

The Journal of Religion and Theatre

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**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

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ISSN 1544-8762

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Debra Bruch, Ph.D.
General Editor, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*
Department of Fine Arts
Michigan Technological University
1400 Townsend Drive
Houghton, MI 49931

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The Effect of the Reformation on the Antagonists in English Drama

by Mark C. Pilkinton

The break with Rome in 1535 initiated a series of complex reversions and lasting deflections which produced notable changes in the national drama. These reversions and deflections thoroughly established, by the time of the opening of the Theatre and Second Blackfriars in 1576, an ideology of drama which was clearly made manifest in the great Elizabethan and Jacobean plays of the Shakespearean era. This paper relates the changes which English drama reflected during this turbulent time, with a special commentary on how these changes altered the nature of the dramatic antagonist.

To understand what changed in 1535, one must know the precedents of this momentous time in English history. Throughout much of the 15th century, the English drama dealt with absolute polarity between a perfect protagonist, God, and a patently evil antagonist, Lucifer, who, in his cyclic form, emerges as the ultimate source of dramatic antagonism in the English drama.¹

Using *The Castle of Perseverance* (1425) as an example, before the Catholic Renaissance of Henry VII late in the century, the following principles regarding the antagonist hold true: an absolutely evil devil as antagonist attacks; an absolutely good God as protagonist defends; and a fallible humankind exercises free will in a macrocosmic setting more easily occupied by evil than by good. Demonic temptation, best seen in the deadliest of the deadly sins, covetousness (avarice, greed), succeeds in bringing humankind's soul to hell while demonic coercion (most often seen in the deadly sins of pride, wrath, and envy) fails to do so. Humanity, whose state of sin qualitatively can never earn salvation, need only ask for mercy from a beneficent God to receive it.

Between 1495 and 1535, the Catholic Renaissance begun by Henry VII continues under the reign of his son, Henry VIII, and brings about significant changes in the national drama, the most significant of which is the assumption rather than the presentation of the absolute polarity between good and evil (which was so obvious in *The Castle of Perseverance*). Neither God nor the devil appears in the twenty extant interludes from 1495 to 1535.² Playwrights of the Tudor Interludes extend the dramatic heritage of cosmic polarity between the Trinity and Lucifer to produce terrestrial agents who represent good and evil. These agents are both personified vices and virtues and mortal human beings who reveal their cosmic sympathies through their behavior. The conflict between protagonist and antagonist occurs on a recognizable earth inhabited largely

¹ This article is derived from Mark C. Pilkinton, *The Antagonists of English Drama, 1370-1576*, (Diss: Univ. of Bristol, England, 1974), available in a revised form in the United States as *The Antagonists of English Drama Before 1576* (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1984). It was presented as a paper at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education National Conference in August 1989.

² See Appendix (page 53, below). In *The Weather* (1528), the Roman god Jupiter appears and rewards greed and self-indulgence.

by mortal humanity. By assuming rather than presenting the cosmic polarity between the triune God and his fallen, brightest angel, Lucifer, the dramatists generate a more apparently secular drama.

Personified vices appear in eleven of the twenty Tudor Interludes extant from 1495-1535, varying from the conventional characters in *Nature* (1495) who represent the World, the Flesh, and the Fiend, to distinctly unsinister characters like Merry Report in *The Weather* (1528), who is nevertheless labeled a "Vice." Personified vices corrupt personified humanity, as in *Nature* (1495), *Magnificence* (1504), *Mundus et Infans* (1508), *Youth* (1520), and *The Nature of the Four Elements* (1517); they corrupt historical mortal characters, as in the case of Aman in *Godly Queen Hester* (1527); and in a play which has no mortal protagonist, such as *Hickscorner* (1513), the Vices attack the Virtues.

With the emphasis shifted away from cosmic polarity and the resulting new priority on this world and the worldliness that this shift embraces, it is little wonder that the attitude toward the deadliest of all the deadly sins changes: in both *Magnificence* (1504) and *Mundus et Infans* (1508), a new virtue called husbandry is born when the playwrights separate the management of wealth from wealth itself. This Catholic Renaissance acceptance of well-managed worldliness as a virtue signals a shift in the view of sin from one that is qualitative (any amount of a sin places one in a damnable state) to one that is quantitative (a well-managed amount of covetousness is not covetousness at all—it is husbandry—and only when worldliness becomes excessive does it mutate into the vice of covetousness).

With the removal of absolute good and evil from the Place, the doctrine of free will becomes more important than ever, and, indeed, is personified for the first time in *Hickscorner* (1513). In addition, the acceptance of husbandry as a virtue, which permits and even encourages the accumulation of wealth and power, and the continued importance of free will make it possible to depict for the first time the prince as protagonist. The generalized character Humanum Genus of *The Castle of Perseverance* becomes the prince Magnificence in the play by the same name in 1504. The wealthy, powerful (but flawed) Lord Temporal chooses between good and evil and rises to prosperity or falls into adversity accordingly during the progress of Skelton's 2,567-line morality play.

Before the national drama fully realizes the potential variety made available by the rapid humanization of characters brought about by the new thinking and attitudes of the Catholic Humanist Renaissance, Henry VIII separates the Church of England from the Church of Rome, and the drama reverts to an earlier simplicity which presents rather than assumes the cosmic polarity between God and the devil. Between the break with Rome (1547), the development of apparently secular drama stops, and the drama becomes an instrument of Protestant polemic.³

³ Note the theological shift in English drama between 1527 and 1533: In 1527 the play *Heretic Luther*, an anti-Protestant interlude, is performed at the Court of Henry VIII. In 1533, both *Against the Cardinals*, an anti-Catholic interlude is performed at Court, and in the same year the pageant, *The Coronation Triumph of Anne Boleyn* is performed in London. (See *Annals of English Drama*, pp 22-25.)

One need only turn to John Bale's extant plays to see the depiction of cosmic polarity at work. In all of his plays except *King Johan* (1538), God appears, and in the case of *The Temptation of Our Lord* (1538), Satan understandably has a key role. This contrasts sharply with the drama of the preceding period wherein neither God nor the devil appears.

Although God re-enters the Place after 1535, he functions differently from his fifteenth-century predecessors. The defensive God who protects a free-thinking humanity from an offensive diablerie now takes the offensive and brings down upon the antagonists his divine wrath. Indeed, divine wrath is personified as the character *Vindicta Dei* in Bale's *Three Laws* (1538).

Within the new political and religious ethic, the reversion to cosmic polarity virtually eliminated the doctrine of free will as a concept worthy of dramatic expression and support. When John Bale writes a play with agents of good and evil, such as *King Johan*, he makes it clear that his protagonist stands in for God and is not a mortally flawed human being who walks a tightrope between hell-pit and heaven's bliss. Bale sees free will as a freedom more often abused than not, and his characters who are agents of good and evil represent a return to a more fundamental doctrine of absolutes. Necessarily, qualitative sin re-emerges as good and evil forces once again lock in a battle to the death.

The most significant deflection which results from the reversion to cosmic polarity as a result of the Reformation centers around the role of the prince. In Protestant polemical drama, the devil's agent on earth becomes the Pope (=Antichrist) and God's representative becomes the prince (=Christ). In the spirit of Reform, the prince becomes God's incorruptible vicar, and he defends God's law against the world's infidels, whether they be Turks or Roman Catholics. A play like *God's Promises* states clearly that princely infallibility is a tradition established by the great patriarchs of the Bible; thus the play elevates Henry VIII into the company of Moses and David. The prince emerges as the only individual capable of destroying the demonic hierarchy of the Church of Rome while at the same time protecting the souls and bodies of his subjects. As God's minister, he no longer freely chooses between good and evil, as does Magnificence in the preceding period; evil prevails only when the formidable strength of the Pope/Antichrist triumphs.

From 1536 to 1547 humanization of agents of good and evil does in fact occur but in a transmuted way from that of the preceding period. One sees for the first time Vices punished physically on earth, as in *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaits* (1540); such punishment serves strongly to indicate the development of more human characters (only genuine human beings can suffer earthly punishment). If God assumes mortality on earth in the person of the King and if Lucifer sits on the See of Rome in the corporeal person of the Pope, then it is reasonable to assume that the Vices, too, lose some of their inherently impalpable nature and become agents of evil who are also living, breathing human beings liable to terrestrial law and punishment.

The Edwardian and Marian years see a significant growth in censorship. It is little wonder that the few surviving plays, such as *Ralph Royster Doyster* (1552) and *Gammer Gurton's Needle*

(1553), shift almost completely away from religious polemic and deal instead with comedy of manners and satiric parody. The characters are decidedly human, and when cosmic polarity does arise, as in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* where the devil is treated as a matter for superstition, it is in a comic context. Censorship and religious instability at mid-century appear to hone the edge of the sword of social satire, a refinement which permits the drama henceforth to direct itself with greater accuracy against a much smaller target.

In the one surviving play of Catholic polemic from the Marian period, *Respublica* (1553), one sees eschewed the cosmic polarity on which John Bale so heavily relied. Instead, the play falls back on pre-Reformation traditions of sin and free will and attributes the Reformation not to the papal Antichrist but to the deadly sin of kingly covetousness.

During the first eighteen years of Elizabeth's reign (1558-1576), dramatists make use of the wide variety of options available to them. The drama continues to evaluate vicious behavior in terms of cosmic polarity, with the devil himself appearing in seven of the twenty-nine extant plays. In *The Life and Repentance of Marie Magdalene* (1559), *The Glass of Government* (1575), and *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576), playwrights combine atheism with traditional religious polemic to create yet another ploy deceitful demonic vices can use to swell hell's ranks (a device Marlowe will also use in *Doctor Faustus*).

The prince as God's vicar, established in the drama in the early years of the Reformation, continues as an important tradition but with a significant change. The prince is once again capable of error, not to say sin, and thus he becomes fallible. With the harshness and injustice of Mary's reign in living memory of the Protestants once again in control of the kingdom, it was now obvious to all that princely power, when unsupported by godly virtue, could destroy the kingdom.⁴ The quarrel remains God's however,⁵ and when the people interfere as in *Gorboduc* (1562), anarchy and chaos result.

With the acceptance of princely error (within the context of the prince as God's agent), the doctrine of free will rises once again to the forefront. Protagonists choose to do ill or good and suffer or prosper accordingly. In *The Conflict of Conscience* (1572), free will permits the forces of demonic temptation to triumph over the forces of demonic coercion.

The quantitative view of sin and the related development of the virtue of husbandry from the vice of covetousness re-appears in the drama with Elizabeth's accession. A Protestant capitalist society carries it one step further by formulating a work ethic which replaces covetousness with sloth as the supreme vice. Covetousness continues to be a prince of sin, but only within a quantitative frame. *Enough is as Good as a Feast* (1560) attests in its title that a certain quantity of worldliness is perfectly acceptable; indeed, in such plays as *The Conflict of Conscience*,

⁴ The Coronation Pageants for Elizabeth visually and verbally make this point: the *Ruinosa Respublica* and the *Respublica bene instituta* effectively compare the dissolute past with the (hopefully) prosperous future. See David M. Bergeron, *English Civic Pageantry: 1558-1642* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), p. 19.

⁵ See John of Gaunt's speech in William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, 1.2.37-41.

worldliness becomes necessary to provide for one's family.

Between 1558 and 1576, antagonists become increasingly human and continue to suffer punishment on earth for their misdeeds. In *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576), the dramatist permits Greediness to be both an agent of evil and a mortal human being. As a mortal human being, he dies, but the abstract nature of the vice lives on forever.

While attacking princely misrule, the drama also elevates the virtuous woman to the ranks of the godly protagonists. The worship of the Virgin Mary, no longer an acceptable part of English culture, deflects to the veneration of supremely virtuous historical female figures. The dramatists undoubtedly have in mind their own virgin queen when they write such plays as *Grissell* (1559), *Appius and Virginia* (1564), and *Susanna* (1569), which optimistically describe the godliness as related to virtue and chastity. Virginia dies by her father's hand rather than submit to Appius' lust; Grissell's exceptional godliness is described as "perfect integrity"; and Susanna remains uniquely free of sin in a profoundly dissolute world.

The period from 1559 to 1576 sees the re-emergence of the individual freethinking human being who is capable of making the decisions which will ultimately bring salvation or damnation. This represents a transmutation of a corresponding shift toward humanization of dramatic characters which had occurred before the Break with Rome, for it takes place not in the Catholic tradition of the Humanist Renaissance of Henry VII, but in an atmosphere of rebirth bounded by Protestant and nationalistic interests.

Having explored the conventions which obtained until 1576, it is well to say a word about the later Elizabethan period. While it is not within the scope of this article to analyze and to evaluate the antagonists after 1576, it is worthwhile to apply the principles herein discussed and to view the drama through the eyes of those of the time rather than from the vantage point of the twentieth century.

It is well to remember that only twenty-seven years pass between the opening of The Theatre and the death of Elizabeth; thus all dramatic models and precedents which had been established by 1576 remained in living memory of the nation's playwrights throughout a period which saw performed all of Peele, Greene, Kyd, and Marlowe, as well as a majority of the plays written by Shakespeare. To be sure, new pressures arose to influence the choices dramatists could make, not the least of which was the political pressure of censorship; the box office exerted pressure on dramatists to write plays which would be commercially successful; and life as it was being lived created topical pressure, as it always does in any art form. But behind these new pressures lies the inherited tradition as outlined above, and I would plead that to look to these inherited traditions and conventions, when evaluating the drama of the later Elizabethan period, can be illuminating and can bring one closer to the realities of the time.

With a knowledge of the dramatic traditions and conventions which playwrights of the later Elizabethan period inherited from the Tudor Interludes, it becomes legitimate to view a character

like Hotspur both as a rash intemperate princeling and as a personification of the deadly sins of pride, wrath, and envy; a character like Falstaff can be seen to represent both the worldly, wildly humorous companion to a prince and the personification of the sins of sloth, lechery, and covetousness. The closer one brings any critical examination of such plays to the conventions of the Tudor Interludes, the more likely one is to see an agent of demonic coercion in Hotspur and an agent of demonic temptation in Falstaff. In a play like *Doctor Faustus*, one need not look very far to see demonic antagonists employing the traditional methods of disguise, deceit, and mendacity to ensure the arrival in hell of the body and soul of the presumptuous Faustus. What the knowledge of the national dramatic tradition serves to do is to replace the question, "Why does Richard III behave as he does?" by providing the answer: he is "the son of hell" as Queen Margaret says he is, a devil incarnate, an Antichrist who has unlawfully claimed supreme temporal authority and who can be vanquished only by the King/Christ Henry VII, grandfather of the reigning monarch Elizabeth.

These are but a few examples of the many parallels which exist between the Tudor Interlude and the more apparently secular drama of the later Elizabethan period. I have attempted above to call attention to the important changes which occur in the non-cyclic drama between 1495 and 1576. Those changes collectively form the dramatic heritage available to playwrights of the later Elizabethan period. To suppose this heritage is replaced outright in 1576 is to fly in the face of reason. To suppose that playwrights like Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare spontaneously generate their dramaturgy from their own geniuses, without regard to their national dramatic heritage, is to ignore the way in which any art form develops.

Appendix

Extant Tudor Interludes from 1495 to 1576

This appendix is derived from *Annals* with the exception of the dating of *Magnificence*. See Leigh Winser, "Skelton's *Magnificence*," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 23, No. 1 (Spring 1970), 14-25.

One asterisk (*) indicates the play is incomplete; two asterisks (**) indicate the play is a fragment.

1495-1535

(Before the break with Rome)

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1495 | Medwell, Henry. <i>Nature</i> . |
| 1497 | _____. <i>Fulgens and Lucrece</i> . |
| 1504 | Skelton, John. <i>Magnificence</i> . |
| 1508 | Anon. <i>Mundus et Infans</i> . |
| 1513 | Anon. <i>Hickscorner</i> . |
| 1517 | Rastell, John. <i>The Nature of the Four Elements</i> .* |
| 1519 | Heywood, John. <i>The Pardoner and the Friar</i> . |

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- 1520 _____ . *The Four PP.*
_____ *Johan Johan.*
Anon. *John the Evangelist.* *
Anon. *Youth.*
- 1527 Rastell, John (?). *Calisto and Melibea.*
_____ *Gentleness and Nobility.*
Anon. *Godly Queen Hester.*
- 1528 Heywood, John. *The Weather.*
- 1530 Anon. *The Prodigal Son.***
- 1533 Heywood, John. *Love.*
_____ *Wit and Witless.*
Anon. *Old Christmas or Good Order.***
- 1535 Anon. *Temperance and Humility.***

1536-1547

(From the Break With Rome to the Death of Henry VIII)

- 1537 Udall, Nicholas (?). *Thersites.*
Anon. *Albion Knight.**
- 1538 Bale, John. *God's Promises.*
_____ . *John Baptist's Preaching in the Wilderness.*
_____ . *King Johan.*
_____ . *The Temptation of Our Lord.*
_____ . *Three Laws.*
- 1539 Redford, John. *Courage, Kindness, Cleanness.***
_____ . *D.G. and T.***
_____ . *Wit and Science.**
- 1540 Lindsay, David. *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaits.*
- 1542 Anon. *The Four Cardinal Virtues.***
- 1545 Anon. *The Resurrection of Our Lord.*
- 1547 Anon. *Impatient Poverty.*

1548-1558

(The Edwardian and Marian Years)

- 1550 Wever, R. *Lusty Juventus.*
Anon. *Love Feigned and Unfeigned.***
Anon. *Nice Wanton.*
Anon. *Somebody and Others.***
- 1552 Udall, Nicholas. *Ralph Royster Doyster.*
- 1553 Stevenson, W. (Mr. 'S.'). *Gammer Gurton's Needle.*
Anon. *Respublica.*

- 1554 Udall, Nicholas. *Jacob and Esau*.
Anon. *Wealth and Health*.
1555 Anon. *Jack Juggler*.

1559-1576

(From the accession of Elizabeth to the opening of The Theatre)

- 1559 Wager, Lewis. *The Life and Repentance of Marie Magdalene*.
Phillip, John. *Grissell*.
Wager, W. *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art*.
1560 Ingeland, Thomas. *The Disobedient Child*.
Wager, W. *Enough is as Good as a Feast*.
Anon. *Tom Tyler and His Wife*.
1561 Preston, Thomas. *Cambises*.
Anon. *The Pedlar's Prophecy*.
1562 Norton, Thomas, and Sackville, Thomas. *Gorboduc*.
1564 Anon. *Appius and Virginia*.
1565 Edwards, Richard. *Damon and Pithias*. Wager, W. *The Cruel Debtor*.**
Anon. *King Darius*.
1567 Pickering, John. *Horesies*.
Wager, W. (?). *The Trial of Treasure*.
1568 Fulwell, Ulpian. *Like Will to Like*.
Anon. *The Marriage of Wit and Science*.
1569 Garter, Thomas. *Susanna*.
1570 Rudd, A. et al. *Misogonus*.
Anon. *Clyomon and Clamydes*.
Anon. *July and Julian*.
Merbury, Francis (?). *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*.
1571 Anon. *New Custom*.
1572 Woodes, Nathaniel. *The Conflict of Conscience*.
1575 Gascoigne, George. *The Glass of Government*.
Anon. *Processus Satanae*.**
1576 Wapull, George. *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*.
Anon. *Common Conditions*.
Lupton, Thomas. *All for Money*.