy honours derogacyon' (ll.513-4, *GP*: C4). Idolatry is constructed as a social vice that has recurred through the seven ages of visible church history.

Keen to maintain a topical eye on the direction of official policy, Bale's likely brief from Cromwell and Morison would have certainly reflected the iconoclastic attacks on orthodox Catholic iconography including female saints and the Virgin Mary. As a Carmelite, Bale's pre-conversion self had been heavily influenced by such traditional pieties (Fairfield, 1976, pp.16-8). In effect, his male celibate self had been moulded

by devotion to female deities and images. The Dominican friar Robert Holcot's influential *Commentary on the Book of Wisdom* warns against the dangers of female beauty as a form of idolatry; the [male] should 'Turn away thy face from a woman dressed up, and gaze not upon another's beauty'. Holcot glosses this as:

a man, diligently seeking out and considering in his thought the beauty of women, so that he makes idols for himself, necessarily prepares for his own fall. (1989, Camille, pp.298-9)

Idolatry's on-stage female status encodes unnatural male submissiveness in the adoration of female flesh and its representations in simulacrum. As a male magically transformed into a grotesque parody of a female through the obsessive adoration of female flesh, s/he interrogates the formation of the (male) subject through devotion to the Virgin Mary and female saints, and argues that it runs contrary to nature. The idea that Mariolatry contributes to making men effeminate is effectively conveyed through Bale's clever exploitation of the Dionysian and unsettling potential that lies within the cultural practice of male cross-dressing in popular drama. In order to argue that the normal gender hierarchy according to natural law is disrupted through orthodox hagiography, Bale constructs an elaborate theatrical allegory embodied within the cross-dressing character of Idolatry.

Conventional medieval piety read Mary's body as an enclosed space, ostensibly pure and free of sin (2001, Spivey Ellington, p.69). By closing her body to external penetration, she had through her role as mediator between God and the believer, and as *Regina Coeli* or queen of heaven, acquired the power to close the gates of heaven and hell. In the 1380s belief in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had reached fever pitch, with orders and confraternities celebrating the Virgin Mary making their influence felt in universities and royal courts (1988, Perry & Echeverría, p.24). The female, with its connotations of the earthy, the sensual, and the natural, had in Judeo-Christian tradition become associated with sin. As a condemnation of

the grotesqueness inherent in the intermingling of the erotic and the spiritual, of corporeality and the elevation of femininity in orthodox practice, idolatry is defined as fleshly as well as mental transgression. Mary Russo has written of the metaphorical connection between the idea of the cave or 'grotto-esque' as an unfilled and unknown space, and the anatomical female body, whose distinguishing sexual characteristic the vagina replicated in miniature the aforementioned characteristics of the cave. Like the cave or grotto, the vagina is 'Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral' and an inherently enclosed space (1996, Russo, p.1). As Geoffrey Galt Harpham and Ewa Kuryluk have observed, the cave is inherently associated with grotesqueness, and as Kuryluk notes, 'all closed spaces tend to be perceived as female and are associated with both protection and threat' (1982, Galt Harpham, pp.58-60; 1987, Kuryluk, pp.22-3). Thus, ideas of grotesque femininity are associated with the monstrous, the untamed, and the unknown. One might hasten to add that the cave is connected with the concepts of hell and the Hadean underworld in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Christianity took the classical pagan worldview of hell and reinvented it as the grotesque orifices of the mouth and the vagina dentate (1987, Kuryluk, pp.22-3; 1984, Bakhtin, p.26).

The vagina is a space outside the boundaries of the masculine body and voice so heavily identified with dominance and hierarchy in Bale's writings. To this extent, Bale is engaged in writing femininity and femaleness as a strategically imagined space of sexual and social anxiety, with the womb as its nexus. Into that birthing and life-creating space is poured a large number of communal and national concerns: reproduction, iconography, mortality and the question of the royal succession and the Tudor state. Since Henry VIII's determination to procure a male heir had resulted in the declaration of Princesses (later Queens) Mary and Elizabeth as bastards, the issue of illegitimacy arose where the womb functioned

independently of patriarchal control. Complaints about images, relics, the Mass and transubstantiation, and the slippage between the spiritual and the material were not Reformation innovations. Wycliffite teaching and Lollardy expressed a distrust in created objects as vehicles of faith.

The allegorised female embodiment of the vice of idolatry was not without late medieval precedent. Idolatry appears in female guise in the expanded 1355 recension of the long dream-vision poem *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* (*Pilgrimage of The Life of Man*) originally composed in 1330 by the Cistercian Guillaume de Deguileville, and a work where ambivalence about the place of iconography within the spiritual economy is a heavily recurrent theme, composed as it was at a time when controversy raged across Europe about how the expansion of Marian devotion into wider social spaces ‘risked... a devaluation of the divine’, as Michael Camille calls it (2002, Camille, p.153). John Lydgate’s 1426 verse translation of Deguileville’s work made a timely appearance amidst the context of the much fiercer English debate about images provoked by Lollardy. In Lydgate’s version of the Pilgrimage, Idolatry invites the pilgrim— a monk in both the French original and the English translation— to come into her house, where he there encounters a carpenter/mason prostrate in adoration before an image of his own creation. ‘Dame Ydolatrye’ is described as ‘ffoul and horryble off look and Eye’, and brags that she ‘kan, by collusioun/ Tourne al estatys up-so-down’ and her chief purpose, is firstly, paraphrasing Deuteronomy 6:13, ‘To dyfface...The kynges worshepe and honour’ and then, secondly, ‘off ffolkes that be ffre,/ Thys my custom and uságe,/ ffor to brynge hem in seruage’ (1899-1904, Lydgate, pp.556-7). This condemnation of idolatry as a degenerative force that subverts political authority and undermines societal structures finds its eerie echo in *Three Laws*, where Infidelity proudly boasts that:

Now underneth her wynges  
Idolatry hath kynges

With their nobylte,  
 Both dukes, lordes, knyghtes and earles,  
 Fayre ladyes with their pearles,  
 And the whole commenalte. (ll.772-6, *TL*: C1v)

Idolatry thus has the power to turn the individual away from the correct duties of reverence and fealty that are supposed to mediate relationships between commons, nobility and absolute kingship. In *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, immediately after meeting Idolatry, the pilgrim encounters Sorcery, like her immediate predecessor, personified as an ugly old witch, and a disciple of the Devil. When asked, she declares that, ‘My namē ys Bythálassus/ Wych ys to seyné, (who lyst se) Pilgrimage’ (1899-1904, Lydgate, p.561). In *Three Laws*, Infidelity tells Idolatry to ‘Take thys same staffe and scryppe,/ With a God here of a chyppe,/ And good beldame, forewarde hyppe,/ To set fourth pylgrymage’ (ll.667-70, *TL*: B8v), urging her, in effect, to follow the example of the Pilgrimage’s carpenter and carve for herself a wooden image that she, too, can worship. It is striking to note how both texts associate the actual concept of pilgrimage with vice: Deguileville’s Pilgrim has actually embarked on a spiritual voyage in order to be confronted with the *possibility* that journeys made to shrines may not be routes to grace and may in themselves be *idolatrous*. The believer has, by undertaking the journey to visit the idolatrous image, in effect, made an open declaration of their intention to commit the sin of idolatry. From the angle of the Injunctions of September 1538 which prescribe piety within the boundaries of Scripture, Bale’s drama characteristically argues that *all* forms of religious pilgrimage are idolatrous, whether they be to the Boxley Rood of Grace—‘the blessed rode of Kent’— or to any ‘carved ymage’ for ‘yet wyll we have pylgrymage’ (l.494, ll.1111-2, *TL*: B4, D2v).

It is also worth noting here the similarity between the idolatrous practices foregrounded in Bale and Deguileville. In both instances a carved image is the object of veneration. In the case of Deguileville’s carpenter this is an image that *resembles* a king on a throne, but which *may not* be a king.



When False Doctrine declares to Infidelity that for monks and friars it is ‘a very plesaunt thing’ (l.1509, *TL*: E4) that their head abbot is called ‘lorde and kynge’ (l.1510, *TL*: E4) the chief vice hastily reminds him where his allegiance ought to lie:

Naye, monke and chorle, for here is no kynge but one;  
 If he be a kynge hys mace is a marybone  
 And hys crowne a cow torde. Soch knaves as come from the Cart  
 Must be called kynges for playenge a popysh part  
 (ll.1511-14, *TL*: E4).

It is the actual *sin* involved in worshipping false idols rather than the images or relics themselves— the surrender of reason in favour of admiration of the flesh and artificial creation— which is being condemned. Hence the idol is configured as male in *The Pilgrimage* and the vice itself as female. In the French original, the foolish carpenter is described as a ‘vilain’- literally translated by Lydgate as *villain*- the stress being laid upon the personal immorality of idolatry, which in Bale’s eyes lurches between being an individual sin and a widespread social dysfunction (2002, Camille, p.155). In this regard, idolatry closely resembled sodomy, in that it was connected with the old deadly sin of lust. Deguileville’s carpenter effectively lusts after the idol of his own creation; reformers saw the adoration of the Virgin Mary and the veneration of saints as forms of idolatry, because they focused the believer’s attention on the flesh.

Hence, idolatry, as the false worship of surface beauty and the *female* flesh that leads to the ‘lewdenesse’ of Adam, ‘Whych for an apple neglected my commaundement’ (ll.64-5, *GP*: A3), is the root cause of Original Sin and all human unhappiness. Adam’s seduction by Eve prompted the Fall and banishment from Paradise. Turning away from the obedient reverence of God and satiating the self and the body through intercourse and *metaphorical* feasting is the ‘one pore synneful cryme’ that makes Adam’s ‘whole kynde...slyme’ (ll.76-7, *GP*: A3). To paraphrase

Judith Butler's idea of gender as essential to subject formation, Bale repeatedly propounds in his polemical drama the notion that the Roman Church within a female conception leads to the malformation of the male subject. Surrendering one's higher reason and giving into the temptation of the lower flesh is grotesque feminisation, and descent into a dark otherworld from which there is no plausible hope of return. That descent is conceived in metaphysical terms as the male cleric's progressive collapse into the female body— his becoming feminine *and* weak through lascivious carnality and passion— and also in extremely grotesque images of death, mortality, and the body's physical return to the earth. Idolatry is wrong because it overturns reliance upon reason, self-discipline and the genuine faith in the Almighty as 'a substance invysyble' (1.36, *TL*, A3), in favour of forms of sensuality and corporeal indulgence that lead to the sins of pride and worship of carnality. Indulgence of the carnal body inevitably involves a wide variety of sexual transgressions, which in Bale's anti-papal rhetoric fall under the wide embrace of sodomy— itself the ultimate sin of the body (1994, Mager, p.141).

Idolatry's dominance of man is represented through the body of 'Mankynde' as the male subject both physically *and* mentally feminised through an over-adoration of the female image. Not only does this contribute to the legal and sexual perversion of the Law of Nature— glossed in the Latin stage directions as *Lex Naturae*— but also reinforces the notion that the Law of Nature is deliberately created as a hybrid overlay of patriarchal law in which traditionally female Nature is made subordinate to the masculine will of the Tudor state expressed through the metaphorical corpus of the state embodied in Henry VIII *and* his actual physical body. The construction of a form of female dominance that transgresses the natural order is represented in *Three Laws* through the appropriation of elements of the cuckold farce.<sup>4</sup> Medieval and early modern festive culture was rich with examples of women in dominant positions such as Phyllis riding Aristotle or

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, 'law' is translated in Latin as *lex*, which is like *natura* a feminine noun.

the representations on playing cards of women beating men (2001, Humphrey, p.26). However, the linkage with entertainment and play stresses the idea that female dominance is merely a temporary phenomenon that transgresses the hierarchies that ostensibly prevail in the everyday world. This would indicate a problematic and irreconcilable ambiguity as regards the portrayal of women and gender relations in the comic traditions of medieval literature and festivity, as revealed through the theoretical framework of carnival. Bakhtin's views appear suffused with this deeply contrasting ambiguity. On the one hand he argues that:

The popular tradition is in no way hostile to woman and does not approach her negatively. In this tradition woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. (1984, Bakhtin, p.240)

He appears to be here advancing a conception of women as grotesque through their linkage to nature and earth through the process of reproduction, but at the same time stressing the positive connotations of the grotesque female body as one that reproduces itself through childbirth. However, he counters this by stating that:

when this image is treated trivially (in the *fabliaux*, *facéties*, early novellas, and farces) woman's ambivalence acquires an ambiguous nature; it presents a wayward, sensual, concupiscent character of falsehood, materialism, and baseness. (1984, Bakhtin, p.240)

If the woman was allowed to get her way, she would seek dominion over those above her and her disorderliness would lead her into witchcraft and idle theological speculation. Overt sensuality and flirtatiousness, combined with a sharp emphasis upon female usurpation of power and an obsession with the body through the profession of midwifery are all inscribed on the *feminised* body of Idolatry. In this instance, the idea of the 'woman on top'

involves the literal subsuming of an anatomical male body into its female equivalent (1987, Zemon Davis, pp.124-51). Bale constructs the embodiment in such a way as to lay emphasis upon a dualistic polarity of base and indulgent ‘femininity’ rooted in a material and visible world contrasted with the ethereal and eternal patriarchal power of the figures of Heavenly Father (*Pater Coelestis*) in *God’s Promises* and Godly Vengeance (*Vindicta Dei*) in *Three Laws*. One might add in comment that it would have been very much imperative upon Bale to draw upon his skill as a playwright in ensuing that his representation of God remained firmly symbolic as opposed to mimetic in order to ensure that the polarity could be effectively expressed.<sup>5</sup>

The propaganda campaign strongly suggests how *Three Laws* works as a play that was specifically composed for performance on festive occasions. The characterisation of Idolatry with its combination of corporeal, linguistic and above all else, gender transgression appears carefully ‘compyled’ to reflect and contribute to a festive setting. Within the context of Cromwell’s anti-orthodox religious direction, the *magically* feminised allegorical figure of Idolatry was a composite union of political expediency and personal zeal, whose constant moment of gender flux is the destabilising axiom of the play. Idolatry is a character that indulges in riotous masquerade and play that unsettles and dislodges the hitherto privileged discourse and status of the pre-Reformation Church. As Donald Mager comments:

She speaks a language of carnivalesque parody, ribaldry, folk superstition, perverse reversals of hierarchy, and assertions of transgressive female power: if she is not quite an allegorical icon for the Catholic Church as is Spenser’s Duessa, her

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<sup>5</sup> Representing God in mimetic human form was considered blasphemous, and various ingenious devices such as the famous *deus ex machina* were concocted so that God was symbolised and not imitated. Sarah Carpenter and Meg Twycross argue, ‘the mask...must be thought of as completely abolishing the man, the actor himself. We do not see him representing or pretending to *be* God, but only hear the voice speaking God’s words’. ‘Masks in Medieval English Theatre: The Mystery Plays’, in *Medieval English Theatre*, 15 (1993), pp.7-44.

imagery is fused with references to Roman abuses as perceived by the militant Reformation mind. (1994, p.149)

Hence Idolatry is paired with Sodomy as a vice whose ‘sedes ...the lawe of nature begyle’ (ll.552-4, *TL*: B6). The concept of carnival seems to suggest that this is permissible in a temporary sense, and then only as a deviation from normality. Bale’s intention is to use the festive inversion of patriarchy in a parabolic fashion, in order to effectively demonstrate the unnatural dominance of the Mother Church in the real world beyond the realms of festivity. In this instance, the insertion of the abstract signification of the morality play creates a fusion of dramatic elements that allows the cuckold farce to function rather more as an allegory of external reality rather than a bawdy deviation from normal hierarchies. In *Three Laws*, he draws upon the comic traditions of the fabliau and the cuckold’s farce with their images of the ‘woman on top’. Infidelity’s address to the Law of Nature uses the transgressive language that is his ironic privilege as the fool, calling him ‘syr huddypeke’ and ‘next cosyne to a fryar’ (l.227, l.275, *TL*: A7, A8). When rebuked by the Law of Nature, Infidelity’s verbal retaliation is very clever and witty indeed:

*Infidelitas*: By the masse, I the defye  
With thy whole cuckoldrye

And all that with the holde.

A linguistic battle of wits duly erupts between the two:

*Naturae Lex*: Why dost thus me blaspheme,

And so ungodly deme?

*Infidelitas*: For by thys blessed  
I went ye had bene a coke  
And that made me so bolde.

For a coke ones havynge age,  
With a face demure and sage

And auncyent to beholde,

As yow have here in place,  
 With a bearde upon your face,  
 What is he but a coke-olde? (ll.230-44 *TL*: A7-7v)

The use of the book here, presumably a missal, is an interesting counterbalance to the earlier point about Bale's presumed use of Scripture in its incarnation of the printed text as both material object and physical gesture that acts to restore damaged sacramental and communitarian bonds (1993, Whitfield White, p.15). Infidelity mocks Christ's Law as 'a cuckolde' for having been begotten through Jesus Christ and belief in the Bible. Infidelity also makes easy mirth out of the Law of Nature's advanced years, as indicated by his white beard, which renders him nothing 'but a coke-olde'. The emphasis is very firmly on the idea that an old husband is, to coin a bad turn of phrase, fair game when it comes to playing the game of cuckoldry - itself an essentially carnivalesque element. As Peter Burke has noted, a play, usually a farce, was a 'recurrent element in Carnival' (1978, Burke, p.185). Modelled after the French genre of secular comedy known as the *farce du Pastis*, the best-known example of a Reformation period English farce is probably John Heywood's *Johan Johan*, where the mendicant friar Sir John and the young wife Tib cuckold the eponymous elderly husband. The generic Sir John figure had obvious appeal for the avowedly anti-papal Bale, giving him a highly malleable dramatic stereotype easily exploited for the purposes of Cromwell's propaganda campaign (1975, Kahrl, p.120).

Idolatry is represented together with Sodomy as standing in opposition to the Law of Nature, in the first of a series of three triangular relationships in *Three Laws*, where the three virtues (the Laws of Nature, Moses and Christ) are each confronted by three pairs of fool-vice and the head vice, Infidelity, in a pattern similar to that of John Lydgate's 1421

Christmas mumming staged in front of the infant Henry VI.<sup>6</sup> Idolatry's heterogeneity stands in diametric opposition to the homogeneous, enclosed and *strictly* masculine body of the Law of Nature in a play, which like *King Johan*, understands gendered embodiment as a form of strategic political intervention. The Law of Nature as masculine speaks in favour of law and order, and the natural world as a self-contained whole, where, 'Soch creatures as want reson/ My rules obeye yche season' and 'The sunne and mone doth move/ With the other bodies above/ And never break their ordre' (ll.256-7, ll.259-61, *TL*: A8). Only sinful humanity has strayed from 'good lawes naturall' (l.266, *TL*: A8). Making Nature into a male gendered embodiment is easily the most astounding and actually *transgressive* strategy in Bale's drama, because it flies blatantly in the conventional representation of Nature as feminine *Natura*, which is adhered to in earlier moralities and interludes.

These precedents for the Law of Nature are to be found in Henry Medwall's turn of the century court interlude *Nature*, which dates from the reign of Henry VII, and John Rastell's *Four Elements* (c.1520).<sup>7</sup> There is little superficial difference between the representation of Nature in both plays and *Three Laws*: in *Four Elements* the character of *Natura Naturata* declares that she is 'The inmedyate mynyster for the preservacyon Of every thyng in his kynde to endure' (*Four Elements*, ll.156-7) (1979, Axton, p.34). Medwall's eponymous title character speaks of 'fowles, bestys, and fysshes in theyre kynde', and of how 'No maner creature may take on hym the cure/ Of these workys but onely I, Nature' (*Nature*: l.30, ll.34-5, A2r) (1980, Nelson, p.92). Yet in Medwall's *Nature*, one sees the application of the cosmological and Aristotelian conception of logic to the natural world;

<sup>6</sup> Lydgate's Christmas disguising was presented in 1427 in the royal palace at Hertford Castle before the boy-king Henry VI. Derek Forbes reconstructs the pageant in *Lydgate's Disguising at Hertford Castle: The First Secular Comedy in the English Language*. Also, see Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool*, pp.25-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Nature* is reprinted by Alan H. Nelson in his critical edition *The Plays of Henry Medwall* (Cambridge: DS Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980); Richard Axton reprints *Four Elements* in *Three Rastell Plays* (Cambridge: DS Brewer; Totowa, NJ: 1979).

she talks of ‘Counsell with Arystotell my philosopher electe,/ Whyche hath left in bokys of hys tradycyon/ How every thyng by hevenly constellacyon/ Is brought to effecte’ (*Nature*: ll.59-62, A2r) (1980, Nelson, p.93). Where Bale’s Law of Nature differs, is that he is really more a transgendered hybrid of feminine Nature and masculine Reason, where the ‘male’ mind and Aristotelian logic take precedence over the ‘female’ body. The Law of Nature is not really concerned with the concept of untamed ‘nature’ as such; rather he articulates in a more blatant fashion than either Medwall’s or Rastell’s allegorical equivalents the idea of there being an inviolate natural order that is governed by Judeo-Christian traits of moderation and reason. Any transgression or deviation from it, such as idolatry or sodomy that exists as a form of corporeal expression, is automatically grotesque because it concerns excess that challenges boundaries as Bale understands them.

I would concur with Donald Mager in seeing Idolatry as not quite being emblematic of Spenser’s Duessa. Perhaps a more appropriate forerunner would be Bale’s lavishly attired Whore of Babylon in his apocalyptic church history *The Image of Both Churches*, which was originally published during Bale’s first exile in Antwerp in 1545, and which, replicating the antithesis of Christ and Antichrist, imagined the visible world divided between the True and the False Churches (1982, King, pp.61-2). As I shall presently consider, Idolatry is closer to being an inverted allegory of the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne, and perhaps other assorted female saints, but the relationship between Idolatry and the pantheon of orthodox (female) sainthood is never made explicit, rather hinted at tangentially through Idolatry’s dual profession as witch-midwife, and her embodiment as old and ugly, and thus barren.<sup>8</sup>

If anything, Idolatry is very much more akin to *The Faerie Queene*’s sterile temptress-sorceress Acrasia, who stretches out her limbs in the Bower

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<sup>8</sup> Bale may be drawing upon the Dame of folk-play tradition. See Happé, *The Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, p.163; Richard Axton, “Folk Play in Tudor Interludes”, in M. Axton and R. Williams (eds), *English Drama: Forms and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, pp.22-3.



of Bliss, the imitation garden, and who seduces the knight so he spends his body in ‘lewd loves, and wastfull luxuree’, until Sir Guyon prevails and destroys the Bower, ultimately proving his masculinity in his successful resistance to feminine wiles.<sup>9</sup> Idolatry is the most symbolically overloaded, syncretic and polyvalent body in Bale’s extant drama and a prime example of what Bakhtin defines as ‘the body-matrix’ that encompasses:

a heterogeneous world of things, phenomena and ideas that were in the medieval picture of the world, infinitely far from the body, and included in completely different series of words and objects. (1981, Bakhtin, p.176)

Alongside Widow England, s/he is the only female characterisation. The two bodies share, in spite of diametrically opposed allegorical significations, the same fragile instability, that deems female authority and femininity grotesque spaces. There is thus a potent cross-fertilisation between ideas of female authority, nationhood, gender identity and iconography in Bale’s works. Idolatry as an embodiment of an Ovidian gender mutability is really only possible in the topsy-turvy world of festivity. As both a man playing at being a woman and a man magically self-transformed into a woman, Idolatry personifies and physically represents an idea of the grotesque woman articulated by Margaret Miles, as, ‘the creature closest to the male subject, but innately, disturbingly different’, and who, ‘is ultimately more grotesque than are exotic monsters’ (1997, p.85). This stress upon the close resemblance of the subject spectator to the grotesque embodiment on stage is a very important point, given the unsettling proximity of male and female bodies inferred by the process of gender metamorphosis. Idolatry possesses a body that is both Ovidian and Dionysian in essence, and to use a loose, if arguably apt cliché, *gender-bending*. Idolatry’s body as an example of

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<sup>9</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book II Canto XII, p.381. See also Clifford Davidson, *History, Religion, and Violence: Cultural Contexts for Medieval and Renaissance English Drama*, pp.70-2; 79-81. Davidson discusses Acrasia in the context of witchcraft, female seduction and Apocalypse in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* in his chapter ‘*Antony and Cleopatra*: Circe, Venus, and the Whore of Babylon’, pp.64-94.

Ovidian metamorphosis is mutable and unpredictable; one has the feeling that changing gender is merely one aspect of its ability to morph from one shape to another.

In conclusion, the blurring of socially and biologically constructed masculinity and femininity undermines the essentially patriarchal institutions of family and nation that the Protestant reformers in England and elsewhere saw as essential to their construction of a reformed and early Protestant subjectivity. Yet, as the Cromwellian propaganda campaign shows— and it is a valedictory vindication of the Foucauldian conception of sexuality as a means of the exercise of authority— it could serve as a useful conduit for the projection of power. A fleshly and degenerate Mother Church may have corrupted male and female subjects alike, but in its corrupt body it nonetheless allowed opportunistic reformers like Bale, released from an old ideology with its associated bonds and obligations, new ways of imagining identities.

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