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## Staging Reformation: Religious Theater in England, 1525-1553

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# **Staging Reformation: Religious Theater in England, 1525-1553**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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in

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by  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyzes and explores the role of privately sponsored religious theater and dramatic performance in the English Reformation, 1525-1553. In the sixteenth century, most theater was religious in nature, and audiences were accustomed to receiving clear moral and political messaging in the form of dramatic entertainment. Plays that were written and performed specifically for individual monarchs also include these commentaries and moral arguments, and can provide historians with significant insight into what messages were presented to monarchs. These insights are particularly illuminating in studies of the cultural progress of the English Reformation under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary I. Playwrights John Bale, John Heywood, Richard Wever, and Nicholas Udall worked in close proximity to these monarchs and presented plays created for them; an examination of these plays can reveal what monarchs saw and how playwrights navigated the changing social and political world of the English Reformation as it progressed.

The plays of Bale, Heywood, Wever, and Udall also provide insight in an examination of the Reformation's influence on English culture at the highest social levels. Playwrights continued to work in medieval traditions, particularly the morality play genre, even though these customs and structures were part of outdated religious traditions. These medieval genres and literary influences could adapt easily to a Protestant religious message while retaining their medieval character. What messages these playwrights chose to present to their monarchs, and the theatrical traditions and styles used to present them, illuminate the inner thoughts of these pivotal characters during the English Reformation.

## Introduction

In February 1565, a clerk at the court of Elizabeth I of England recorded that the Revels Office, responsible for overseeing all courtly entertainment, had paid a total of 444*l*.11*s*5¾*d* for plays and masques that had been performed at court since 1563.<sup>1</sup> This amount, roughly £106,000 (over \$144,000) in 2017, covered the charges for only two years of courtly entertainment. Even this value, substantial as it is, underestimates how much this money was actually worth. In the 1560s, a typical laborer earned around £5 per year, and Elizabeth's court spent over eighty-eight times that amount for two years of plays and performances. Theater in the sixteenth century was expensive—as it remains today—and Elizabeth was happy to pay exorbitantly for it.

Elizabeth's taste for theater was the culmination of a long tradition within the Tudor family. All of the Tudor monarchs sponsored a personal theatrical troupe, on call to perform for the court for holidays, special occasions, or whenever the monarch wanted to see a performance. Henry VIII and his children regularly indulged in masques, interludes, and revels as part of their courtly entertainment during their respective reigns, and these performances became an integral part of court culture in each period. Playwrights and performers who presented plays at court had a unique opportunity to communicate with the monarch through their works, and a responsibility to tailor their work to ensure that the monarch saw what they wanted to see.

The playwrights studied in this thesis wrote in this very setting. John Bale, John Heywood, Nicholas Udall, and Richard Wever were playwrights of the Tudor period, whose connections to the monarchy elevated their plays in historiographic importance. These four men

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<sup>1</sup> "Estimate of charges for the representation of various plays and masques before the Court." February 1565. MS Secretaries of State: State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth I. SP 12/36 f.43. The National Archives of the UK. *State Papers Online*.

worked in the royal context, presenting plays that they knew monarchs would see; the stories they chose to write, and how they chose to present those stories, are full of unspoken realities about what the English Reformation looked like within the Tudor family, and what influence it had—or did not have—on English theatrical structures.

This thesis sets out to investigate plays that were performed for monarchs, or connected to them, to gain insights into the cultural progress of the English Reformation under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary I. John Bale's *King Johan*, *Three Laws*, and *God's Promises*; John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*, *The Four PP*, *The Pardoner and the Friar*, and *Johan Johan*; Richard Wever's *Lusty Juventus*; and Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* all provide examples of the types of stories that were presented to monarchs, and demonstrate how these playwrights worked through the cultural and religious developments of the English Reformation. These plays call into question the Reformation's influence—cultural, theatrical, and religious—on the highest levels of English society. While Catholicism gave way to Protestantism, playwrights continued to hold to medieval theatrical customs and structures that came from outdated religious traditions. The morality play remained a popular vehicle for religious messages, both Catholic and Protestant, and retained much of its medieval character while also adapting to suit the needs of Protestant playwrights. The monarchs who watched these plays, most notably Henry VIII and Mary I, saw parodies of the clergy and of controversies within the pre-Reformation church, heavy-handed commentary on English history and the moral responsibilities of the king of England, and a carefully balanced criticism of Protestant regimes. Their direct responses to these plays have not survived, but the playwrights knew what kind of world they were working in, and what they chose to present in the first place provides historians with significant clues about the inner thoughts of these monarchs during the Reformation.

## The English Reformation: A Brief Overview

England was deeply affected by the Protestant Reformation, which stretched from the publication of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and brought about waves of dramatic and sometimes violent turmoil across the European continent. Beliefs that we might now identify with Protestantism existed in England before Lutheran ideology, nor were Luther's ideas the only Protestant influences that reached England: the Lollards, followers of fourteenth-century theologian John Wycliffe, persisted in scattered groups across the island despite extensive persecution, and Ulrich Zwingli's followers fled to England from Switzerland beginning in 1523.<sup>2</sup> When Luther's writings and belief in *sola scriptura* reached England in the 1520s, Protestant thought was already well established. The enthusiastic reception of Tyndale's English language New Testament, published in Antwerp in 1526, conclusively demonstrates that English academia had definitively turned toward Protestantism.<sup>3</sup>

The Henrician Reformation, the first of four reformation projects undertaken by the Tudor family, grew out of this turbulent period, but was spurred on by questions of politics rather than religious belief. While Protestant ideas picked up steam in the English community, these same ideologies led to complications at Henry VIII's court. Henry's contentious attempts to secure an annulment from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in 1527 prompted him to turn to Parliament to limit the Pope's power and impose his authority over his own kingdom. Henry's anticlerical turn was not inconsistent with previous English legal precedent; the Statute of Praemunire, which made it illegal to appeal a monarch's decision to the Pope, had been on the books since 1392, and Henry used this old statute to punish Lord Chancellor Cardinal Thomas

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<sup>2</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1964), 22-32, 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 70-74.

Wolsey for his failure to get Pope Clement VII to grant the annulment in the first place. The Parliament convened in 1529, which came to be called the Reformation Parliament, was originally primarily intended to solidify Henry's authority over the clergy, but Henry's newfound anticlericalism coincided with the arrival of Tyndale's *Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), and he ended up walking away with much more than tight control over English religious officials. The Reformation Parliament passed the Supplication of the Commons Against the Ordinaries in 1529, strengthened the existing statutes of praemunire in 1530, and passed the Act of Supremacy in 1534.<sup>4</sup> Henry was now head of a new Church of England, primarily defined by its separation from Rome and its much-weakened clergy.

The Reformation Parliament provoked tensions between conservative members and those who were either Protestant or sympathized with the need for religious reform, and those pressures were equally present at court. Thomas Cromwell, Wolsey's former secretary and a devout Protestant, had championed Henry's cause in Parliament, and persistently attempted to guide Henry towards religious reform through his tenure as Henry's most important servant. Henry's second wife Anne Boleyn was also Protestant, and allied with Cromwell to help persuade Henry in favor of religious reform; she reportedly gave Henry a copy of Tyndale's *Obedience of a Christian Man*, which may have inspired him to pursue a break with Rome. Thomas Cranmer, who would become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533, entered Henry's service in 1527 and was a leading Protestant voice at court. Cromwell, Cranmer, and Anne were not Henry's only influences, however, and were up against a committed faction of conservative officials and nobles who were determined to see church traditions preserved. The most prominent of these officials were Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, and Thomas Howard,

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<sup>4</sup> Michael A.R. Graves, *Early Tudor Parliaments 1485-1558* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1990), 51.



the duke of Norfolk. Henry was surrounded by religiously-motivated conflict that often turned personal and violent, and throughout the Henrician Reformation period was under pressure from elites on both sides of the Catholic/Protestant divide to shape religion their way.

Historians generally agree that the English church did not truly become Protestant in doctrine, despite the break with Rome, until the reign of Henry's son Edward VI. Edward took the throne in 1547 at nine years old, and for the entirety of his reign was under the control of a Lord Protector. The first such protector was Edward Seymour, duke of Somerset and Edward's maternal uncle. Somerset was himself a committed Protestant, and through Edward's authority instituted sweeping and destabilizing religious policy changes. An official, mandatory Book of Homilies was published in July 1547, which preached a doctrine of salvation through faith alone, and Archbishop Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549. The book was meant to be a compromise between conservatives and Protestant reformers, but still eliminated the elevation of the host and intentionally took an ambiguous position on transubstantiation. A series of violent rebellions followed in the summer of 1549, which demanded a return to pre-Reformation Catholicism. Somerset and his policies were blamed for this violence, and John Dudley, duke of Northumberland, replaced him as Lord Protector. Northumberland removed all conservative bishops from the episcopate in 1550 and replaced them with reform-minded Protestants, including Nicholas Ridley and Miles Coverdale. This group of bishops pushed for even more dramatic reforms that were no more popular than Somerset's, including the use of communion tables in place of stone altars. A second Book of Common Prayer was published in 1552, which drastically simplified the eucharist and clerical vestments. The Forty-Two Articles were enacted just before Edward's death in 1553, and while they were never enforced, outlined a truly Protestant definition of the Church of England's doctrine.

English Catholics hoped that Edward's sister Mary would reverse the process of Protestant reform and restore English Catholicism when she inherited the throne in July 1553, but were initially disappointed. Mary began her process of reform slowly, initially promising religious tolerance, and faced substantial resistance from the Protestant nobility that had gained power under Edward. Mary's first Parliament repealed Edward's reforms and reinstated the mass by the end of 1553, but refused Stephen Gardiner's proposal to repeal all religious legislation since 1529. Mary married Philip II of Spain, son of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, in 1554 with the hopes of producing a Catholic heir and reconciling England with Rome. Cardinal Reginald Pole arrived in England in late 1554 to end the schism, and Henry's Act of Supremacy was officially repealed in December.

With Henry's separation from Rome rescinded, Marian Catholic reform accelerated quickly. Mary's church did not return to pre-Reformation practice; the new doctrine emphasized the individual's inner faith and placed less focus on saints, images, and the sacraments. Pole succeeded Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1556, and oversaw the creation of the *Reformatio Angliae*, a series of decrees that imposed tighter discipline on the English clergy. New programs of education were established, and the church acted to rebuild Catholicism in England from the ground up.

But pockets of Protestant loyalty remained throughout England, and Mary faced resistance and rebellion throughout her reign from these underground Protestant minority communities. Heresy was reinstated as a capital crime in 1555, and nearly three hundred Protestants were burned at the stake from 1555 to 1558 for acts of religious dissent. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) publicized these executions and cemented Mary's legacy as a violent and vindictive monarch. Mary's reforms were successful, in that the Catholic church had once again

achieved supremacy in England and Protestantism had become a quiet minority, but the moniker “Bloody Mary” would permanently color historical perception of this time period.

### **English Religious Theater**

English theater during the medieval period carried an important moral obligation that went far beyond entertainment. Almost all theater preoccupied itself in some way with the instruction of the human soul. Virtually everything that made it onto the stage carried some kind of metaphorical or allegorical meaning. This feature makes theater particularly interesting to study: since plays were verbally transmitted, an audience member need not have been literate to participate in this moral culture. An audience would also have understood that underneath the entertainment value lay some kind of moral that they were expected to pick up on. Ruth Blackburn argues that European humanists began to see theater as a potent and accessible vehicle for proper moral instruction and correction of the human soul, even before the Reformation.<sup>5</sup> Every play meant something, and every playwright was working from a set of moral motivations. Plays—typically called interludes—were considered appropriate for schools, churches, and villages, and were a common form of entertainment among the nobility.

English medieval theater fell into three distinct, archetypal genres that became associated with particular methods and types of moral instruction. The mystery play held the most important social place and was undoubtedly the most well-known of the three genres. These plays, typically performed in collections called cycles over the course of several days during a holiday season, reenacted Biblical events—Easter cycles commonly told the story of Christ’s life in multiple individual episodes, for example—and became closely associated with the area where they were performed. The York-Corpus Christi cycle, for example, is a particularly enduring

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth H. Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton & Co, 1971), 23.

collection of forty-eight short plays that were traditionally performed on pageant carts in honor of the Corpus Christi feast; a manuscript copy of the texts dates to 1465, and performances may have begun as early as 1349.<sup>6</sup> Mystery plays did not have to look far for the didactic elements of these stories, and usually heavily emphasized the moral lessons that were already present in them. They focused on humanity's redemption through Christ, and their depictions of Christ's life were often centered around the ability to achieve salvation by applying Christ's virtues to everyday life.

The miracle play was structured similarly to a single mystery play, although it typically narrated the life of a particular saint or Biblical character besides Christ. Like mysteries, these plays did not miss an opportunity to expound on a moral theme, and usually worked in good/evil archetypes with little to no gray area in between. It is a less distinct genre on its own, typically only distinguished from mystery plays by historians after the fact, but miracle plays are themselves valuable for the depth of emotion they invoked, and then tied to their story in the minds of the audience. Unlike mystery plays, these plays typically focused more on the character, and the experience of the person at the heart of the story, than on the story itself.<sup>7</sup>

For the cultural historian, the morality play is by far the most fascinating and far-reaching of the three genres. Unlike mystery and miracle plays, which were confined to Biblical narratives, the morality play had no predetermined text. The morality playwright was free both to devise a scenario and choose the moral lessons he or she wished to impart, which could be far more complicated and specific than the more general Biblical lessons other plays focused on. As Lois Potter puts it, "the morality, despite its allegorical nature, is firmly based in the very world

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), ix, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 13 n. 1, 18; Murray Roston, *Biblical Drama in England* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 28.

which it urges Man to reject.”<sup>8</sup> Blackburn describes the morality play as an allegory that represents the inner struggle of the human soul away from sin and toward salvation. The protagonist, usually a universal “everyman” character—in fact, one such play is simply titled *Everyman*—typically travels through five stages of life: Innocence, Temptation and Fall, Life in Sin, Repentance, and Pardon. Exceptions to this structure are not uncommon, but plays that do not incorporate these five stages in some way stand out sharply against the hundreds of plays that do. Tropes and stock devices abounded; in particular, characters, both good and evil, frequently adopted disguises to conceal their true nature, and costumes played important roles in identifying a character’s moral alignment. Morality plays were versatile, flexible, and yet clearly structured; an audience could reasonably expect a play to follow a particular plot, but could also expect a unique interpretation of humanity’s role in the sinful world and relationship with God.<sup>9</sup>

Moralities flourished after the Reformation, but the face of English theater changed dramatically as Henry VIII asserted his complete control over the English religious world.<sup>10</sup> The English monarchy’s relationship with theater was a complicated one through the entire Tudor period, but it was made even more contentious by the Reformation, in both religious and political terms. In 1532 Henry sent a letter to the city council of York ordering the mayor to censor “any papists, who shall, in performing interludes which are founded on any portion of the Old or New Testament, say or make use of any language which may tend those who are beholding the same to any breach of the peace.”<sup>11</sup> As Henry’s religious opinions evolved, so did his position: in 1543, a new statute allowed plays that were specifically moral in nature, so long as they did not

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<sup>8</sup> Lois Potter, “The plays and the playwrights,” in *The Revels: History of Drama in English*, ed. Norman Sanders, Richard Southern, T.W. Craik, and Lois Potter (New York: Methuen, 1980), 145.

<sup>9</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, “The social and historical context,” in *The Revels: History of Drama in English*, 12, 7.

<sup>11</sup> J.O. Halliwell-Phillipps, ed., *Letters of the Kings of England* (London: Henry Colburn Publishers, 1848), vol. 1, 354.

present any unconventional interpretation of scripture, a reflection of his return to doctrinal Catholicism and elements of Catholic worship.<sup>12</sup> Theater occupied a complicated and politically-fraught place in the early years of the Reformation, and the English monarchy clearly understood just how dangerous—or valuable—it could be.

John Bale is perhaps the most central figure in the historiography of pre-Shakespearean English religious theater, and his contemporaries Heywood and Udall (and to an extent, Wever) are also well studied. David Bevington uses Bale's and Heywood's plays as windows into the relationship between drama and politics in the Tudor era, and extensively profiles both men as dramatic propagandists; in his view, Heywood is a reconciliatory voice, subtly urging Henry to use his authority to compromise with Protestant reformers and reunite with Rome, and Bale is a brash, zealous Protestant highlighting a historical tradition of Catholic deception and dishonesty.<sup>13</sup> Bevington's conception of the two playwrights has become central to historical interpretations of their plays, and these readings of Bale and Heywood are effectively the standard in modern historiography.

Bale and his contemporaries are also pivotally important in tracing the development of drama as a practice and an art form through the sixteenth century. Ruth Blackburn devotes much of her study of Tudor-era religious drama to an examination of Bale and his work, and credits Bale with the technical innovations in style and structure that would move English theater from medieval to early modern.<sup>14</sup> He is similarly central in Lois Potter's section of *The Revels: History of Drama in English*, which focuses on the importance of the morality play and Bale's adaptation of the morality style into a Protestant setting.<sup>15</sup> Potter associates Heywood with pre-

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<sup>12</sup> Sanders, "The social and historical context," 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics*, 96-106, 64-74.

<sup>14</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama under the Tudors*, 20-24.

<sup>15</sup> Potter, "The plays and the playwrights," 145.

Reformation dramatic traditions, and like Bevington, emphasizes how his work might be read in the context of Catholic reconciliation and with an understanding of his medieval inspirations and influences.<sup>16</sup> Hardin Craig's profile of English religious drama in the Middle Ages and medieval period ends with a discussion of Bale, whom he considers to be the culmination of medieval religious traditions such as the mystery and morality plays.<sup>17</sup> Murray Roston, whose survey of English drama focuses on the later Renaissance and Shakespearean eras, also considers Bale to be a tipping point in the transition from medieval to modern.<sup>18</sup>

None of these playwrights or plays are obscure or underserved in historiography. This thesis does not set out to explore new texts or fill historiographic gaps in the selection of literature. Rather, the objective is to investigate what these famous and well-established plays meant in themselves. Historians have studied what these playwrights tried to say, and they have established where they fit into the development of English theater during and after the Reformation. Bale and Heywood in particular are crucially important figures in the progression away from medieval theater toward the Shakespeare era and beyond. Most of these works, however, leave out what these men might tell us about their plays' foundations in medieval English literary style, and what that connection might mean for our understanding of the English Reformation.

Apart from Wever, whose biography is almost entirely a mystery, all of these playwrights were in positions that made their work more important than the standard plays produced as theatrical pastime. John Bale was sponsored by Thomas Cromwell and wrote plays to his specifications; John Heywood worked directly for Henry; Nicholas Udall was a respected scholar

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<sup>16</sup> Potter, "The plays and the playwrights," 159.

<sup>17</sup> Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 368-371.

<sup>18</sup> Roston, *Biblical Drama in England*, 60-64.

who had cultivated a connection with Mary I. They had relationships with the Tudor family, and their plays found an audience at court. What Henry, Edward, and Mary saw performed, what these playwrights felt confident in presenting to them, and how the playwrights went about making their point provide us with valuable information about how important individuals responded to the Reformation.

It is often said in the dramatic world that a playwright writes only half of a story; it is up to the actors, director, creative staff, and audience to create the other half. An author can publish a book with only their own input, but a playwright relies on a village to finish out the story. A play is collaborative, not individual, and requires a playwright to secure actors who will agree to present their story, an audience willing to see it, and in the sixteenth century, a patron able to pay for it. A book could sit on a shelf, unread but still accessible; a play without actors, audience, or patron could not exist.

For these reason, plays are incredibly valuable, but often overlooked, historical sources. They reveal what their playwrights were willing to say. They tell us what they thought their audience would find amusing or frightening, what they found acceptable to mock, what they revered. Bale, Heywood, Udall, and Wever wrote with the confidence that the king or queen of England would watch their plays, and because of their audience, their works provide invaluable clues into what those monarchs were thinking during a time when it is difficult to truly understand what they thought.



## Chapter 1. John Bale

John Bale, preacher and playwright of the 1530s, was far from an inscrutable man. The Carmelite friar turned ardent Protestant preacher frequently found himself in trouble with both secular and religious authorities for his vocal and unforgiving criticism of the Catholic church, the English government, and nearly every facet of religious life and politics in the complicated years of the early English Reformation. Bale's opinions were never secret—he believed that the sixteenth-century Catholic church was a hypocritical institution that damaged its adherents' loyalty to the English monarchy and led them astray from the true word of God—and he never passed up an opportunity to share those opinions if it meant a chance to also criticize the church.

England in the 1530s certainly provided these opportunities in spades. Henry VIII's contentious divorce from Catherine of Aragon in 1534 elevated the religious debates that had divided the European mainland and dramatized their consequences for English politics. The newly-created rift between Catholics and Protestants quickly became a political chasm that would eventually split English society at every level. Theological debates and religious tracts proliferated alongside the upheaval generated by religious factional debates at court, and opportunities abounded for theologians, scholars, and playwrights alike to voice their own opinions at unprecedented levels. Bale wrote in a political world which amplified his theological voice, and he contributed a wealth of anti-Catholic polemics to these debates.

Bale's voice took on new power and direction, however, on the stage. Bale channeled his talents for strident and confrontational preaching into provocative religious plays, which spoke directly to an audience of ordinary people without filtering his agenda through the elite forum of theological debate. Through the recurring character of Baleus Prolocutor—literally “Bale the Speaker”—Bale became the narrator of a religious and secular history which demonstrated that

the Pope and Catholic politics had no place in England. While Bale's tracts against saints and the abuses of Catholic clergy circulated among scholars and intellectuals, Baleus Prolocutor preached Bale's vision of English Protestantism to the English people.

This chapter outlines the ways in which John Bale's theatrical works, while professing a staunchly Protestant worldview and theology, actually deviate from the traditional structure of the English morality play in ways that make them more closely align with Catholic, rather than Protestant, practice. Based on the strength with which Protestant reformers, Bale among them, pushed back against "Catholic" practices, we would expect to see Bale reject these theatrical structures as invalid and dangerous expressions of religious faith, but Bale subverts these expectations in his most famous plays, *King Johan*, *Three Laws*, and *God's Promises*. Bale's work provides revealing examples that suggest how newly emerging Protestants thought about themselves in relation to the default-Catholic culture that had dominated England for its entire existence. His plays show us that rather than rejecting Catholic cultural structures—literary genre, religious imagery, and the like—Bale chose to make his works Protestant through politically-motivated content and by twisting Catholic forms to suit a Protestant agenda.

### **John Bale**

John Bale's background and personality—particularly the contradictions that shape his life story—have long fascinated biographers and historians. Bale trained as a Carmelite friar in Norwich, and received a bachelor's degree in divinity from Cambridge in 1529. He was a paradoxical religious character from the start. Biographer Leslie Fairfield stresses his acceptance of conventional traditions and loyalty to Dominican practices, but argues that he was not an especially devout Catholic in spite of these devotions.<sup>19</sup> David Bevington labels Bale as a

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<sup>19</sup> Leslie P. Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1976), 16.

“graphic example” of heterodoxy within the sixteenth-century priesthood, pointing out a report that Bale, while still Prior of the Carmelite order at Doncaster, taught students that Christ was not actually present in the eucharist.<sup>20</sup> He was a passionate preacher, a fact which is evident in his dramatic works and vocal, enthusiastic writing style, and preached multiple sermons against Lutheranism in the 1520s.<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to determine the precise moment when Bale decided to set aside his Catholic faith, but Fairfield notes that Bale was a “hot-headed Protestant” by 1534.<sup>22</sup> After converting, Bale frequently found himself at odds with the English monarchy: after the fall from grace and execution of his patron Thomas Cromwell in 1540, Bale fled to Antwerp and remained there until after Henry VIII’s death in 1547. He returned to the continent again in 1553, amongst the wave of Protestant theologians fleeing Mary I’s Catholic restoration, and did not return to England until 1560. However, when he was in good graces with the royal family, Bale had a remarkably successful career in the Anglican church that was shaped by and heavily dependent on royal favor. He was named Bishop of Ossory, a lucrative diocese in Ireland, in 1552, and was granted a prebendal stall at Canterbury Cathedral under Elizabeth in 1560. Bale died in Kent in 1563 and was buried in the cathedral, cementing his legacy as a Protestant innovator.<sup>23</sup>

Bale’s academic contributions to the Reformation were frequent, fervent, and influential. Over the course of his life, he published a massive range of religious tracts, most of them passionate diatribes against the Catholic church. The most notable of these works are *The Acts of English Votaries* and *An answer to a papistical exhortation pretending to avoid false doctrine*,

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<sup>20</sup> David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation*, 29; Ruth H. Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1971), 45.

<sup>22</sup> Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation*, 88-92.

both published during Bale's exile in Antwerp in 1546 and 1548, respectively; both attack the behavior of Catholic clergy and declare the church's response to the Reformation insufficient. Bale's writing is cited by notable sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars such as John Leland, William Camden, and Miles Coverdale, and appears in Richard Holinshed's foundational 1587 *Chronicle of English history*.<sup>24</sup>

Bale was an extremely prolific, and theological, playwright. By 1548 he had written twenty-four plays, all of which covered religious themes.<sup>25</sup> His was not a particularly enduring theatrical voice, however. The scripts for nearly all of his plays were lost sometime after his death in 1563, and *King Johan* was not rediscovered until the 1830s.<sup>26</sup> The only evidence we have for the existence of much of Bale's work comes from his own *Anglorum Heliades* (1538) and *Summariium* (1548), two lists of significant literature published in England, and the plays' titles are our only clues to their contents.

Yet Bale's work has had significant influence on our understanding of English Reformation and Renaissance theater. Ruth Blackburn calls Bale "the prophet-playwright of the early Reformation," and divides Reformation drama into "John Bale" and "Other Plays" written by "Bale's contemporaries."<sup>27</sup> Bale is a central figure in the development of English theater after the Reformation in *The Revels: A History of Drama in English*, and is the subject of an entire

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<sup>24</sup> John Leland, *The laboryouse iourney and serche of Iohan Leylande, for Englandes antiquitees geuen of hym as a newe yeares gyfte to Kyng Henry the viij in the xxvij yeare of his reygne, with declaracyons enlarged by Iohan Bale* (London, 1549); William Camden, *Britain, or A chorographical description of the most flourishing kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the ilands adjoyning, out of the depth of antiquitie beautified vvith mappes of the severall chires of England* (London, 1637); Miles Coverdale, *A Christen exhortacion vnto customable swearers What a ryght lawfull othe is* (Antwerp, 1543); Richard Holinshed, *The first and second volumes of Chronicles* (London, 1587), *Early English Books Online*.

<sup>25</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 37, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Barry B. Adams, *Bale's King Johan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 29, 64.

chapter in Murray Roston's *Biblical Drama in England*.<sup>28</sup> Shakespeare is less important than Bale in these discussions of Tudor theater; Blackburn's discussions suggest that Shakespeare's contribution to Elizabethan drama were less important than Bale's contributions to the transition from medieval to Reformation theater.<sup>29</sup> In Fairfield's biography, Bale earns the title of "mythmaker" from his mission to adapt English history to a Protestant perspective and create an English past from which reformers and the newly converted nobility could draw inspiration; she points to Bale's dramatic works as examples of his search for historical precedents for anti-Catholic sentiments in English history.<sup>30</sup>

### **Bale's *King Johan***

Bale's most famous play, *A Tragedy of John, King of England*, presents an allegorical interpretation of the real King John's infamous clash with Pope Innocent III in 1209. The play, usually referred to by the abbreviated alternate title *King Johan*, is often credited as the first Renaissance Biblical play, and the first example of an English history play; Murray Roston identifies a "sense of purposeful history" in Bale's script.<sup>31</sup> Largely thanks to his villainous role in the traditional Robin Hood legend, John is principally remembered as a tyrannical ruler who overtaxed his people and had his power limited by the Magna Carta. His reputation among his successors was also doubtful: John lost the Duchy of Normandy to Philip II of France in 1214, a serious blow to a monarchy which was still claiming the throne of France in 1547, and an embarrassing failure that John's reputation would never overcome.<sup>32</sup> John was certainly not a

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<sup>28</sup> Norman Sanders, "The social and historical context," and Lois Potter, "The plays and the playwrights," in *The Revels: A History of Drama in English* vol II (New York: Methuen & Co, 1980); Murray Roston, *Biblical Drama in England: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 60.

<sup>29</sup> For a survey of John Bale's theatrical historiography, see Peter Happé, "Recent Studies in John Bale," *English Literary Renaissance* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 103-113.

<sup>30</sup> Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation*, 55-56.

<sup>31</sup> Roston, *Biblical Drama in England*, 60, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Inventory, 1 April 1547, in *Documents relating to the revels at the court in the time of King Edward VI and Queen Mary*, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Louvain: A. Uystpruyt, 1914), 9.

model that English kings would aspire to, nor would they look favorably on being compared with him.

This standing would change, however, in the 1530s, when aspiring reformers saw John's monumental quarrel with Innocent III as an early break with Roman tyranny. John's falling-out with the Pope originated in a struggle for political dominance, but had significant religious consequences: after the death of the previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Hubert Walter, in 1205, Innocent appointed Stephen Langton to fill the post against John's wishes, an act which John saw as a significant overreach of papal power. The king responded by seizing papal lands in England, and Innocent retaliated by banning English priests from performing the sacraments. The struggle between the two leaders escalated over the course of several years, culminating with Innocent excommunicating John in 1209. With this controversy, John and Innocent fused theology and imperial politics long before Henry did in the sixteenth century.

*King Johan* was probably published in 1538, although it may have been written as early as 1536.<sup>33</sup> It appeared during the height of the dissolution of English monasteries, a project that liquidated nearly all of England's monastic houses and their properties from 1536 to 1541. The Act for the Suppression of Religious Houses (1535) and its successor, the Act of Dissolution (1539), painted a sharply negative picture of the goings-on inside monastic houses that fueled anti-Catholic sentiments in England.<sup>34</sup> Pope Paul III formally excommunicated Henry in December 1538, an event which only caused observers to draw more comparisons between the two monarchs and their conflicts with Rome.

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<sup>33</sup> *The Revels: History of Drama in English*, xxiv-xxv; Peter Happé argues for the earlier date: "Dramatic Images of Kingship in Heywood and Bale," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 39 no. 2 (1999): 249.

<sup>34</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1964), 139, 142.

In Bale's *King Johan*, the titular king finds himself in the center of a scheme led by Seditio, under Antichrist's direction, to subvert the monarch's authority in England. John is approached by England, portrayed as a penniless widow, to defend her from abuse by Rome and restore her husband God to the kingdom. John calls on his allies, Clergy, Nobility, and Civil Order to support him in expelling Rome's influence, but only Civil Order takes his side. Seditio easily sways Clergy and Nobility, convincing them that the power of Rome is stronger than the power of the king. Seditio and his agents Dissimulation, Usurped Power, and Private Wealth instruct Clergy to provoke rebellion against John in retaliation for his theft of church lands, but John refuses to back down. Usurped Power and Seditio, in disguise as the Pope and Cardinal Stephen Langton, then confront John and threaten to invade England if he does not back down and allow the Pope to exercise complete control over Clergy, Nobility, and Civil Order. John is forced to surrender his crown to protect his people from invasion, and reluctantly accepts it back as a symbol of his submission to the Pope; he also promises that his descendants will be loyal and faithful to Rome for the next three hundred years, which he laments as enormous restitution.<sup>35</sup>

One need not squint to find the anti-Catholic language and sentiments that abound in *King Johan*. Even setting aside the characters' names and relationships, Bale drives home his criticisms of Catholic doctrine particularly forcefully. As it becomes clear that Nobility has sided with Seditio and Usurped Power, John questions several elements of traditional Catholic belief. Among these is the idea of salvation through good works and intercessory prayers: Nobility defensively comments that it is worthwhile to have someone pray for one's soul after death just in case, to which John responds that Christ's sacrifice should be enough to guarantee

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<sup>35</sup> John Bale, *A Tragedy of John, King of England*, in *The Dramatic Writings of John Bale, Bishop of Ossory*, ed. John S. Farmer (London: Early English Drama Society, 1907), 252-253.

salvation, and that doing anything else to secure a place in heaven questions God's supremacy.<sup>36</sup> This point clearly aligns with Bale's fundamental belief in *sola scriptura*, the primacy of the text of the Bible itself above all other religious belief or practice, and forms an important pillar of John's argument that Nobility has irreparably fallen because they have adopted faithless beliefs from the church.<sup>37</sup>

Despite these clear anti-Catholic themes, *King Johan* fits neatly into the medieval morality genre. Potter describes Bale's work as "anti-Catholic morality," a term which Roston echoes, highlighting both its agreement with the strongly-traditional tropes of a morality play and its uniqueness in deviating from the expected religious themes of a morality.<sup>38</sup> The devil operates through personified vices who are sent to the physical realm of earth to undermine humanity's relationship with God. Costumes and disguises play an important role, and many characters are disguised as key historical figures. *King Johan*'s conflict is between a human protagonist and an absent devil, and although John's story does not end well, he ultimately chooses God's side over Satan's despite the grave earthly consequences for doing so.

Bale's main complaints against the Catholic church center on the relationship between political and religious power. Through John, Bale takes special issue with Nobility's commitment to the church, reflecting the traditional fear that the Catholic church required allegiance to a prince other than the king of England. John asks Nobility, "Why leave ye your prince so sore?" to which Nobility responds, "For I took an oath to defend the church evermore."<sup>39</sup> This concern, that Nobility and Clergy have sworn loyalty to the Pope that supersedes their loyalty to John, appears frequently throughout the play. Nobility remarks that "I

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<sup>36</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 195.

<sup>37</sup> Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Potter, "The plays and the playwrights" 179; Roston, *Biblical Drama in England*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 240.



took a great oath when I was dubbed a knight, Ever to defend the Holy Church's right" when asked why they have betrayed John and sided with Sedition and Usurped Power.<sup>40</sup> John accuses Clergy of running to the Pope every time he is corrected and of undermining John's authority, and Sedition openly admits that bishops serve as spies for Rome.<sup>41</sup> The most telling example, however, is John's conversation with Clergy: Clergy exclaims that "By the grace of God the Pope shall be my ruler," but when pressed quickly backtracks, saying "Ha! did I stumble? I said my prince is my ruler."<sup>42</sup> This moment makes frequent appearances in analyses of *King Johan*, and very clearly underscores Bale's preoccupation with the idea that the church requires its members to supersede their obligations to the monarch and give that allegiance instead to a foreign leader. Rather than criticize elements of Catholic practice, Bale attacks the church's inherently political structure. He directs his criticisms at church leadership, not the people practicing day-to-day religion, and he ultimately tackles the issue of who ought to be in charge of the church rather than how its adherents should worship. His problem, therefore, is not doctrinal—that people are paying allegiance to the Pope over God—but political.

The ways in which *King Johan* is not like a morality play, however, provide valuable insights into the development and conception of Protestant theater. More recent historiography agrees that despite the overwhelming trend of comparing *King Johan* to the morality tradition and analyzing Bale's agreement with medieval structures, studies of the play must also look beyond its morality associations. Although Adams acknowledges that Bale's most important significant influences came from the morality play tradition rather than contemporary dramatic models developing in Europe, he argues that analyzing *King Johan* solely through the lens of a

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<sup>40</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 189.

<sup>41</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 189, 183-184.

<sup>42</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 196.

traditional morality play tends to overlook interesting elements outside of the genre and direct scholars to draw conclusions from the morality play concept rather than the actual play. His concern, however, is for the play's technical and literary elements; Adams contends that character analysis in particular is unfairly restricted by *King Johan*'s associations with medieval morality.<sup>43</sup> The features that differentiate *King Johan* from morality plays are equally telling and complicate our understanding of the play's relationship to the Reformation.

The dramatic structure of *King Johan*, particularly Bale's choice of characters, is not what one might expect to see in a morality play, but his breaks from tradition do not make his work more Protestant. The protagonist, a literal king of England, is far from the everyman that is standard to the morality genre. This choice aligns with the Aristotelian definition of tragedy which calls for a protagonist who is distinct from the ordinary human in some way, and reflects the growing influence of humanist thought on both the Reformation and the development of Biblical drama.<sup>44</sup> John also interacts directly with the Antichrist's forces; the standard morality play, however, is typically "true to average human experience in allowing man little first-hand contact with spiritual forces."<sup>45</sup>

Bale's treatment of John as a character further exemplifies a surprising reliance on Catholic traditions. A story that focuses on a single otherworldly person, separate from the average human in both political and spiritual significance, sounds suspiciously like the narrative of a *saint's* life—and yet Bale takes a clear stance against the veneration of saints in both his theatrical work and academic writing. In the first volume of *An Act of English Votaries*, for example, Bale includes Catholic saints in his attack on celibacy and sexual immorality within the

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<sup>43</sup> Adams, *Bale's King Johan*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 77-79.

<sup>45</sup> Potter, "The plays and the playwrights," 148.

church: two chapters discuss “Saints begot in whoredom” and blame saints for leading their followers into “fleshly filthiness.”<sup>46</sup> More specifically, Bale disapproved of the idea that people would support a saint on the basis of one good deed, however major, without also acknowledging their potentially less-desirable actions; in this play he has held John up solely because of his confrontation with Innocent III, and does not make any mention of his poorly-remembered history. It goes too far to say that Bale is directly making John into a Protestant saint, but his approach to John’s story is more Catholic than we might expect from a committed and vocal Protestant such as Bale, and certainly relies on traditions of veneration to elevate John’s importance.

Why would Bale find it acceptable to rely on tropes that were strongly associated with church practices he disagreed with? According to Lois Potter, playwrights tried to “save” mysteries and moralities by adapting their questionable elements. She emphasizes that mid-sixteenth-century playwrights, including Bale, incorporated what she calls “deadly subordination of drama to sermon,” meaning that writers supported their theological views with lengthy sermon-like texts, intended to highlight the importance of word over image. This goal was usually accomplished through a “commentator” character; in *King Darius* (1565), for example, after all of the action has concluded, the commentator retells the entire story of Darius from the beginning to ensure the audience understood it correctly.<sup>47</sup> The Interpreter in *King Johan* fills this role. The Interpreter appears between the first and second acts of *King Johan*, to summarize what the audience has just seen and, curiously, tell them exactly what will happen in the second act. This speech might have been a practical necessity—the actor playing both Private Wealth

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<sup>46</sup> Bale, *The first two partes of the actes or vnchast examples of the Englysh votaryes gathered out of their owne legenades and chronycles by Johan Bale* (London, 1551), *Early English Books Online*.

<sup>47</sup> Potter, “The plays and the playwrights,” 180.

and Nobility would have needed time to change costumes between the end of Act I and the beginning of Act II—but the fact that Bale reveals the ending of the play before the second act has even started indicates that it was pivotally important to include this message.<sup>48</sup> Interlocutors were preachers—Bale most likely played these roles in his plays himself—who ensured that the audience picked up the right messages, and understood that the story was meant to teach them something. By adding these sermons to plays, Protestant playwrights adapted Catholic structures to their theological purposes. Potter ultimately concludes that Bale “us[ed] the theatricality of the Catholics as a weapon against them,” particularly in *Three Laws* and *King Johan*.<sup>49</sup>

Such adaptations, however, were not unique to the Reformation. Murray Roston notes that the twelfth-century play *Ordo de Ysaac et Rebecca et Filiis Eorum* (The Order of Isaac and Rebecca and Their Sons) also features a commentator character whose purpose was to make sure the audience properly understood the morals of the story. Interlocutors were not new; the types of message they presented were adapted to suit Reformation ideology, but they were already a feature of medieval drama and therefore could not have been a Protestant innovation specifically intended to separate the morality genre from Catholicism.

Bale’s work demonstrates the potency of the morality play as a means of expressing political ideology, even when adapting those morals and arguments to a fundamentally Protestant worldview rather than a Catholic one. If, as Potter, argues, the mystery cycles and morality plays were “one of the greatest obstacles to the popularizing of the new religion,” why would such an ardent Protestant as Bale have continued to perpetuate their use by writing more of them?<sup>50</sup> Perhaps because he found them valuable. After the only known performance of *King Johan*, at

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<sup>48</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 223.

<sup>49</sup> Potter, “The plays and the playwrights,” 178.

<sup>50</sup> Potter, “The plays and the playwrights,” 178.

the Archbishop of Canterbury's palace in Kent on January 2, 1539, audience member John Alford complained to Archbishop Cranmer that his companion, Henry Totehill, had illegally defended the pope after the play ended. According to Alford's deposition, he remarked after the play ended that he feared Paul III would soon abuse King Henry as Innocent had done to John. Totehill allegedly replied that Bale had been wrong to mock the Pope, and ought to have treated him more respectfully. Totehill's comment, lamenting that Bale had failed to portray Innocent with the respect and deference a Pope deserved, violated Henry's recent injunction forbidding anyone to give the "bishop of Rome" more allegiance than was due to any ordinary bishop.<sup>51</sup> Cranmer does not note what became of Alford's complaint, but this contentious response makes it clear that audiences were well prepared to look for these political messages, and thanks to Bale's forceful, emotionally-charged language and commentary, found them quite easily. David Coleman calls Bale's stark division between political Catholicism and spiritual Protestantism too unsophisticated to accommodate the nuances of Reformation politics, but it appears that his approach was in fact quite effective anyway.<sup>52</sup>

Bale also quite effectively turns Biblical and English history into political commentary. The interval speech explicitly compares John to Moses: Bale admits that John's story will not end well, but he has, like Moses, taken the first step in bringing England out of the desert of popery.<sup>53</sup> He then adds that England languished in exile "Till that Duke Josue [sic], which was our late King Henry, Clearly brought us into the land of milk and honey."<sup>54</sup> Bale makes Henry into Joshua, leading England into a new godly age, but this Joshua follows in John's complicated

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Cranmer to Thomas Cromwell, 11 January 1539; in *Calendar of State Papers in the Reign of Henry VIII*.

<sup>52</sup> David Coleman, *Drama and the Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 223.

<sup>54</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 224.

and politically-fraught footsteps. John also promises Seditio that England and its monarchs will be faithfully Catholic for three hundred years; since the events of the play take place in 1209, the three hundred year sentence expires in 1509, coincidentally—or not so coincidentally—the first year of Henry VIII’s reign rather than the beginning of the Reformation in 1534. Bale erases twenty-five years in which Henry was devoutly Catholic and the people of England largely were as well; Fairfield’s biography labels Bale a “mythmaker” because of this bold reinterpretation of English history.

### **Bale’s *Three Laws***

Bale’s *A Comedy Concerning Three Laws, of Nature, Moses, and Christ* also demonstrates his understanding that Protestantism is defined in opposition to Catholic beliefs and practices. The play was published in the Netherlands in 1548, although it is listed among Bale’s works in *Anglorum Heliades* (1538). It was printed again in England by Thomas Colwell in 1562.<sup>55</sup> Bale probably wrote *King Johan* first, but the two plays entered the same political climate and were doubtless inspired by similar theological positions. Despite their proximity, the difference in tone and character between the two shows is remarkable. *Three Laws* is considerably more lighthearted and humorous than *King Johan*; we are introduced to the character of Infidelity, for example, as he sings a song peddling brooms, while the equivalent character of Seditio in *King Johan* is introduced in the middle of an intense argument with John, even as he claims he has come to entertain himself.<sup>56</sup> It is easy to think that this play would have been much more appealing and entertaining to an audience.

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<sup>55</sup> John Bale, *A nevve comedy or enterlude, concernyng thre lawes of nature, Moises and Christe* (London, 1562), *Early English Books Online*; Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 36; John S. Farmer, ed., *The Dramatic Writings of John Bale*, 341.

<sup>56</sup> John Bale, *A Comedy concerning Three Laws, of Nature, Moses, and Christ*, in *The Dramatic Writings of John Bale, Bishop of Ossory*, ed. John S. Farmer (London: Early English Drama Society, 1907), 10; *King Johan*, 175.

In *Three Laws*, God (as Deus Pater) sends the Law of Nature to earth as a guide for humankind, in the hope that he will be able to teach humanity correct moral behavior. God expresses his love and affection for humankind, and hopes that the Law of Nature can bring them back into his grace.<sup>57</sup> However, Infidelity, acting on behalf of Antichrist, sends Sodomy and Idolatry in an attempt to corrupt the Law of Nature. They praise the Catholic church's practices and exalt the Pope's power, and the Law of Nature is overpowered.<sup>58</sup> The Law of Moses is sent to redeem the fallen Law of Nature, but Ambition and Avarice corrupt him with their insistence that bishops must maintain a monopoly on church knowledge and therefore control salvation.<sup>59</sup> The Law of Christ follows, but falls to Hypocrisy and Pseudodoxy. Unable to convince them that the church's ceremonies are not prescribed in scripture and therefore go against God's teachings, he is burned as a heretic.<sup>60</sup> Finally, Vindicta Dei arrives to confront Infidelity and avenge the falls of the three Laws. He destroys Infidelity, restores the Laws, and proclaims that "the old popishness is past which was damnation."<sup>61</sup>

Bale's anti-Catholic stance is more theologically motivated in *Three Laws* than in *King Johan*, but his critiques are no less powerful. His most prominent complaint here, one which permeates the entire script, is the church's stranglehold on knowledge. Infidelity laments the loss of clerical primacy; he complains that now everyone can understand and interpret scripture, and insists that the church will lose everything if it cannot reclaim its dominance. Ambition also criticizes the "Bible readers," and insists that "the bishops must hold their priests in ignorance With long Latin hours, lest knowledge to them chance."<sup>62</sup> The Law of Christ tells

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<sup>57</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 5, 7-8.

<sup>58</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 10-27.

<sup>59</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 28-47.

<sup>60</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 48-67.

<sup>61</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 74.

<sup>62</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 43, 41.

Pseudodoctrina that “No man willeth Paul to speak in the congregation in a strange language, without interpretation.”<sup>63</sup> Bale is clear that he disagrees with Latin services, which prevent the congregation from understanding scripture, but ultimately assigns the blame for the continuation of this practice to the bishops rather than the lay clergy themselves. The problems with the church, Bale argues, lie with its leadership.

Much like his commentary in *King Johan*, Bale again voices his fundamental objection to the church’s deviation from scripture and continuation of rituals and practices not found in the Bible. The Law of Christ faces off against Pseudodoctrina, an obvious shot directly at church doctrine. Addressing the multitude of different church services and rituals that dominate Catholic worship, he asks if “God commanded any such things to be done,” and calls them “fruits of your imaginations.” He punctuates his argument with the line “What else is your doctrine but a blind popish thing?”<sup>64</sup> Bale does not reserve his criticism for formal church rituals. Sodomy calls the Ave Maria and other personal rituals “charms of sorcery,” and Idolatry’s monologue in Act II disparages of huge swaths of traditional practices, including holy oil, psalters, and the practice of venerating saints.<sup>65</sup>

Bale’s third, but undeniably most powerful, criticism is the question of clerical celibacy, a factor in the fall of all three Laws. He repeatedly argues that clergy are practically bound to fall to sin because they are restricted from marrying: Sodomy says plainly that “For the clergy at Rome, and over all, For want of wives to me doth fall,” and Hypocrisy informs the Law of Christ that all holy men, including the Pope, want women.<sup>66</sup> Bale even goes so far as to accuse Pope

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<sup>63</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 62.

<sup>65</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 17, 18-20.

<sup>66</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 21, 54.



Julius II of sexual abuse of a minor, a claim for which no evidence exists; Bale was prone to making these kinds of libelous claims for little more than shock value.<sup>67</sup>

Like *King Johan*, *Three Laws* can be easily classified as a medieval morality play. The devil once again works through metaphorical vices to damage the relationship between humanity and God. The character list calls for the vices to be dressed as Catholic religious figures, including Ambition as a bishop and Covetousness “like a pharisee or spiritual lawyer,” meaning that the parallels drawn between these characters would have been easy to identify visually.<sup>68</sup> The Law of Nature describes the four seasons of a man’s life, referring to the five stages of life that play a central role in morality drama.<sup>69</sup> The play is also structured in five acts, like the majority of morality plays.

Bale’s reputation for fervent Protestant preaching, however, leads us to expect a much more didactic Protestant agenda. The question is not if Bale could have been more negative about the Catholic church, but why he does not use this platform to promote distinctly Protestant practices. Bale promotes the quintessential Protestant belief in salvation by grace alone, but he does so by criticizing people who do not believe in salvation by God’s grace rather than simply encouraging the belief on its merits. The villains believe in laying in a backup plan by doing the good works that Protestant reformers criticize, and John condemns them; John does not make a corresponding expression supporting God’s grace. Similarly, he endorses the idea of clerical marriage as a means to prevent clergy from falling to temptation rather than as a celebration of the godly aspects of marriage. These comments seem out of place relative to the rest of Bale’s work. *The Image of Both Churches*, Bale’s famous paraphrase of the Book of Revelation, mixes

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<sup>67</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 23; John S. Farmer, *The Dramatic Writings of John Bale* (London: Early English Drama Society, 1907), 327.

<sup>68</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 6.

admonitions against Catholic ritual and “popishness” with exultations of Biblical scripture, and although his tone in that work is decidedly anti-Catholic, the message portrayed is far more tempered when compared to *King Johan* and *Three Laws*.<sup>70</sup> We might question, then, what Bale’s motives actually were. Why would he write these plays but not actually use them for what they were intended?

Bale’s use of God onstage also raises significant questions about his positions and intentions. God appears in two separate characters in *Three Laws*, Deus Pater and Vindicta Dei, both to be played by the same actor.<sup>71</sup> In the first act, Deus Pater tells the Laws to bring humankind the Bible, as “A seal of [his] covenant, and a living testament” to help them live righteously.<sup>72</sup> He is concerned with guiding humankind back to his grace, so they may reclaim their status as God’s “own elect.”<sup>73</sup> Once the Laws have fallen, however, Vindicta Dei—literally, God’s Punishment—violently strikes down the Vices and informs the audience that he will destroy any force that threatens to restore “Babylonical popery.”<sup>74</sup> God, in both forms, is arguably the protagonist of *Three Laws*—the three Laws themselves do little besides argue unsuccessfully with Infidelity’s Vices, and it is God who brings humankind back into his own light.

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<sup>70</sup> Bale, *The Image of Both Churches*, in *Select Works of John Bale* ed. Henry Christmas (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1849); Bale effectively rewrote the Book of Revelation to emphasize the importance of scripture—apparently the irony in doing so comes only from historical hindsight—and criticize rituals associated with the Catholic church. His expansion of the single sentence verse Revelation 10:1 spans two pages; the phrase “and [the angel’s] face as it were the sun” becomes a 172-word paragraph, containing the comment “And as concerning their lives, more God desireth not of the christian [sic] minister, than to expend his whole study, labour, and time for the lightening of others. He neither commandeth them to be shaven nor disguised, to be popish priest nor monk, to say matins nor even-song, to fast Friday nor vigil, to abhor marriage nor meats: only he willet them to edify his flock with none other learning than his godly truth” (369). It is clear here that Bale is arguing vehemently against these Catholic ritual practices, but in a way that presents Protestant devotion to Biblical text as good, rather than leaning only on ritual and superstition as bad.

<sup>71</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 70-72.

By including God as a prominent, visible character who takes significant action, Bale flew in the face of both long-standing morality play tradition and evolving Protestant expectations. English theologians had debated the appropriateness of portraying religious characters, particularly God or Christ, since the beginning of the Reformation. Protestant playwrights devised workarounds to avoid bringing God or Jesus on stage, including having an angel deliver God's speeches to Jonah, and skipping Jesus's baptism and using a messenger to report the crucifixion in plays about John the Baptist. The reasons for these alternatives are not entirely clear; playwrights might have feared the implications of having an actor play Jesus, or worried about accidental idolatry. Yet Martin Luther only encouraged playwrights to treat Christ's life respectfully, and other Protestant playwrights had no reservations about depicting Jesus on stage.<sup>75</sup> God, however, is another matter. In pre-Reformation drama, conflict usually was between physical life and death rather than God and the Devil, and in the rare plays in which God appeared, it was in a minimal role at the end of the play.<sup>76</sup>

Bale's portrayal of God was not technically prohibited by early Protestant theology, but certainly seems to contradict Protestant beliefs. Deus Pater frequently proclaims the unerring power of scripture, and the Laws hail him as a king.<sup>77</sup> But he also resurrects the fallen Law of Christ on stage in a stylized ritual, and Vindicta Dei tells Infidelity that he acts on behalf of "The innocent blood of saints" fallen to false doctrine.<sup>78</sup> Sodomy proudly boasts that he has corrupted God's image "with most unlawful usage," a moment rife with irony considering that Deus Pater himself has left the stage only a few minutes earlier.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 23-26.

<sup>76</sup> Potter, "The plays and the playwrights," 148.

<sup>77</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 9.

<sup>78</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 73, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 24.

Including God on stage is unusual for both medieval morality tradition and the developing Protestant practices of the 1530s which pushed back against the idea of creating images of any religious figures. Not only has Bale flown in the face of long-standing morality play tradition by including God as a prominent, visible character who takes significant action, but he also criticizes the church for effectively doing the same thing.<sup>80</sup> Rather than emphasize the Protestant direction against religious imagery and the creation of false idols, Bale chose to create a visible image of God himself, carrying out impressive acts of wrath and reminding the audience of those same stories. Did Bale recognize the considerable cognitive dissonance that this contradiction created, or is it only a contradiction from the modern perspective? How did Bale think of his work as a Protestant while incorporating visible and active images of religious figures, since his plays appear to characterize Protestantism as a belief defined by rejecting Catholic practice?

### **Bale and Politics: Thomas Cromwell and *John the Baptist***

Bale's relationship with Thomas Cromwell may have also inspired his paradoxical use of pro-Catholic modifications to advance an anti-Catholic message. Cromwell served as Henry VIII's chief minister from 1532 to 1540, and directed the "revolutionary years" of administrative reform within the English church.<sup>81</sup> Cromwell was determined to completely subjugate the church to the king's control, and his policies demonstrate a drive to make the church legally dependent on the crown. Cromwell is best remembered historically for his program to dissolve the English monasteries beginning in 1533. He was a prominent member of Henry's council and had a close relationship with the king for much of the eight years he was in favor; Cromwell was

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<sup>80</sup> Potter, "The plays and the playwrights," 148.

<sup>81</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 113-115.

in a prime position to influence the king and the direction of English policy in any way he saw fit.

Like many sixteenth-century nobles, Cromwell sponsored a personal theater troupe, Lord Privy Seal's Players, and chose John Bale as its leader. Bale wrote all of his known plays under Cromwell's patronage. Lord Privy Seal's Players are first recorded in 1537, but Bale had attracted Cromwell's attention earlier. Cromwell intervened on Bale's behalf when the Privy Council brought charges of subversion against him in 1534, reportedly for the sake of the religiously-themed play Bale was working on.<sup>82</sup> Cromwell's patronage and attention proved valuable to Bale, and frequently protected him from the legal consequences of his subversive ideas and vocal evangelical preaching. Cromwell, however, fell from favor quickly and dramatically in 1540, after the breakdown of the king's disastrous fourth marriage to Anne of Cleves, which Cromwell had engineered and strongly encouraged; Anne was quietly set aside, and Cromwell was executed in July 1540. As Diarmaid MacCulloch notes, "Bale operated at the outer limit of what was possible in Henry VIII's Church of England" in terms of the theology of his plays. With the loss of Cromwell's protection, he could not have survived his patron's downfall.<sup>83</sup> Bale left England as quickly as possible after Cromwell's death, and lived in exile in Antwerp until Henry died in 1547.

Cromwell's background and education were balanced with humanist influences, but he was a committed evangelical Protestant, and his religious sympathies were closely connected to his political position.<sup>84</sup> He first gained influence as secretary to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Henry's chief advisor and leader of the transition to a Protestant England from 1515 to 1529; in

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<sup>82</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 417.

<sup>83</sup> MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 420.

<sup>84</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 109.

fact, Cromwell found himself in precisely the same position as Bale would when Wolsey lost Henry's favor after failing to secure an annulment of the marriage between Henry and Catherine of Aragon and died in disgrace in 1529, leaving Cromwell associated with a patron who had lost the influence Cromwell had relied on. Unlike Bale, Cromwell was able to separate his reputation from Wolsey's and became a key member of Henry's staff soon after Wolsey's death, but he retained the associations with Protestant factions at court that he had learned in Wolsey's service. Cromwell's politicized relationship to religion parallels Bale's attention to the relationship between religious observance and political loyalty.

It is difficult to know which of the many ideologies in Bale's plays were his and which were included at Cromwell's direction. Cromwell's theological and intellectual influence, however, is clear in *King Johan* and *Three Laws*. Even if Cromwell was not explicitly directing Bale's writing, there are many parallels between Bale's comments and Cromwell's policies that are far from coincidental. It seems that the two men agreed on several religious questions, most importantly that loyalty to the king should supersede allegiance to a religious figurehead. Cromwell's Protestantism, then, pointed in much the same political direction as Bale's.

Cromwell began actively sponsoring religious performances in 1537. MacCulloch suggests that he sought to counter the effects of the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace, whose leaders demanded the restoration of monasteries and Cromwell's removal from office, by loudly advocating for obedience to the king and loyalty to the English monarchy above all other allegiance.<sup>85</sup> The Lord Privy Seal's Players performed all over the country in 1537 and 1538, including in the northern counties of Shropshire and Yorkshire, where the rebellion had begun, suggesting an effort to sway a large popular audience.<sup>86</sup> Bale forcefully argues for the king's

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<sup>85</sup> MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 418.

<sup>86</sup> Cromwell, Thomas (1485-1540), *Records of Early English Drama*, <https://reed.library.utoronto.ca/node/315844>.

supremacy over the church in *Three Laws*, and draws connections between political loyalty and religious devotion with instructions from the Laws to obey only “lawful powers.”<sup>87</sup> Rather than simply imploring his audience not to obey the pope, Bale directs that loyalty away from the church and to the king. MacCulloch describes Cromwell as “extending this engagement with the public to the stage, previously so much the property of traditional religion.”<sup>88</sup> Cromwell’s theatrical campaign provides another example of Tudor leadership recognizing and harnessing the propaganda value inherent in popular drama, especially drama associated with long-standing religious and secular tradition.

Bale’s play *John the Baptist’s Preaching in the Wilderness* was most likely part of Cromwell’s propaganda campaign against the Pilgrimage of Grace. The manuscript is dated 1538, but the play was probably performed in May 1537.<sup>89</sup> *John the Baptist* follows the Biblical narrative of John’s baptism of Jesus. In the play, John baptizes The Common Man, The Tax Collector, and The Soldier, after each repents for his sins and promises to follow the true word of God.<sup>90</sup> John’s preaching on the arrival of the Messiah attracts the attention of Pharisaeus and Sadducaeus, who admonish him for preaching new beliefs without permission. John accuses them of hypocrisy and self-promotion, saying they will not be able to justify their methods and “holy behaviors [sic]” to God; a contemporary audience might have seen here a representation of the conflict between Catholic tradition and Protestant innovation.<sup>91</sup> Jesus then arrives and asks John to baptize him, proclaiming Pharisaeus and Sadducaeus the very type of sinners he has come to save. John baptizes Jesus, and Pater Coelestis (Heavenly Father) appears—in person,

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<sup>87</sup> Bale, *Three Laws*, 27, 47, 64.

<sup>88</sup> MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 192.

<sup>89</sup> John Bale, *John the Baptist’s Preaching in the Wilderness*, in *The Dramatic Writings of John Bale, Bishop of Ossory*, ed. John S. Farmer (London: Early English Drama Society, 1907), 150; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 418.

<sup>90</sup> Bale, *John the Baptist*, 134-136.

<sup>91</sup> Bale, *John the Baptist*, 139-141.

not as a dove or a voice from heaven as the gospels describe—to claim Jesus as his son and proclaim him the true Messiah.

Bale's heavy-handed commentary and symbolism are just as present in *John the Baptist* as in his other works, but his criticisms are directed specifically at the religious dissenters who called for the restoration of monasteries. Baleus Prolocutor, again probably played by Bale himself, opens the play by introducing the story and characters, and comments that “Where the froward [sic] sects continually rebel, Ye shall see Christ here submit himself to baptism,” a clear criticism of the pilgrims.<sup>92</sup> The epilogue, also delivered by Bale, is especially direct and very clearly targeted at the rebellion. Bale tells the audience that “The justice of men is but an hypocrisy,” and stresses that John's preaching was acceptable because he taught “Not men's traditions, nor his own holy life, but to the people Christ Jesus did he preach.” He denounces the main monastic orders: “Hear neither Francis, Benedict, nor Bruno, Albert, nor Dominic, for they new rulers invent.”<sup>93</sup> Jesus entreats “the great grand captain so well as his poor tenants” to return to righteousness; MacCulloch points out that audiences would have easily understood the reference to Captain Robert Aske, leader of the Pilgrimage.<sup>94</sup>

*John the Baptist* is not a medieval morality play in the style of *King Johan* or *Three Laws*, but Bale did not confine himself to the morality genre and incorporated all styles of medieval religious theater. Blackburn argues that the titles in *Anglorum Heliades* and *Summariium* suggest that Bale was working a mystery cycle on the life of Christ; *John the Baptist* is one of two surviving plays that most likely would have been included in that cycle.<sup>95</sup> The play

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<sup>92</sup> Bale, *John the Baptist*, 130.

<sup>93</sup> Bale, *John the Baptist*, 148-149.

<sup>94</sup> Bale, *John the Baptist*, 145; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 418.

<sup>95</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors*, 48-49.



follows the main conventions of the mystery genre—it is very short, faithfully adapts a well-known Biblical story, and heavily emphasizes the story’s morals.

The mystery play genre had the strongest associations with Catholicism: in 1532 performances of the long-running Corpus Christi cycle in York and Chester were permanently canceled because of pressure from the king to avoid events that could cause civil disorder and religious conflict.<sup>96</sup> Yet Bale—and most likely Cromwell—chose this genre as the best means of suppressing the political consequences of a very significant episode of civil disorder. It may have been the best vehicle for Bale’s targeted commentary on baptism. Even though the majority of the play’s criticism is reserved for the religious dissenters, Bale does not miss the opportunity to emphasize the differences between the Protestant and Catholic sacrament of baptism. John stresses after each of the four baptisms that he is only performing a ritual, and that the actual salvation involved in baptism comes from God alone.<sup>97</sup> It is equally likely, however, that Bale chose to write a mystery play because it would get his audience’s attention. The northern city of York was very near to the epicenter of the Pilgrimage of Grace, and was also an important location for performances of mystery cycles. The genre would have had even more value as a means of pro-Protestant and anti-Catholic propaganda in this setting.

Cromwell’s intellectual and theological influences also strongly shaped Bale’s work, and the two found common inspiration in William Tyndale, the controversial Protestant reformer whose influence shaped much of the direction English Protestantism would ultimately take. Cromwell attempted to bring Tyndale back to England from his exile in 1531, and sneaked Tyndale’s work by Henry in the form of the “Thomas Matthew” Bible in 1537.<sup>98</sup> Tyndale was

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<sup>96</sup> Sanders, “The social and historical context,” 9.

<sup>97</sup> Bale, *John the Baptist*, 137.

<sup>98</sup> Roger Bigelow Merriman, *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 99; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 416.

among the first to make John into a Protestant hero. Tyndale's *Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528) draws on John as an example of the Catholic church's long-standing abusive treatment of England, and accuses clergy of altering history to cast John as the villain while they are the heroes.<sup>99</sup> Tyndale only mentions John twice in his argument, but his influence is very visible in Bale's work. In *King Johan*, Nobility proudly tells Sedition that "For their [the clergy's] maintenance, I have given lands full fair; I have disinherited many a lawful heir," which very closely mimics Tyndale's assertion that "Men disinherit their own heirs, to endow these clergy."<sup>100</sup> Cromwell took issue with the financial relationship between English people and the church, and involved Bale in his concerns—Bale recorded and published Dr. Richard Leighton's notes on monastic finances during Cromwell's campaign against religious houses.<sup>101</sup> Tyndale also criticizes the pope for allowing John to hand over his crown to him, and for granting remission of sins "by fighting and murdering for the pope's pleasure" to destroy John's kingdom.<sup>102</sup> It was Tyndale who first argued that clerical celibacy would inevitably lead to sodomy and sin, which Bale echoes in both *King Johan* and *Three Laws* and Cromwell codified in the Act for the Punishment of the Vice of Buggery (1534).<sup>103</sup>

Theater flourished during the Reformation because of its value as propaganda. Social commentary was already a common feature of medieval drama, but became even more popular in the 1530s, on both sides of the religious divide. John Heywood's *Play of the Weather* defended Catholicism and argued for religious reconciliation just as strongly as Bale pushed for further reform.<sup>104</sup> Yet the question remains—why would Cromwell utilize propaganda that

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<sup>99</sup> Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man* (London: 1515), 103. *Early English Books Online*.

<sup>100</sup> Bale, *King Johan*, 224-225; Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 58.

<sup>101</sup> MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 306.

<sup>102</sup> Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 104.

<sup>103</sup> MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, 241.

<sup>104</sup> Sanders, "The social and historical context," 13-14.

closely aligned with the side he was against? Lord Privy Seal's Players performed until 1540, and Cromwell continued to pay for Bale's work until his death.<sup>105</sup> Clearly he felt it was effective and worth paying for, and he was not offended by the plays' contents or Bale's tone. Cromwell's close relationship with the king put him in an excellent position to direct administrative and religious policy in his favor for much of the eight years that he was in favor; he could have easily instructed Bale to leave out features and tropes that he disagreed with or felt were problematic. Paul Whitfield White contends that Cromwell exploited entrenched traditions that could reach an illiterate audience to draw people away from Catholicism and toward his own Reformation policy, but it seems contradictory to use images and allegories associated with Catholicism for this purpose, especially considering how passionately Bale hated these rituals.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps a better question is why these tropes continued to be effective as propaganda. Very few voices exist from ordinary people who saw these performances and commented on how they perceived them, so we can only speculate. John Alford and Henry Totehill confirm Norman Sanders's comment that medieval theater had trained audiences to interpret plays and look for hidden commentary.<sup>107</sup> The centuries-long tradition associated with mystery and morality plays made them familiar and predictable, in both content and structure, and people were used to seeing them in moralizing contexts. Plays were accessible, visible, and did not require people to adapt to new innovations in order to understand their message. Bale's work demonstrates that playwrights were aware of and could capitalize on the familiarity of theater and the religious context that had become associated with it.

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<sup>105</sup> Lord Privy Seal's Players, *Records of Early English Drama*, <https://reed.library.utoronto.ca/content/lord-privy-seals-players-1>.

<sup>106</sup> Paul Whitfield White, "Theater and Religious Culture," in *A New History of Early English Drama* ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 136.

<sup>107</sup> Sanders, "The social and historical context," 12.

## Conclusions

The effects of Bale's plays on English culture and politics during the Reformation are difficult to determine. Barry Adams argues that, since the most prominent plays were lost, Bale's enduring effects in the dramatic sphere would have been minimal.<sup>108</sup> But Bale's *King Johan* does provide an interesting example of the effects that Protestantism had on English culture. Tudor monarchs were particularly concerned with legacy and reputation, making Bale's analogies between John and Henry a significant potential risk. Elizabeth I's infamous reaction to Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which she interpreted as both an insult and an act of sedition even before she saw it performed, indicates that she was certainly aware of, if not extremely sensitive to, perceived insults and political slights against the monarchy in theatrical works. We have no record of a similarly explosive reaction to Bale's *King Johan* or *Three Laws*, so it seems reasonable to conclude that, if Elizabeth did see a performance of *King Johan*, Bale's metaphorical comparison between her father and a deeply unpopular king did not offend her.<sup>109</sup> By the 1560s, Protestantism had altered English politics and political memory to the degree that a previously unthinkable analogy had become acceptable.

Bale's conflation of Biblical text, anti-Catholic criticism, and English history created a powerful propaganda tool that Cromwell found immensely valuable, as well as a conception of English culture that could be adapted to Protestant rather than Catholic purposes. However, this combination presents an inherent contradiction between the Protestantism that Cromwell and Bale tried to define and the Catholicism that had fundamentally shaped English culture.

Protestant culture was in its early stages of development, and Bale's plays suggest that in the first

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<sup>108</sup> Adams, *Bale's King Johan*, 56.

<sup>109</sup> Barry Adams suggests that *King Johan* might have been performed as part of the pageantry at Edward's VI's coronation in 1547, and perhaps for Elizabeth at her visit to Ipswich in 1561, in addition to the confirmed performance at the Archbishop of Canterbury's palace in 1539: *Bale's King Johan*, 39.

decades of the Reformation, Protestant reformers were more inclined to think of their culture as consciously separated from Catholic tradition; at the same time, early Protestants valued their connections to English history, and looked for ways to integrate Protestant practice into the historical traditions that had become so fundamental to English culture.

The point of this examination is not to think about how Bale's dramatic works affected English thinking about the Reformation in the 1530s. We know that Bale's impact in the theatrical realm of religious thought was not long-lasting or held much weight outside of the world of Henry VIII's court. We can look to Bale, rather, as an example of what people might have thought about the politics of the Reformation as it was happening. Bale's plays show us that he saw theater as the best vehicle for religious propaganda. They give examples of what sixteenth-century English people might have found humorous or dramatic about the world they lived in. Bale, like his contemporaries, saw parallels between the process of Reformation and events of religious and secular history, and he believed these connections were powerful enough to carry the weight of a Protestant propaganda agenda. Bale's theatrical works are an important window into how English people conceptualized the Reformation and adapted changing religious traditions to existing English culture.

## Chapter 2. John Heywood

Where John Bale was bold and opinionated, his contemporary John Heywood (1497-1580) was shrewd and reserved. Heywood, a talented court musician and amateur playwright who served four of the five Tudor monarchs, was a devout Catholic who made no secret of his religious affiliation. His contributions to the world of English theater served a very different purpose than Bale's moralities had—while Bale preached, Heywood entertained—but were no less valuable as examples of what the English dramatic world looked like during the controversial decades surrounding the Reformation. Heywood wrote before Henry VIII's break with the Catholic church, meaning that the plays he presented were among the influences on the king, and reflect the culture at court during the 1530s.

Heywood's plays were created for the court, which makes their content and commentary especially valuable, and these interpretations are of undeniable importance. Across his surviving works, Heywood argues for a peaceful resolution of the dramatic religious schisms dividing England right before and immediately after Henry's break with the Catholic church. He did not shy away from political or religious commentary even though those arguments were not as direct or heavily foregrounded as others around him using popular entertainment as a vehicle for religious commentary, such as Bale or Sir Thomas More.

This chapter, however, explores Heywood's plays for what they were: examples of dramatic entertainment, produced for the royal court to amuse the king and the people around him. Heywood wrote to an especially prominent audience with serious influence over English religion, and what he chose to create for that audience provides valuable insights into the role of theater in the changing Reformation world. The commentaries in these plays are useful, but

equally important is the method he chose to make his points and what those methods meant for the people who watched them.

Heywood's plays demonstrate the centrality of medieval genre, structure, and style in English drama as late as the 1530s. Heywood worked in a number of quintessential medieval genres, namely the morality, the debate or disputation, and the farce; his comfort and familiarity with these genres, in addition to the elements he incorporated into his plays to align with those genres, are interesting to consider. Four of Heywood's most well-known plays, *The Play of the Weather*, *The Pardoner and the Friar*, *The Four PP* and *Johan Johan*, draw inspiration from medieval traditions in both content and composition, and show us what those genres looked like in practice during the pre-Reformation English world.

Labeling a play's genre does not seem to produce conclusions with significant historical utility. There is little concrete knowledge to be gained by deciding that a play more closely resembles one dramatic archetype than another, and the differences among these categories are relatively small. In the case of these plays, however, these genres give us clues to what Heywood meant to do with them. Heywood's chosen vehicle for presenting his commentaries make it clear that in nearly every case, his purpose was to entertain rather than to moralize.

Heywood's proximity to and relationship with the Tudor family, and with Henry VIII in particular, allows us to look to his plays as a particularly valuable example of what entertainment for Henry and the Tudor court looked like during the 1520s and 30s. Heywood presented Henry with caricatured farces mocking religious figures and prominent church controversies, debates that highlighted flaws in and the corruptibility of church leadership, and moralities that set aside doctrinal content in favor of entertainment. Medieval styles of dramatic literature were still popular and prominent, despite serving a very different political and religious purpose than the

Catholic education and doctrines that they were originally meant for. Heywood's use of those genres demonstrates that Henry was entertained by jokes, metaphors, and storylines that do not seem to align with the tense religious moment in the decades immediately before the English Reformation.

### **John Heywood: A Brief Biography**

John Heywood's lengthy career at the Tudor court, which spanned four monarchs and four different religious settlements, demonstrated his nimbleness and ability to adapt to the ever-changing world of sixteenth-century English politics. The twists and turns of his life at court, particularly during the reign of Henry VIII, are reflected in his writings and thus worth exploring in some detail. Unlike Bale, whose works are drawn from English and biblical history, Heywood wrote for the courtly world in which he lived, and the context of those plays is far more significant even than their content. Therefore, it is important to thoroughly understand Heywood's life and how he worked within that context.

Heywood was born in 1497 and first appears in records of Henry VIII's court in 1519, around age 22, when he was paid for services as a musician. He was soon well known at court as a talented virginals player. He may have been associated with the king's interlude players, one of the many performance troupes that Henry sponsored, although his primary role was always as a musician. Heywood's contemporary John Bale includes him in his catalogue of significant British authors, noting that he was a skilled musician and poet.<sup>110</sup>

For much of his time at Henry's court, Heywood enjoyed great favor with the king. Henry was only six years older than Heywood and was himself an accomplished and enthusiastic musician and talented virginals player. It is not at all difficult to imagine the two young men

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<sup>110</sup> Bale, *Index Britanniae Scriptorum*. (1548).



striking up a friendship, and Henry's shows of favor indicate that they probably did. Around 1521, Heywood was granted the income from Maxey Manor in Northamptonshire, and later the same year the income from the manor of Haydon.<sup>111</sup> In 1528 Heywood was appointed steward of the royal chamber, a lifelong appointment which made him an official member of the household and allowed him to become very close with the king. In his biography of Heywood, Robert Bolwell suggests that he took great advantage of his privileged place with Henry, as indicated by his extensive list of valuable possessions and continually increasing salary.<sup>112</sup>

At the beginning of the 1530s, Heywood's personal life would set him on a course for trouble later. In 1529 he married Eliza Rastell, daughter of John Rastell and Elizabeth More—respectively, the owner of a prominent printing business in London, and the sister of Sir Thomas More. John Rastell, and later his son William, would go on to print most of Heywood's dramatic works that were published to a broad audience.<sup>113</sup> Both More and Rastell were well known for their devout Catholicism, and Rastell frequently published both More's and his own religious polemics. Heywood's marriage to Eliza closely tied him to both men, and to More's circle of conservative religious philosophers.<sup>114</sup>

As the Reformation in England began to gain steam, Heywood found himself in a precarious position but managed to hang on to his place at court. While More's writings—also published by the Rastell family—became increasingly divisive and confrontational, Heywood's plays argued for peace and urged their audiences to consider religious reconciliation. Greg

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<sup>111</sup> "Grants in April 1521," undated. *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* vol. XVIII part 2, ed. J. Gairdner and R.H. Brodie. London, England: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. 1902. Heywood lost Maxey in 1525, when Henry gave the grant instead to young Henry Fitzroy on his creation as Duke of Richmond, but retained Haydon; this suggests that the loss of property did not reflect a loss of favor (Bolwell, 11). Henry's choice to grant Maxey to Heywood in the first place is an important indicator of Heywood's position, as the property was valuable and distinguished enough to later give to his son.

<sup>112</sup> Robert Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1921), 18.

<sup>113</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 20.

<sup>114</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 23.

Walker draws attention to the reversal of attention from the press toward the two men: More's works were originally published with elaborate, ornamental title pages but were presented simply and without ornamentation throughout 1533, while Heywood's works, originally cheaply-made rush jobs, began to receive title pages and the company's proscenium arch decoration reserved for important works. This was perhaps a subtle attempt from William Rastell to distance himself and his press from More's polemical ideas and promote Heywood's reconciliatory opinion.<sup>115</sup> More was executed in July 1535 for his refusal to accept Henry as the supreme head of the Church of England, and Heywood was present for More's execution.<sup>116</sup>

Heywood's luck nearly ran out in 1543, when his role in the Prebendaries' Plot against Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was discovered. The plot involved a plan to remove Cranmer from his position as Archbishop of Canterbury. It is unclear what exactly Heywood's role in the plot was, but it appeared to have been a significant one. Cranmer asked suspected plotters "what communication by word or writing [they] had with Mr. Roper, Balthasar the Surgeon, Heywood, Mr. Moore, Germain Gardiner, Mr. Beckinsale, or with either of them, and to what effect such communication hath been."<sup>117</sup> Clearly he believed that Heywood was right at the center of the matter, a logical conclusion given Heywood's proximity to the king and important position at court.

Despite his formal censure and loss of property, Heywood survived his involvement in the Prebendaries' Plot, and managed to keep his head firmly attached to his body. He was granted a full general pardon for all activities associated with the plot against Cranmer in June

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<sup>115</sup> Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112-113.

<sup>116</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 29; Bolwell quotes William Roper's biography of his father-in-law More, in which Roper reports that Charles V lamented More's death to his English ambassador Sir Thomas Elliott, who then relayed those comments to a list of assembled friends who included John Heywood and his wife.

<sup>117</sup> "Cranmer and the Heretics," *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* vol. XVIII part 2, ed. J. Gairdner and R.H. Brodie (London, England: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1902), 297.

1544.<sup>118</sup> In exchange Heywood offered a recantation, recorded on July 6, 1544. Henry's Calendar of State Papers reports that in this recantation Heywood "Willingly declare[d] the great clemency of the King, whose supremacy had often been opened to him both by word and writing, though he obstinately suffered himself to fall into such blindness as not only to think the bishop of Rome supreme head of the universal Church, but, like an untrue subject, to conceal and favor such as held the same opinion."<sup>119</sup>

For the most part, Heywood jumped right back into favor at court. Cranmer commissioned a play from him in 1544, after his pardon; neither the play nor its title have survived, and historians are left to wonder whether Cranmer's request was an olive branch intended to mend bridges with Heywood or an attempt to test the veracity of his recantation and conversion to Protestantism.<sup>120</sup> It would become clear later that there was no such conversion, but there are no records of future arguments between the two men about the matter, suggesting that even if Heywood's play had failed to pass muster, it was not a significant enough problem to make it into Henry's state papers.

Heywood served all three of Henry's children after Henry's death, and remained in a place of prominence at court until the 1560s. Despite his Catholicism, he avoided trouble with the fervently Protestant Edward VI and continued to write lighthearted entertainment for the young king. His true moment of success came under Mary I; just as with her father, Heywood enjoyed a personal friendship with Mary, and he publicly supported her even in her less popular moments (including her violent anti-Protestant persecutions and her controversial marriage to

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<sup>118</sup> "Grants in June, 1544," *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* vol. XVIII part 2, 504.

<sup>119</sup> "Recantation of John Heywood," July 6, 1544, *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* vol. XVIII part 2, 531-532.

<sup>120</sup> Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama*, 107.

Philip II). He resigned his position as steward of the royal chamber a few weeks before Mary's death in 1558.

Heywood's tenure at court came to an end not long after Elizabeth I's accession. There is little surviving information about Heywood's experiences under Elizabeth, but it is clear that by 1564, he was living in exile in Antwerp. Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity was adopted in 1559, requiring all English subjects to attend services in the Church of England, which most likely created a difficult situation for Heywood at court. It is unknown when Heywood left England, or the precipitating cause, although Bolwell suggests that he left "because of some definite act of religious zeal which roused the ire of Elizabeth."<sup>121</sup> Heywood sought the queen's permission before he would attempt to return to England in 1574. That permission was apparently never granted, and Heywood died in Antwerp in 1580.<sup>122</sup>

John Heywood was clearly intimately familiar with the intricacies of life at court throughout the Tudor period. He served four different monarchs under four different religious policies, and until the end of his life managed to remain in warm favor with those monarchs for most of his career. Heywood's relationship to Henry in particular is especially valuable for historians: his proximity to and familiarity with the king suggest that he knew exceptionally well what entertainment to present to him. Heywood's plays create a picture of courtly culture during the Reformation, and we can trust that this picture closely reflects what Henry and the people around him actually experienced.

### **Classical Morality to Interlude: Heywood's *The Play of the Weather***

John Heywood wrote in the same time period as John Bale, whose morality plays demonstrate how emerging Protestant voices worked in a literary culture with substantial

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<sup>121</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 67-68.

<sup>122</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 67-71.

Catholic roots. Heywood's relationship to that same literary culture was very different from Bale's, in large part because of his Catholic faith, but also because of the purpose his plays served and where they were intended to be seen. Unlike Bale, who leaned heavily into the characteristics of the morality genre to advance his arguments, Heywood wrote plays that incorporated aspects of morality but pushed away from its most important features in favor of the moral interlude. *The Play of the Weather* is an example of the evolving theatrical world at work, much as Bale's plays were, but Heywood's subversions of medieval literary tradition are intended to present a more entertaining story rather than for the express purpose of making an argument.

*The Play of the Weather* is Heywood's most notable work, and it has drawn the attention of historians and scholars of early modern English theater. William Rastell published the play in 1533, but it was almost certainly written and performed earlier; scholars have proposed a date of composition in 1528.<sup>123</sup> Heywood's script does not call for any actors to play multiple characters, suggesting that it was not intended to be performed by professional actors; at the same time, Bale's scripts written for his own professional performance troupe often economized on their limited numbers by requiring one actor to play as many as seven roles. He also calls for "A Boy, the least that can play," perhaps to be played by a young member of court.<sup>124</sup> It is clear that Heywood intended for this play to be presented at court, and thus there was a strong chance that Henry was in the audience.

In the play, the god Jupiter visits Earth after a fight with several other gods; the gods fought one another via the weather, and Jupiter has magnanimously chosen to hear complaints

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<sup>123</sup> Norman Sanders, "The social and historical context," in *The Revels: History of Drama in English* vol. II 1500-1576 (New York: Methuen & Co., 1980), 48.

<sup>124</sup> John Heywood, *The Play of the Weather*, in *The Dramatic Writings of John Heywood* ed. John S. Farmer (London: Early English Drama Society, 1905), 92.

from the people of Earth who were affected by that weather. Merry Report—whom Heywood labels “the Vice” in his character list—arrives to speak for the people, claiming that he will hear from everyone and impartially report all of their complaints to Jupiter. Merry Report fields complaints from a wide range of people, who request weather that is favorable to them: the gentleman asks for pleasant weather for hunting, the merchant wants strong and favorable winds to drive his ships, the ranger asks for strong gales to knock down trees. Merry Report presents the complaints to Jupiter, who is dismayed to hear that so many disagree, and someone must be disappointed no matter what he chooses to do. He admonishes everyone for not thinking about the problems that their own preferred weather might cause for others. The people agree to defer to Jupiter’s judgment regarding the weather, and Jupiter ends the play with the comment that “Our prudence hath made peace universally.”<sup>125</sup>

The political and religious commentary in *The Play of the Weather* is fairly clear. Jupiter represents Henry, who must decide what to do about England’s religion as the Reformation looms. Merry Report probably represents Cranmer, Heywood’s enemy and Henry’s advisor, who claims to be impartial but in fact spends more time arguing with the people coming to seek Jupiter’s favor than facilitating a conversation. The assortment of people who speak to Jupiter represent the waves of new religious thought (in 1528, largely Lutheran- and Anabaptist-leaning theologies, spurred on by William Tyndale’s recently published English language Bible) starting to appear in England, who each want Henry to make a settlement that prioritizes their own faith over the others. In the end, Heywood encourages Henry, like Jupiter, to call for an end to all of the competing voices and to use his authority to make the decision himself. Like much of

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<sup>125</sup> Heywood, *The Play of the Weather*, 135.

England's Catholic leadership at this time, Heywood believed that Henry was the country's best hope against the pressures of Reformation from the rest of Europe.<sup>126</sup>

This interpretation of political commentary has pulled *The Play of the Weather* into the historiographic spotlight, and has brought the rest of Heywood's dramatic works along with it. Greg Walker argues that Heywood's interests in writing this play were practical and personal: "the need to deprive the radical opponents of the established church and traditional catholic practices," he says, "of the potent weapon which Parliament was providing them" in the form of extensive religious debates throughout the early 1530s.<sup>127</sup> *The Play of the Weather* is at the same time a piece of propaganda in support of Henry's God-given right to total authority over England's state religion and a tool by which Heywood attempted to shape religious policy to his own interest.

But its historiographic centrality and political and religious commentary have somewhat overshadowed its role as an example of courtly dramatic culture. *The Play of the Weather* was written and performed at a crucial moment in England's transition from medieval to early modern literary culture, a transformation driven in no small part by the Reformation, and Heywood's work indicates what aspects of that change took priority and what elements continued to be compatible with the mid-Reformation situation. Heywood's commentary in this play is certainly important—and unlike several of his other plays, it is safe to conclude that this commentary was both deliberate and central to his intent in writing the play—but a consideration of what the play looked like as a functional piece of drama also yields valuable conclusions.

Historians have associated *The Play of the Weather* with the medieval morality genre, and in some ways it appears that Heywood may have at least taken his inspiration from that

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<sup>126</sup> Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama*, 102-103.

<sup>127</sup> Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* 91.

genre. Heywood directly labels the character of Merry Report as “the Vice” in his character list, calling to mind the traditional antagonistic human “vices” found in morality plays.<sup>128</sup> Bevington argues that Heywood borrows the device of extended metaphor from contemporary religious drama” to make his argument.<sup>129</sup> Apart from Jupiter and Merry Report, Heywood’s characters are generic; they are not the personified traits most commonly found in moralities, but they are blank caricatures of ordinary occupations and represent typical human experiences. There are elements in *The Play of the Weather* that somewhat resemble elements of the traditional morality.

It certainly would not have been unusual for a playwright of this time to write a morality play; the morality was a popular genre, and examples of these plays abound in sixteenth-century English dramatic literature. Heywood’s morality, however, greatly differs from most of those examples. Bale’s version in *King Johan* and *Three Laws* concentrate much more heavily on the more traditional, medieval-era features of this genre—the progression of its main character away from sin and toward salvation, the downfall of personified vices and triumph of virtues, the didactic message to its audience. All of these elements are conspicuously missing from Heywood’s work. Bale’s tone in his plays is serious and solemn, reflecting the gravity of his chosen topics; Heywood, on the other hand, is far more facetious and takes a lighthearted approach to his story, filling his text with jokes, songs, and physical humor.

*The Play of the Weather* may also be described as a moral interlude. At the time, the term “interlude” was generally used to refer to any play, distinguishing scripted performances from masques and revels, but historiography has begun to apply the term specifically to lighthearted, generally humorous plays intended for entertainment. There are few hard and fast

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<sup>128</sup> Heywood, *The Play of the Weather*, 92.

<sup>129</sup> David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 70.



features to distinguish this genre from the morality play in general, but interludes are more frequently characterized by a lighter plot and a comedic or farcical tone. The morality genre does not preclude humor or comedic interpretation, but interludes certainly aim toward entertainment far more directly than do standard morality plays. William Rastell's original publication added the subtitle "a new and very merry interlude," confirming that sixteenth-century writers and audiences made a distinction between the two types of play and associated interludes with lighter entertainment.<sup>130</sup> The interlude was a transitional genre, from the strict and formulaic religious theater of the medieval era to the secular drama that would later characterize the Shakespearean period, and Heywood participated in this transition.<sup>131</sup>

Heywood's work demonstrates to us how theater and the morality were changing, in coincidence with—and not necessarily because of—the Reformation. Bale's plays argued for the supremacy and significance of Protestant doctrine and the flaws of the Catholic church, and his modifications of the genre were meant to further those arguments. Heywood's purpose in writing *The Play of the Weather* was almost exactly the opposite: this play was ultimately meant to entertain rather than moralize, and argues for Henry to exercise his authority as monarch to keep the Catholic church in power. Even though early reformers still owed a good deal of their intellectual and cultural influences to the medieval period, there is some irony in the profoundly Protestant Bale following the medieval literary tradition more closely than Heywood does, but both men demonstrate that altering morality plays was a valuable means of making points on either side of the religious question.

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<sup>130</sup> Heywood, *The Play of the Weather*, 91.

<sup>131</sup> Dinah Birch, ed, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 519-520.

Historians identify *The Play of the Weather* as a point of meaningful innovation, in both the practical and literary elements of theater.<sup>132</sup> Heywood was among the earliest writers to incorporate classical characters into morality plays, and when looking back over the history of English theater we can identify this play as one of the first examples of what would come to be the interlude. But this play was not considered a significant innovation at the time—in fact, it almost entirely escaped Bale’s notice in his *Scriptorum*.<sup>133</sup> Thus, *The Play of the Weather* can be seen as an example of theater in a relatively steady moment: even though Heywood was working outside of the strict boundaries of morality plays, the purpose of the play was not to innovate, and therefore demonstrates what theater looked like, at court, in that moment. Heywood turned a religious moral (and weighty political argument) into a play meant almost entirely for entertainment, and the court accepted it.

### **The Medieval Debate: The Pardoner and the Friar**

*The Pardoner and the Friar* was most likely Heywood’s earliest play, and was published anonymously by William Rastell in 1533. The date of composition has been debated; Bolwell suggests that it may have been written as early as 1521, owing to Heywood’s reference to Pope Leo X who had died that year, but the play’s religious content suggests that it was more likely written in 1529.<sup>134</sup> Either date places it at the very beginning of Heywood’s playwriting career. Even though *The Pardoner and the Friar* is much simpler in style and content as compared to Heywood’s more famous works, it is a good indicator of the cultural influences Heywood was working with, and what court entertainment standards looked like at the time. *The Pardoner and*

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<sup>132</sup> Richard Southern, “The technique of play presentation,” in *The Revels*, 72; Lois Potter, “The plays and the playwrights,” in *The Revels*, 234.

<sup>133</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 58.

<sup>134</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 110; Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama*, 84.

*the Friar* is an example of what Henry and the people at court were entertained by, which in this case was, surprisingly, a caricature of religious controversies that would soon push England toward reformation.

The play takes the form of a dialogue between two religious men, the eponymous Pardoner and Friar, who attempt to solicit money directly from the audience, standing in for a congregation. Each man presents a fairly well-reasoned argument as to why the audience should give their money to him rather than to the other. A disagreement between them ensues, which escalates into a physical fight; the curate of the local church arrives to chase them away, irritated that they are “polluting his church” with their swindling.<sup>135</sup> The Pardoner and the Friar join forces to fight off the curate and a neighbor who has come to help remove them. They win the fight, and both men agree to go their separate ways and be more pleasant to one another in the future.

The political and religious commentary from this play are not as commonly analyzed in historiography as *The Play of the Weather*, but they are nonetheless still present. Greg Walker draws out what he feels is Heywood’s Reformation metaphor: the Friar is a caricature of the evangelical reformer, while the Pardoner represents the established church and its flaws. The two men talk over one another—symbolic of contentious and unending religious debate—and ultimately do not arrive at any compromise beyond agreeing to go their separate ways. From Heywood’s perspective, Walker argues, these religious issues were hardly a matter for negotiation, and friendly yet perpetual division is preferable to compromising one’s beliefs and morals.<sup>136</sup> Even with this play’s shorter text and more formulaic plot, Heywood is given credit for significant symbolism and metaphoric religious commentary.

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<sup>135</sup> Heywood, *The Pardoner and the Friar*, in *The Dramatic Works of John Heywood*, 22.

<sup>136</sup> Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama*, 80-84.

*The Pardoner and the Friar*'s construction makes it very likely to have been written specifically for performance at court. The cast consists of only four characters, two of whom only appear in one scene; when compared to Bale's lengthy cast lists, which required actors to take on two or three roles, it appears that Heywood's play is much better suited to amateur performers and performance in a smaller family setting where fewer people might be available to play a role. No elaborate sets or costumes are required. The only props called for in the script are a series of comedically exaggerated saints' relics which the Pardoner shows off to the audience, all of which are either bones or items of clothing that could be borrowed from the kitchen or from a member of the household's wardrobe. This play would have been quite easy to perform at court—and likely an entertaining one, given the humorous, exaggerated caricature of the Pardoner and the Friar. It is highly likely that Henry saw this play performed, and also likely that members of court and the royal family participated in its production, perhaps the strongest tacit endorsement of its content and presentation style.

*The Pardoner and the Friar*, unlike *The Play of the Weather*, is not a morality play in the medieval tradition. While it does involve religious characters and some religious themes, that the play is religious at all is almost completely coincidental: the basic plot itself is entirely secular, and could have been performed with secular characters with very few alterations. There are no high-handed moral messages or didactic themes. Because the play ends with no real resolution, beyond the Pardoner and the Friar agreeing to disagree on their opinions, the audience is left wondering what moral Heywood had in mind at all. The call for coexistence, however subtle, is clearly present in Heywood's message, but the enduring moral lesson that an audience would have expected to come with a morality play is absent. Above all, there is no question of

sin or salvation, the most fundamental part of a morality play's plot. It is clear that Heywood is not working within the framework of a morality play.

*The Pardoner and the Friar* is, however, strongly influenced by the medieval period in the form of the *débat* genre. The debate was more commonly a poetic form than a dramatic one, but made a handful of significant appearances in English Renaissance-era theater, most notably in Heywood's work. Several of Heywood's other plays also fall into this category, but *The Pardoner and the Friar* demonstrates most clearly how the debate was adapted to suit the world of the Reformation and the arguments at hand, and Heywood's purpose in doing so.

The debate genre has a long tradition in both English and French literature, and was a popular and prominent style of poetry during the medieval period. The earliest surviving European example dates back to the late eighth century.<sup>137</sup> Seth Lehrer describes “the penchant for anthropomorphizing *disputationes* (soul vs. body, wine vs. water, summer vs. winter, etc.)” during the Middle Ages, a trend that was reflected in Old English poetry and continued through the medieval period.<sup>138</sup> Debate poetry usually takes the form of a dialogue between two natural opposites, such as the pairings Lehrer describes, who engage in a lighthearted but emotional debate.

Heywood was no stranger to the dialogue structure. *The Four PP, Witty and Witless*, and *The Play of Love* can also be classified as debates—in fact, Lois Potter argues that all but one of Heywood's works lean too far into the dialogue format to be considered plays.<sup>139</sup> Whether Heywood chose this genre as a vehicle for a broader argument, or leaned into its structure

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<sup>137</sup> John W. Conlee, ed., *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1991), xii-xiii.

<sup>138</sup> Seth Lehrer, “Old English and its afterlife,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>139</sup> Potter, “The plays and the playwrights,” 167-169.

because he struggled to write a strong plot is unclear. The fact remains, however, that Heywood knew that his audience would find the format entertaining, even if modern historians criticize its relative lack of dramatic structure.

Heywood's choice of pairing, however, sharply contrasts the standard "opposite" pairings typically found in dialogue poetry and literature. Heywood stages a debate between two characters who are nothing like the more common natural comparisons. The Pardoner and the Friar are both less than ideal men, and their moral flaws are on clear display. Far from the traditional celebration of the two compared characters, Heywood generates humor from exaggerated caricatures of the worst of how religious figures acted at the time—the play is humorous because of the men's ridiculous, far from clergy-like behavior, and the extents to which Heywood takes his commentary on that behavior. The Pardoner and the Friar argue not for their own virtue, but for the failings of the other.

In addition to its literary qualities, *The Pardoner and the Friar* also offers commentary on the academic world of the Reformation and how academic arguments combined with entertainment. Heywood was not the only one writing debates and dialogues for the pre-Reformation audience, nor the only writer at court. Sir Thomas More's famous *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, a passionate defense of Catholic church doctrine and affirmation of its validity, was published in 1528. Heywood married More's niece less than a year after its publication, and was already closely connected with More's academic circle; it seems to be little coincidence that Heywood also took up the writing of dialogues around the same time.

More's *Dialogue* is humorous and entertaining in structure, and its tone closely resembles that of Heywood's *The Pardoner and the Friar*. More fills his work with several entertaining stories—Walter M. Gordon outright calls them "bawdy"—that make his work more accessible to

the ordinary person and drive home his point. More's *Messenger* is reminiscent of Heywood's *Pardoner and Friar*, an energetic and impulsive character with little patience for the narrator's passionate descriptions of miracles.<sup>140</sup> Because the date of *The Pardoner and the Friar* is uncertain, it is impossible to know which of the two was written first, but it is tempting to read *The Pardoner and the Friar* as an imitation of *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, at least in tone.

The two pieces have markedly different purposes, however, and Heywood ultimately subverts the disputation to dramatic effect. Unlike More's characters, who dispute the validity of the sacraments and the strength of the Catholic church, Heywood's *Pardoner and Friar* argue over which of them most deserves the money they are trying to wrangle from the audience. There is no profound religious argument, and no meaningful moral emerges at the end of the play. Heywood does not arrive at an answer, but he sets up his play in a way that makes it look like he will.

Heywood followed in the substantial literary and academic tradition of dialogue and debate, and *The Pardoner and the Friar* is not an innovation in that genre. But Heywood's work demonstrates what factors influenced English theater and academic conversation during the late 1520s and early 1530s. The debate genre held on through centuries of European literature to become a ubiquitous part of English writing, both literary and academic, and influenced poets and theologians alike. It goes too far to suggest that Heywood set out to satirize More's *Dialogue*, but undeniable parallels can be drawn between More's work and *The Pardoner and the Friar*. But rather than replicate More's Catholic defense with a strong religious commentary, Heywood sets aside any significant agenda to present caricatured reflections of what many English people actually saw in their everyday religious experience: clergymen and church

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<sup>140</sup> Walter M. Gordon, "The Argument of Comedy in Thomas More's 'Dialogue Concerning Heresies,'" *Renaissance and Reformation* 4, no. 1 (1980): 13-14.

officials not behaving in ways that accorded with their vows. These anti-clerical comments were certainly not unusual, even before the Reformation, and even ardent Catholics criticized their church. Heywood's authorship, however, has been questioned because of these comments: Charles Wallace finds it outright impossible that a man with strong Catholic convictions could have written a play so critical of the Catholic church.<sup>141</sup> Heywood's commentary is sharp and substantial, even when it is considered in the context of Catholic reformers, who often made anticlerical comments and arguments of their own. We might expect an ardent Catholic (and relative of More) to shy away from casting his own church in such an unfavorable light. Heywood instead chose to make his audience laugh by presenting a popular, well-accepted genre and point of academic debate to answer no question at all.

### **French farce: *The Four PP* and *Johan Johan***

*The Four PP* and *Johan Johan* are equally valuable examples of a courtly culture grappling with monumental religious upheaval. Recent historiography has tried to rescue these plays, especially *The Four PP*, by attributing to them considerable political and religious commentary. While these arguments are significant and draw out important opinions that indicate Heywood's place in the religious debates of the early Reformation, they overlook the plays' role as practical examples of dramatic literature.

*The Four PP* closely resembles its earlier partner *The Pardoner and the Friar* in both plot and style. It was printed by William Middleton at some point before 1543 and was probably included with Heywood's other plays in Rastell's 1533 printing.<sup>142</sup> If we accept this earlier

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<sup>141</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 107; Charles Wallace, *The Evolution of the English Drama up to Shakespeare* (Berlin, Germany: G. Reimer, 1912), 83.

<sup>142</sup> Heywood, *The Four PP*, in *The Dramatic Writings of John Heywood*, 64, publisher's colophon; Bolwell, 101, 104; in arguing for a date of 1533, Bolwell points out that Middleton's press did not print any works between 1543 and 1547, so Heywood's work must have been published before then. He also argues that it was probably popular before Sir Thomas More's death, meaning that it must have been printed in 1533 at the latest.



date—and given the play’s content, it is likely to be correct—then it was written in roughly the same time period and experienced the same political, social, cultural, and religious influences as *The Pardoner and the Friar*.

The eponymous four PP are four ordinary men: a Palmer (pilgrim), a Pardoner, a Potheary [sic], and a Pedlar [sic], who happen upon one another and are soon drawn into an argument over which of the first three performs the best and most religious deeds. The Palmer says that pilgrims display the highest possible piety by visiting holy lands to show their devotion. The Pardoner says that he helps people reduce their time in Purgatory and get to heaven faster by selling them pardons to clear their sins. The Potheary claims that he is the best of them because he sells people medicines to kill their mortal bodies, thus sending them directly to heaven. The Pedlar is left to mediate among the three: he insists that by their efforts combined, all three make up one perfectly pious man, but each of the contestants is determined to win the contest outright.<sup>143</sup>

To settle the question of which man is the most pious, the Pedlar proposes that each describe their piety, but none of the three trust the other two to be honest. They decide to hold a lying contest, with he who tells the most fantastic tall tale to be declared the winner. They present their greatly exaggerated tales, including the Pardoner’s story of traveling through Purgatory to bring a pardon to a friend who had died suddenly, but the Palmer wins with his inadvertent comment that “of all the women that I have seen, I never saw nor knew in my conscience Any one woman out of patience.”<sup>144</sup> The Palmer immediately gives up his victory,

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<sup>143</sup> Heywood, *The Four PP*, 30-34, 40.

<sup>144</sup> Heywood, *The Four PP*, 54, 57.

however, and the play ends with the Pedlar declaring that “Now be ye all even as ye began; No man hath lost, nor no math hath wan [sic].”<sup>145</sup>

Heywood also published *A merry play between John John the Husband, Tyb his Wife, and Sir John the Priest* with William Rastell in 1533.<sup>146</sup> This play goes by a variety of shortened names, most commonly *John, Tyb, and Sir John* or *Johan Johan*, and like all of these early plays was probably written at some point between 1529 and 1533.<sup>147</sup>

*Johan Johan* is relatively rudimentary in structure and plot, but is in fact the most clearly plotted of Heywood’s plays. John, the husband, is convinced that his wife Tyb is having an affair with the local priest, Sir John, but can do little to prove it. After Tyb returns from a meeting with Sir John, she lies to John and says that she was at a friend’s house baking a pie, which she has brought home with her. She asks John to invite Sir John over for dinner, to help them eat the pie. At the priest’s house, Sir John at first declines the invitation, but decides to join them. When Sir John arrives at John and Tyb’s house, he and Tyb behave like lovers and taunt John with their relationship. They set John to work melting a pair of candles over the fire while they eat the pie (which Sir John admits to having bought himself to serve as Tyb’s “alibi”). By the time the candles are melted, all of the pie is gone, and John is outraged. He and Tyb get into a violent physical altercation, after which Tyb and Sir John run off. The play ends with John plotting his revenge on his wife and her lover.

It is clear that neither *The Four PP* nor *Johan Johan* represents a medieval morality, or could possibly be construed as one. There are no questions of salvation or the improvement of

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<sup>145</sup> Heywood, *The Four PP*, 61.

<sup>146</sup> Heywood, *A merry play between John John the husband, Tyb his wife, and Sir John the priest*, in *The Dramatic Writings of John Heywood*, 89; Rastell’s colophon erroneously gives the date of publication as 12 February 1433.

<sup>147</sup> Norman Sanders suggests in “The social and historical context” that Heywood’s earlier plays, including *Johan Johan*, might have been written as early as 1520; that date implies an improbably long delay between writing and publishing, and the late 1520s seems far more likely.

the human soul; the closest example is the Pardoner's fictional journey through Hell to rescue his friend, but even this story is mocked far too much to be taken seriously. All of the characters are concretely identified and not meant to represent any group as a whole or serve as a generalization, nor are they personified virtues or vices as is common in the morality play. There is no personal growth among the characters in either play: in *The Four PP*, the Pedlar explicitly points out that other three Ps wind up right back where they started, and John has done nothing to stop his wife's affair. Just as in *The Pardoner and the Friar*, Heywood seems to be subverting this genre as much as possible. Heywood's purpose with both of these plays was not to urge his audience to seek salvation, nor to argue for the resiliency of the human soul. Morality is where playwrights turn to make a weighty moral point—Heywood himself does so with *The Play of the Weather*—and thus it stands to reason that there was no such point to make.

Both *The Four PP* and *Johan Johan* are far more accurately described as examples of the medieval farce. Farces are far less rigidly structured than the morality play, and the genre has survived into the present day in much the same style as it originally existed in the medieval period. They usually include frequent physical humor and rely on moments of deliberate absurdity and nonsense. A farce almost always takes place in one nondescript location that does not have much bearing on the plot. The features of this genre are quite loose, and unlike the morality it does not call for any specific structure or type of plot; therefore, it is much easier to say that a play constitutes a farce than a morality.

Heywood's chosen subjects lend themselves well to the farce genre, and he uses its tropes and features to great effect as means of entertainment. Both plays draw their comedy from highly exaggerated and improbable situations. Both sets of characters are written in such a way that the actors could have easily incorporated humorous physical characterizations into their

performances. *Johan Johan* in particular does not take itself too seriously: when Tyb enters, she asks an audience member to hold her gown for her and ensure that no one steals it, but soon changes her mind about which person should hold it, saying “But yet he shall not have it, by my fay, He is so near the door, he might run away.”<sup>148</sup> Heywood was clearly very practiced in this type of play, and he incorporates its elements into most of his works.

*Johan Johan* is a particularly interesting example of how medieval genres interacted with the developing Renaissance world, as it is clear that this play was primarily intended for entertainment. There is no grand moral to draw out; rather, Heywood presents comedic characters in a ridiculous setting solely for the sake of comedy. Therefore, this play demonstrates what a playwright like Heywood, placed in the awkward situation of a religion that did not agree with the direction that the political tide flowed, might do when writing a piece purely for entertainment.

What Heywood did with *Johan Johan* was combine a well-known medieval story with a parody of what people already thought about English Catholicism. Bolwell identifies the French play *Farce nouvelle trèsbonne et fort joyeuse de Pernet qui va au vin* as Heywood’s source. In this play, a wife sends her husband away so that she can entertain her lover, and features the use of a pie as an alibi and ordering the husband to melt candles to keep him distracted.<sup>149</sup> The antagonist in the original French version, however, is an ordinary man; Heywood’s version upgrades him to a philandering priest. Sir John’s profession has little impact on the plot—apart from heightening the husband’s emotional tension—and thus Heywood would have had no dramatic reason to make his character into a priest. Thus, his objective was either to satirize the clergy, or simply to make his play more entertaining.

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<sup>148</sup> Heywood, *Johan Johan*, 75.

<sup>149</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 114.

It was well known by the 1520s that large numbers of the clergy did not observe their vows of celibacy, a point which was a significant source of complaint against the pre-Reformation Catholic church. But Heywood does not comment on this controversy, despite the fact that he has inserted it into his play. Sir John's behavior is worse from the characters' perspective because of his role, but largely because of the emotional impacts it has on John (who sadly laments that the priest had been his confessor and close friend before taking up with his wife).<sup>150</sup> If John Bale had written this play, it would have concluded with a speech about the dangers of requiring clergy to be celibate and bemoaning the moral failures of priests who fall to temptation. Such commentary is notably absent from Heywood's play. He uses Sir John as a means of comedy, not as a point of moralization or commentary.

Heywood follows much the same techniques in *The Four PP*, which Bolwell argues is based on the *Farce nouvelle d'un Pardonneur, d'un Triacleur, et d'une Tavernière*. The Pardoner and Triacleur (a traveling apothecary) correspond precisely to Heywood's Pardoner and Potheary, and their debate is moderated by a tavern-keeper, corresponding to Heywood's Pedlar. The discussion among the men replicates portions of the French script almost exactly.<sup>151</sup> The Palmer is Heywood's own invention.

Heywood constructs his farce from exaggerated portrayals of the three categories of practicing Christian: the religious official (the Pardoner), the devout layperson (the Palmer), and the casually religious person (the Potheary and the Pedlar). By including the Palmer in his story, Heywood covers every group into which an English person of the 1530s might fall. No one is clear of his mockery, even the devoted Palmer. Heywood demonstrates that there are

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<sup>150</sup> Heywood, *Johan Johan*, 73.

<sup>151</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 103.

moral shortcomings to be found in all religious people, even the most devoted—crucially, a category with which king Henry might identify.

But lest Heywood's commentary, intentional or not, subsume the practical purpose of his play, it is important to note that the point of the farce was entertainment, and in Heywood's case the objectives of entertainment and satire outweighed any propagandizing message. It is clear that Heywood did not intend to make any enduring comment through this play: his characters learn very little over the course of their argument, and he draws attention to the fact that they gained nothing from determining who was the most pious of them. The farcical nature of the plot, and his collection of unabashed caricatures, demonstrate that Heywood wrote this play because he felt that his audience would find it entertaining. Thus, the situation in England in the late 1520s and 1530s, when Protestant theologies from mainland Europe had started to gain ground and Henry had begun to raise questions about royal supremacy over the church, was one in which people were likely to be amused at these types of religious parody.

As is frequently the case with pre-Shakespearean early modern theater, historians are left in the dark regarding what people actually thought about the plays that they saw. Any argument about the plays' entertainment value, influence, or prominence in theater must therefore be almost excessively speculative. Fortunately, however, in Heywood's case there are sufficient suggestions as to how his works were received that historians can draw some tentative conclusions without relying too much on conjecture. For one, *Johan Johan* and *The Four PP* were published for a wide audience, not just performed at court. We do not know of any other performances outside of the courtly setting—or indeed of any definitive performances at court—but the fact remains that it was worth the cost of publishing, and therefore must have been seen as sufficiently entertaining or noteworthy to be worth Rastell's efforts.

Heywood was also certainly not immune from trouble at court, but despite the fact that Henry's court did not keep copious records of every disagreement Henry had with his courtiers, it is well-documented that Heywood remained in decent favor with the monarch both before and after his Prebendaries scandal in 1544. It appears that nothing in these plays bothered Henry enough to make note of it, nor did they lead to any disputes or controversies among the early religious factions at court that were significant enough to merit making note of. Heywood included religious elements in his adaptations of French plays, and amplified elements that were already there, because he believed that his audience would find them entertaining. Based on the lack of documented response that would indicate otherwise, it is reasonable to conclude that they did.

## Conclusions

Heywood's work is considered innovative only after the fact. Bale does not credit Heywood with any significant innovations to dramatic form—in fact, his entry for Heywood in the *Scriptorium* simply lists him as a talented musician and English-language poet, with no attention paid at all to his dramatic works.<sup>152</sup> We now see Heywood's incorporation of classical elements into religious theatrical tradition as a significant innovation in English theater, but in the 1530s, when Heywood's most important contemporary looked at his works, *The Play of the Weather* and the rest of Heywood's most famous works did not seem groundbreaking.

Bale's attention, or lack thereof, is far from the only indicator of a play's reception, and we cannot firmly conclude that Heywood's work was completely ignored by his contemporaries based only on the word choice of one quick paragraph in Bale's *Scriptorium*. But in the absence of other notable sixteenth-century commentary on Heywood's work, there are few other

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<sup>152</sup> Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood*, 57-58, 121.

appraisals from which to draw conclusions about these plays. Additionally, Bale's *Scriptorium* was a recognized work that was well respected as a compendium of English theater at the point of its publication, and Bale did his research in constructing it.<sup>153</sup> It is therefore prudent to trust Bale's assessment of how Heywood's work was seen in its moment, and that assessment sets Heywood aside as a fairly ordinary playwright whose work was made exceptional only by its role at court.

Even though several of Heywood's plays (particularly *The Play of the Weather*) look very different from what we might expect to see from examples of important sixteenth-century drama, it seems that their audiences did not view them in the same way. This grants them a bit more historical utility, however: because onlookers did not think of these plays as revolutionary, they can serve as valuable examples of what people accepted in the moment, and what their prominent viewers thought of English religious theater in the months leading up to the Reformation.

Heywood's plays, when considered in their temporal context, demonstrate a few important facts about the courtly world of the early 1530s, in the last months before Henry's break with the church. Crucially, *The Pardoner and the Friar* and *The Four PP* are indicators of what a man such as Heywood, writing for a royal audience in a tense moment, was willing to present to the king. Heywood had spent the majority of his life at court, and knew Henry—and his whims—very well. The fact that he composed such a bold and direct caricature of the church, not concealed in metaphorical commentary, is quite telling.

There is no record of Heywood getting into trouble over any of these plays—on the contrary, in 1533 Henry presented him with a valuable gilded cup as a New Year's gift,

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<sup>153</sup> Leslie P. Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1976), 54.



indicating that he was still in reasonably good graces around the time that they were written and performed.<sup>154</sup> We can tentatively assume that if these portrayals did anger Henry, they were not sufficiently offensive to jeopardize Heywood's place at court. And considering that Heywood presented not one, but two very similar caricatures of clergy in *The Pardoner and the Friar* and *The Four PP* around the same time, it is probably safe to think that Henry was not terribly offended by either one—otherwise, it stands to reason, Heywood would not have written another play in the same style.

The conclusion stands thus: in the early 1530s, even as the pressures against English Catholicism mounted, the people around Henry were comfortable presenting to him parodies of the most fundamental day-to-day elements of the Catholic church. Henry was willing to laugh at plays that made fun of pardoners, friars, curates, saintly relics, and pilgrimages. We know that despite his break with Rome, Henry remained largely Catholic at heart—his Act of Six Articles in 1539 left little doubt about his personal beliefs and stopped the English church from trending toward Protestantism—and even as he questioned his relationship to papal authority while trying to secure a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, he remained a devoutly religious man. It would not have been unusual for Heywood to comment on the church, despite his own Catholic faith, but his commentary is heavy-handed, and his parody of the clergy might almost go too far. Yet Henry watched them anyway. These plays show us what the king found entertaining, and despite the tension surrounding Catholicism and religious practice in England in 1533, parodies of religious figures and jokes about critical church controversies still played well with Henry. Perhaps Henry was motivated by more than just the divorce, if he was willing to see these performances and let them continue.

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<sup>154</sup> “The King's New Year's Gifts,” January 10, 1533, in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* vol VI, ed. J. Gairdner (London: Longman & Co, 1882), 14.

Heywood's work also provides valuable examples of the role of medieval tradition in English dramatic literature at this point. Like Bale, Heywood was not content to replicate the standard morality, nor did he hesitate to adapt the debate or the farce to religiously-themed entertainment. Heywood is far more interpretive than Bale, and his alterations are more targeted at entertainment than didacticism, but it is undeniable that both men consciously and intentionally adapted medieval literary genres to their own purposes.

As the world changed, theatrical literature changed in some ways and remained consistent in others. We would expect to see significant developments in English theater at this point, the months leading up to the Reformation, and in some ways Heywood delivers those developments. Historians now look to Heywood's work as an example of groundbreaking advancements in genre and adaptations of medieval tradition to early modern tastes. Yet, in his own moment, Heywood's work was not innovative at all—it was safe, conventional, and made alterations to genres that already existed. Heywood has been credited with significant religious, political, and moral arguments in his plays, and he made those arguments with adaptations of what already existed, not with complete revolutions in theatrical literature.

### Chapter 3. Richard Wever and Nicholas Udall

The English Reformation certainly did not end with Henry VIII's death in 1547. Operating as protector for the young Edward VI, Edward Seymour, the duke of Somerset promptly instituted sweeping Protestant reform. In 1547, Edward issued royal proclamations ordering the use of English-language Bibles, requiring mass to be conducted in English, removing shrines and relics from churches, and instituting an official collection of homilies for private use.<sup>155</sup> The rapid wave of Protestant doctrinal reform, which Somerset and his successor the duke of Northumberland continued to push throughout Edward's reign in spite of popular dissatisfaction, sparked outbreaks of violent iconoclasm throughout England. Protestant reformers heralded Edward as the Biblical child king Josiah, grandson of Hezekiah, who had ordered the destruction of pagan altars in Jerusalem. John Bale himself made such a comparison, calling Edward "no poor child, but a manifest Solomon in princely wisdom."<sup>156</sup> The tide had turned against previous religious traditions, especially imagery that could be associated with idolatry.

Medieval religious theater found itself in an equally precarious place as the Edwardian Reformation set in. Traditional medieval mystery plays became less popular, and only continued in larger areas like York and Chester where the cycles had become too deeply ingrained in the community to be done away with.<sup>157</sup> European Protestant humanists had argued in favor of religious plays beginning in the 1520s, alongside prominent reformers Martin Luther and John

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<sup>155</sup> Edward VI, "Injunctions for Religious Reform; Ordering Homilies to be Read from the Pulpit," July 31, 1547, in *Tudor Royal Proclamations* vol. 1, ed. P. Hughes and J. Larkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964); the proclamation notes that Edward is operating "by the advice of his most dear uncle, the duke of Somerset," and probably did not have much of a hand in this policy himself.

<sup>156</sup> John Bale, *Expostulations* (1552), quoted in Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 271-274.

<sup>157</sup> Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 355.

Calvin, as tools for moral instruction. Biblical drama surged in popularity in the 1540s and 50s, as playwrights began to incorporate classical themes into religious stories, and these plays began new traditions. The old plays, though, were largely left behind.<sup>158</sup>

The morality play, unlike its mystery companions, was relatively easily adapted to a Protestant world. As most morality plots highlighted moral lessons over Biblical stories, their structure was relatively flexible. There was nothing about a morality specifically holding it to any particular religious plot—or indeed to any plot at all—and so its allegorical nature could be applied to any new Protestant lesson that a playwright chose to impart.<sup>159</sup> Mystery cycles were tied to a particular Biblical story, and for the most part to one set of scripts that had been passed down through a community; innovations to these plays would have meant undoing generations of tradition. But moralities had no such concerns.

Richard Wever's *Lusty Juventus*, written between 1547 and 1553, and Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* (1553), were shaped by this period of English religious drama. These two plays, both closely related to the original morality and yet reflective of these new innovations and changes, demonstrate what a morality play looked like after a change to a Protestant tradition. *Lusty Juventus*'s similarity to archetypal morality traditions reveals that those traditions could easily be updated to incorporate Protestant morals rather than Catholic ones, and had room for subtle political commentary. *Respublica*, similar in tradition to John Bale's updated Protestant history-morality *King Johan*, demonstrates how those innovations endured through the Edwardian period and were used to tell a very different type of story. Udall's play, presented to Mary I within the

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<sup>158</sup> Ruth Blackburn, *Biblical Drama under the Tudors* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1971), 23-26; 77-78.

<sup>159</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama under the Tudors*, 20.

first few months of her reign, also indicates how a Catholic tradition adapted for Protestantism could then be made suitable for a Catholic queen.

### **Richard Wever's *Lusty Juventus***

Unlike his contemporaries Bale, Heywood, and Udall, Richard Wever's life is a mystery. Historians cannot even confirm that his first name was indeed Richard—the play is attributed simply to “R. Wever.” *Lusty Juventus* is the only surviving work credited to Wever, and we can draw a few conclusions about his life from the text of the play. It is apparent, for example, that Wever was both devoutly Protestant and staunchly anti-Catholic, and the moralizing tone and strongly didactic message indicate that he was probably a preacher. Richard Beadle suggests that he may have been the same Richard Wever who graduated from Oxford in 1524 and served as a Protestant clergyman under Edward VI, but there is no definitive link between the two Wevers.<sup>160</sup> John N. King argues that Wever designed *Lusty Juventus* for a professional performance troupe of four actors, suggesting that he was associated with such a troupe in addition to his work as a preacher.<sup>161</sup> It is impossible to know when and where the play was performed, or what audience Wever intended for it.

Thus, unlike other well-known examples of English religious theater, academic interest in *Lusty Juventus* lies almost solely with the play itself. *Lusty Juventus* was published in 1561, but was almost certainly written and performed well in advance of that date.<sup>162</sup> The play ends with a prayer “For the prosperous estate of our noble and virtuous king” that asks God to grant the king “a prosperous life long over us to reign”; when coupled with the age of the main character and

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<sup>160</sup> Richard Beadle, “Wever, R.,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* vol. 58, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 331.

<sup>161</sup> John N. King, *Voices of the English Reformation: A Sourcebook* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 109.

<sup>162</sup> Beadle, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 331.

the warnings the play provides, this king was most likely Edward VI. As it makes little sense to pray for the longevity of a deceased monarch, the play was thus probably intended for performance between 1547 and 1553.<sup>163</sup>

The title character, Lusty Juventus—“lusty” at the time meaning merry or joyous—is a carefree young man who has strayed from the laws of God. God’s messenger, Good Counsel, appears to Juventus and warns him that he must follow God’s laws, “or else God will withdraw His mercy from you.”<sup>164</sup> Juventus apologizes for his behavior and prays for strength to follow God’s commandments. This strength arrives in the form of Knowledge, sent to teach Juventus the ways of God, and to correct the education Juventus received from people who were also ignorant of God’s true laws.<sup>165</sup>

Meanwhile, the Devil and his son Hypocrisy lament that the word of God has pushed them out of power, and plot to take control again. They determine that the youth will be the most easily corrupted, and that once they have turned youth against God’s word, the rest of the world will follow. Hypocrisy disguises himself as Friendship and attempts to befriend Juventus, hoping to tempt him against God, but Juventus is suspicious and cannot be persuaded. Out of desperation, the Devil and Hypocrisy call up their associate Abominable Living, and plan to trick Juventus into “liv[ing] carnally.”<sup>166</sup> Abominable Living disguises himself as a woman, and Juventus kisses “her,” causing him to fall from God’s grace. At the last moment, however, Good Counsel reminds Juventus of his promise to live according to God’s word, and God’s Merciful

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<sup>163</sup> Richard Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, in *The Dramatic Writings of Richard Wever and Thomas Ingelend*, ed. John S. Farmer (London, Early English Drama Society, 1905), 41-42.

<sup>164</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 7.

<sup>165</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 11.

<sup>166</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 20.

Promises appears to reassure Juventus of his forgiveness. Juventus appeals to the audience not to repeat his mistakes, and Good Counsel leads the characters in a prayer for the king.

The objective of *Lusty Juventus*, and its central message, are clear. Juventus, who brings down all of humankind with his fall, is probably meant to represent Edward. Wever does not hesitate in preaching a message of godly living to both the young king and to the young men who may have been in Wever's audience. The Devil's easiest route to corrupt English society is through its youth, and ungodly abominable living can take many forms, including that of a young woman. Even men who have devoted themselves to God's true laws can be tempted. It is on the strength and veracity of this message that historians have concluded that Wever was most likely a preacher of some description.

Without knowledge of Wever's relationship to the monarchy, if any, or indeed anything about what his life looked like, it is difficult to definitively say whether or not Wever had a non-moral argument to make with *Lusty Juventus*. There are certainly a few lines that might have referred to past politicized religion: Good Counsel's remark to Juventus that the elders who instructed him did not understand God's true laws, for example, might be read as a comment on the theologians in Henry's reign who had taught the upcoming generation about a church that was still too "popish" for Wever's liking.<sup>167</sup> Hypocrisy introduces himself in a long monologue listing all of the ways he is present in the world; all of them are clergy positions, vestments, saints' relics, or crosses and rosary beads.<sup>168</sup> These occasional hints do not dominate the story, and while Wever does not take too much care to be subtle about them, the focus of the play is on improving Juventus's commitment to God, not on previous religious controversy.

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<sup>167</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 17-18.

A particularly interesting and perhaps very significant point of commentary, however, is Abominable Living's interaction with Juventus while disguised as a woman. While it happens offstage, it is very clear that the two characters have sex, and Juventus does not make a secret of his attraction to her. Female characters are unusual in morality plays, and romance and lust (in the modern sense) rarely figure into a morality plot.<sup>169</sup> It is thus tempting to look for some kind of broader purpose behind this plot point, even where one might not exist, as a means of considering what an audience might have associated with this play. The content suggests that we might look for that purpose in Edward's personal relationships, or more specifically, where they might have been headed when the play was written.

In 1551, a marriage was negotiated between Edward, then fourteen, and Henry II of France's daughter Elisabeth of Valois. As a whole, the country of France had resisted the pressures of the European Reformation, and the French royal family remained devoutly Catholic. Pope Julius III reportedly threatened to excommunicate Elisabeth and her father if she married Edward—but for both nations the diplomatic advantages and potential of peace between France and England ultimately outweighed the religious concerns.<sup>170</sup> Edward died two years later, rendering the question moot, but concerns about this potential marriage may have been strong enough to shine through in *Lusty Juventus*.

Elisabeth of Valois was also not Edward's only prospective Catholic bride. Henry VIII had arranged a marriage between Edward and Mary Stuart, then six years and six months old, respectively, as part of the Treaty of Greenwich in 1543. Henry's "Rough Wooing," as the war resulting from his forceful marriage negotiations came to be called, led to the breakdown of this treaty after his death. Any question of the marriage ended when Mary was instead betrothed to

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<sup>169</sup> Kent Cartwright, *Theatre and Humanism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 137.

<sup>170</sup> Jane Loach, *Edward VI* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 108, 113.



the dauphin of France and left Scotland in 1548 to take up residence at the French court. Mary was out of the picture very early in Edward's reign, but for five years there existed a very serious prospect that Edward might bring a Catholic queen to newly Protestant England.

Outside of the text of the play, there is little to support this theory other than circumstance. The lack of a clear composition date for *Lusty Juventus* complicates this question greatly: if the play was written in 1551 or later, Abominable Living might represent Elisabeth of Valois, but definitely does not if it was written any earlier. The content of the play, and its implicit message of the dangers of allowing love to overpower godly living, strongly suggest that Edward was at least in his teens when it was written, and a date of 1551 makes sense. Abominable Living's female disguise might also be intended as a general metaphor—which would hardly be out of place in a morality play—representing the prospect of marriage to any Catholic woman, in which case it would not matter when the play was written. In any event, it is not implausible that Wever intended to counsel the young king about the dangers of making an “ungodly” marriage, even if the timing does not perfectly align for him to have addressed a specific candidate for that marriage.

There is a good deal to suggest that Abominable Living's female disguise in *Lusty Juventus* is meant to represent a potential Catholic bride, whoever she might have been. Elisabeth was six years old in 1551, certainly far from the adult woman Abominable Living tempts Juventus with, but the references to this character as a Catholic romantic partner are persuasive. Hypocrisy sets up this plan so that he can return to power, and bring with him all of the tools of hypocrisy clearly particular to the Catholic church—“holy pardons, holy beads, holy saints, holy images,” and the like.<sup>171</sup> His objective is that “Youth shall live carnally,” and says

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<sup>171</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 17.

that “she is for to love” in service of that goal.<sup>172</sup> When meeting Juventus for the first time, Abominable Living taunts him with the line “I think, you would not kiss a young woman if one would give you twenty pound [sic] in gold,” maybe referring to a dowry.<sup>173</sup> Most compellingly, while trying to tempt Juventus, Hypocrisy refers to the woman by the name Bess—perhaps coincidence, perhaps not, but it certainly does not rule out Elisabeth.<sup>174</sup> It is clear that the devil can regain his footing (and thus restore Catholicism) if Juventus begins a relationship with this woman.

### **Nicholas Udall**

Nicholas Udall (who also used the spellings Uvedale, Yevedale, and Woodall) was born around 1504 in Southampton, and lived an undistinguished early life. He was admitted to Corpus Christi College, Oxford in 1520, and received a bachelor of arts degree in May 1524. In September he joined the college as a fellow, and gave lectures to younger students in Greek, Latin, and logic. Udall left Oxford in 1529; the reasons for his departure are unclear, but may have been connected to an incident the year previously, in which he was among a group of fellows accused of distributing Lutheran texts to Oxford students.

Udall began writing plays and pageants early in his career. Udall and his schoolmate John Leland contributed a pageant to Anne Boleyn’s coronation festivities in May 1533, and in February 1534, Udall published *Floures for Latin Spekyng*, a Latin textbook based on idiomatic translations of Roman playwright Terence’s works. Udall’s approach was a significant improvement on the clumsy and awkward style of translation previously used to teach Latin, and

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<sup>172</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 20.

<sup>173</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 29.

<sup>174</sup> Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, 27.

the book was immediately popular. Its success led to Udall's appointment as headmaster of Eton College in June 1534.

While at Eton, Udall wrote plays for his students to perform, and apparently presented some of those plays at Henry VIII's court. Udall was paid for plays performed at court in 1537, which may have included a play celebrating Edward's birth, and continued to work with the court through the end of Edward's reign.<sup>175</sup> The most notable play to come out of this period, *Ezekias*, celebrated Henry by comparing him to the biblical king Hezekiah and encouraged Edward to follow the path of Hezekiah's grandson Josiah. *Ezekias* remained popular long after Udall's death, and continued to be performed into Elizabeth's reign. He was also the writer of *Ralph Roister Doister*, published around 1552, considered to be the first true comedy written in the English language.

When Mary I took the throne in 1553, Udall found himself in precisely the opposite circumstance as John Heywood had been in six years earlier, as a well-known Protestant supporter facing a devoutly Catholic monarch. Udall managed to find success during Mary's reign, however, and endeared himself to her as a playwright. The two most likely met in 1543: Queen Catherine Parr had invited Udall to lead a project translating Erasmus's *Paraphrases*, and Udall in turn invited then-Princess Mary. Mary continued her tradition of building strong relationships with court playwrights, much as she had done with Heywood, and in 1553 she issued instructions to the Revels Office to produce any interlude or performance Udall recommended.<sup>176</sup> He continued to present plays at court until his death in December 1556.

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<sup>175</sup> Matthew Steggle, "Udall, Nicholas," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* vol 55, 851-853.

<sup>176</sup> W.R. Streitberger, *Court Revels, 1485-1559* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 354n31.

## Udall's *Respublica*

*Respublica* was written for performance during the Christmas season at Queen Mary's court in 1553. We can date this play far more precisely than the others thanks to Udall's note on the title page: "Made in the year of our Lord 1553, and the First Year of the most Prosperous Reign of our Most Gracious Sovereign Queen Mary the First." The prologue directly calls the play a "Christmas devise" and wishes the audience a happy new year, confirming that the play was written at some point between July 1553, when Mary took the throne, and the Christmas season of that year.<sup>177</sup> Udall also addresses his prologue to "this noble presence," heavily suggesting that *Respublica* was meant to be seen by a royal audience.<sup>178</sup>

*Respublica*'s authorship page has not survived, and thus there is some debate over the play's author. Historians tend to officially treat *Respublica* as an anonymous play, but most scholars agree that Udall is overwhelmingly the most likely playwright, and researchers have gone to great lengths to arrive at this conclusion. *Ralph Roister Doister* was attributed to Udall on the basis of a joke based on a letter with ambiguous punctuation which Udall later repeated in a letter to a friend, proving that he had written the play. Such a silver bullet does not exist for *Respublica*, but the play bears significant similarities to *Ralph Roister Doister* that also align with Udall's biography—for example, both plays clearly refer to their performers as young boys, likely Udall's students at Eton, and both contain Latin phrases, stage directions, and character names that indicate a familiarity with the language appropriate to Udall's skills.

In the play, the vice Avarice plots to swindle money from the widowed Respublica, representing the English state. He joins forces with fellow vices Oppression, Insolence, and

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<sup>177</sup> Nicholas Udall, *Respublica*, in *Recently Recovered "Lost" Tudor Plays*, ed. John S. Farmer (London: Early English Drama Society, 1907), 178-179.

<sup>178</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 178-179.

Adulation, who adopt the disguises of Policy, Reformation, Authority, and Honesty, and present themselves to the ailing Respublica. Respublica has fallen on hard times, a result of a lack of good governors, and is willing to do anything to restore herself and once again provide for her companion People. People is immediately suspicious of Avarice's disguise, but Respublica gives control to "Policy" and charges him to destroy the very vices that are helping him to take advantage of her.

People complains to Respublica that despite the new arrival of Policy, he is no better off than he was before, and insists that the despair in the commonwealth is actually the work of Avarice, Adulation, Insolence, and Oppression. He tries to convince Respublica that "Policy" is not who he claims to be, but Respublica is reluctant to question him. Meanwhile, the vices have been wreaking havoc on the world, and amass huge amounts of wealth by collecting bishoprics. When People confronts the vices, they threaten him into staying away from Respublica, who continues to insist that "Policy" is helping her restore her commonwealth. God answers Respublica's prayers by sending Compassion, who brings her sister Truth to help Respublica recover. Truth tells Respublica of Avarice's falsehood, and summons her sisters Justice and Peace; the four virtues will ally with Respublica against the four vices.

The virtues trap all four vices, and expose Avarice by revealing the bags of gold hidden under his robes. The other three are exposed as well, and the goddess Nemesis is summoned to determine their punishment. Nemesis determines that Adulation is the least responsible for the vices' crimes and is the most redeemable of them, and orders him pardoned; the other three are forced to return the wealth they stole and are imprisoned. The commonwealth thus restored, Nemesis announces her intent to focus on protecting the commonwealth's relationship with other countries. The virtues lead the characters in a brief prayer for Queen Mary.

Udall makes it abundantly clear to his audience that his avenging goddess Nemesis is meant to represent Mary. He celebrates Mary's ascension in the prologue, and says, "She [Mary] is our most wise and most worthy Nemesis; Of whom our play meaneth, t'amend that is amiss".<sup>179</sup> The play concludes with a prayer that Mary "maintain Commonwealth" during her reign, referring to Nemesis's restoration of *Respublica* and the commonwealth.<sup>180</sup> Udall meant for Mary to see this play, and the Revels accounts from the Christmas season of 1553-54 imply that she did.<sup>181</sup> Thus, every element of *Respublica* was something that Udall considered acceptable to present to Mary.

Udall was anxious to prevent his work from being misinterpreted, and seemed to be aware that it could be. His prologue warns his audience that the play "may be wrong interpreted from the author's sense" and stresses heavily that his story is an allegory not meant to be taken literally.<sup>182</sup> But for all his concern, Udall does not shy away from including significant commentary on English religious policy before Mary's reign. *Respublica* has fallen on hard times specifically because of the failings of the previous administration: "Yet, by all experience, this much is well seen," she says, "That, in commonweals, while good governors have been, All thing hath prospered; and, where such men do lack, Commonweals decay, and in all things do go back."<sup>183</sup> She also comments that she is "sore decayed through default of Policy," and Avarice (then in disguise as Policy) adds that "good Policy hath long been put to exile."<sup>184</sup> People says

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<sup>179</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 181.

<sup>180</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 272.

<sup>181</sup> Streitberger, *Court Revels*, 294: Streitberger notes that a play was performed at court by a children's company between December 25, 1553 and January 6, 1554. This play cannot be definitively identified as *Respublica*, but it seems likely, as Udall used child actors and clearly identified the date of his own work as Christmas 1553. Mary later granted Udall a warrant permitting him to present more plays at court, stressing that he had already shown "dialogues and Enterludes before us" (Streitberger, *Court Revels*, 295).

<sup>182</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 179.

<sup>183</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 201.

<sup>184</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 202-203.

that he last made a comfortable living “Vive or zix year ago [sic],” which very precisely pinpoints the beginning of the problem at the beginning of Edward’s reign.<sup>185</sup> David Bevington argues that “*Respublica* ponders the evils of the power vacuum created by the historical accident of a minority kingship” and that Udall compares the time under Edward’s controversial advisors, the duke of Somerset and the duke of Northumberland to the dark days of the Wars of the Roses.<sup>186</sup> While this argument overstates the strength and frankness of Udall’s commentary, it is clear that his criticisms are directed toward administration under Edward. It is not possible to personally identify any of the four vices with any individual historical figure, but criticism of Edward’s reign naturally falls on Somerset and Northumberland. *Respublica* has been left destitute and demoralized by the previous administration’s failings, a situation that allows Avarice to attempt to infiltrate the commonwealth. It is only through the efforts of Nemesis—Mary—that *Respublica* is able to recover from the condition that the previous administration had left her in.

Udall was undeniably a Protestant man, and this fact was hardly a secret from Mary or from her court. He had published prolifically during Edward’s reign, including a popular translation of Peter Martyr’s discourse in 1550, and had gained attention for his Protestant theological writing.<sup>187</sup> Very little of that Protestantism, however, makes it into *Respublica*. Udall carefully steps away from expressions of theological doctrinal position, instead focusing on presenting a conciliatory message. Edgerton describes *Respublica* as “a propaganda play showing how good Roman Catholicism is for a country”; he goes too far in characterizing

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<sup>185</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 229.

<sup>186</sup> David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 116-117.

<sup>187</sup> William L. Edgerton, *Nicholas Udall* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers, 1965), 55.

Udall's argument as necessarily religious, but it is clear that Udall did have a quasi-propagandizing purpose.<sup>188</sup>

Udall's play is not devoid of religious commentary, but he reserves his criticisms for religious policy under the preceding Protestant regimes, and makes his comments in distant and indifferent language. He directly references the controversies that the Catholic church faced in the 1510s and 1520s, but the consequences of all of those problems were not necessarily points of religious or moral failure. The vices collect wealth by infiltrating the church, and by performing many of the behaviors that led to a loss of trust in the Catholic church during Luther's era. Oppression comments that "I have so many half bishoprics, at the least," and Avarice teases him for not knowing enough Latin to qualify him to hold any of those offices.<sup>189</sup> Avarice proudly includes selling benefices, collecting bribes from lower-ranked clergy to be allowed to stay in office, keeping money meant to be used for poor relief, and raising rents for the people who live on his land among his "accomplishments."<sup>190</sup>

The effects of these behaviors are not moral, however, but practical. Avarice and the vices' extortion has severely affected Respublica and People and brought them to financial ruin, but there is no mention of corrupting the commonwealth with their moral failings. Oppression, Insolence, Adulation, and Avarice have wormed their way into the church purely because they believe it is their fastest route to a windfall; Udall presents two destitute people and comically large bags of gold as the consequences of those actions rather than a morally bankrupt commonwealth.

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<sup>188</sup> Edgerton, *Nicholas Udall*, 65.

<sup>189</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 217, 223.

<sup>190</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 221.



All of these points are meant to depict how far the commonwealth had fallen under the previous administration of poor Policy, and thus how it had devolved under Edward's advisors. These allusions were not necessarily out of place—devoutly Catholic John Heywood, for example, made similar references in his own plays—nor might they necessarily be criticisms. These points could instead be interpreted as defenses: the pre-Reformation church was corrupt because it had been infiltrated by Avarice and his fellow vices, and once those vices are eradicated, God's virtues will rule instead. There is no didactic moral at play in *Respublica*, but an expression of faith in the coming regime.

Much as John Heywood's plays provide insight into Henry's mindset during the 1530s, Udall's work can suggest what Mary thought was entertaining and what she might have thought was appropriate to present at court. If Mary made any note of her response to *Respublica*, it has not survived. Udall's fortunes after the play was presented, however, hint at her response. In December 1554 Mary granted Udall a warrant to produce plays at court, and ordered Master of the Revels Thomas Cawarden to furnish props, costumes, and set pieces for his plays "at all & every such time and times so oft and when so ever he shall need & require it."<sup>191</sup> It is unlikely that Mary would have given such permission to a playwright whose work had offended her; we can cautiously conclude, then, that Mary accepted the effusive flattery in *Respublica* and enjoyed Udall's plays.

Udall was well known as a humanist scholar. Corpus Christi College was established for humanist education, and Udall remained at the college as a fellow and lecturer in Greek and Latin after completing his undergraduate studies. William Edgerton describes Udall as an important member of the second generation of humanists after More and Erasmus, among

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<sup>191</sup> Streitberger, *Court Revels*, 295.

contemporaries John Leland, Richard Tavener, and Richard Mulcaster.<sup>192</sup> Udall's criticisms of the pre-Reformation Catholic clergy closely echo medieval humanist John Colet's arguments in his sermon to the convocation at St. Paul's Church in 1512, which called for church leadership to address the falling moral standards among the clergy.<sup>193</sup> Erasmus expressed similar doubts about the clergy in his *Enchiridion* (1523).<sup>194</sup>

Mary also agreed with much of Erasmus's and Colet's positions and humanist thought. Mary's education was overseen by noted Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, personally chosen by her mother Catherine of Aragon, who emphasized the works of More and Erasmus.<sup>195</sup> Biographer John Edwards argues that by 1553, Mary personally leaned in favor of church reform, and notes that she was deeply influenced by Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, which formed a crucial part of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Mary also did not particularly seem to support the veneration of saints' relics, pilgrimages, or excessive loyalty to the papacy—"the Christian humanist circle in which she was brought up, which was greatly influenced by Erasmus and Vives," Edwards says, "had little use for such things."<sup>196</sup> Mary generally agreed with the spirit of these reforms, despite her devout Catholicism, and it was likely no coincidence that Udall considered her a receptive audience for his argument.

*Respublica* is unquestionably a morality play, and demonstrates that in 1553 this genre and its conventions were still conspicuously present in English religious theater. Udall's version is slightly updated—*Respublica* is one of the first English-language plays to be organized into acts and formal scenes—but many of the most important traditional elements of the morality are

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<sup>192</sup> Edgerton, *Nicholas Udall*, 20-23.

<sup>193</sup> John Colet, *A sermon of conforming and reforming made to the convocation at St. Paul's Church in London*, 1512. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A33777.0001.001?view=toc>.

<sup>194</sup> Erasmus, *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, 1523.

[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add\\_MS\\_89149](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_89149)

<sup>195</sup> John Edwards, *Mary I: England's Catholic Queen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 9-14.

<sup>196</sup> Edwards, *Mary I*, 229-231.

still clearly present.<sup>197</sup> The characters are personified vices or universal metaphors that represent people as a whole, the vices disguise themselves as virtues to trick the protagonists, and the play ends with a message of hope for humanity and for human morality. Udall's choice of plot and characters make it clear that he set out to write a morality play, and intentionally fit his story into the genre.

Udall primarily wrote comedies, and *Respublica* is no exception. The play uses far more humor and comedic elements than even Heywood's work, and its style of storytelling would not be entirely out of place on a modern stage. But his comedic presentation has significant implications for the morality message. Morality plays do not typically present the vices as comedic characters, but Udall's vices can be called nothing else. Adulation, Oppression, and Insolence are bumbling henchmen who cannot remember their own aliases, accidentally let slip parts of their schemes, and frequently quarrel among themselves at inconvenient moments. They are not the uncompromising villains of a standard moral allegory, but exist almost entirely to provide humor. Even Avarice, the unquestioned antagonist who does the most harm to *Respublica* and directs the other vices in his schemes, is frequently a target of physical humor and presents a comedically exaggerated façade of villainy. Udall significantly undercuts the vices' villainous power, and turns them into quasi-sympathetic characters without the same negative associations that would have been the result of a more traditional morality presentation.

Even Udall's protagonists are affected by this comedic presentation, and do not carry the same weight of virtue as their counterparts in a more standard morality. People's lines are written phonetically in an exaggerated southwestern accent, and his dialogue is full of malapropisms (at one point he mistakes *Respublica*'s name for "Rice-Puddingcake"); even

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<sup>197</sup> Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain 1485-1558* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 201.

though he shrewdly sees through Avarice's scheme and identifies the vices for what they are, this affectation turns him into a predominantly comic character whom *Respublica* and the audience are encouraged to trivialize.<sup>198</sup> *Respublica* herself is also a far cry from the heroic, universal protagonist morality plays like *Everyman* presented: she is virtuous and upstanding, but also given to self-pity and defeatist attitudes, and naively believes in the vices' disguises for far longer than do her medieval counterparts. God's virtues Compassion, Justice, Truth, and Peace more closely resemble the virtues found in traditional morality plays (Wever's *Good Counsel*, for example) with their wise guidance and confidence in God's grace, but they do not appear until the second scene of Act V. *Respublica*'s presentation is thus heavily weighted in favor of the vices, and undercuts any significant morality point that a morality play might have otherwise provided.

### **The post-Henrician morality**

It is difficult to suggest that *Lusty Juventus* and *Respublica* are anything but morality plays in the medieval tradition. They align far more closely with the traditional morality play than do any of Heywood's examples, or even Bale's, and the standard features are clearly present. Wever and Udall clearly understood and followed the medieval traditions—it is impossible to know if they did so intentionally, but the skill with which both men fit their work into the genre is hardly accidental. Both playwrights chose to work in this genre, and did so very effectively.

Because of how closely *Lusty Juventus* and *Respublica* align with the morality genre, it is useful to compare them to older examples of morality plays—one traditional, and one written in the heat of the Henrician Reformation. These plays are *Everyman*, the late fifteenth-century

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<sup>198</sup> Udall, *Respublica*, 210.

morality that has come to epitomize the genre, and John Bale's *King Johan* (1538), the pivotal model of morality adapted to Protestant doctrine. These comparisons allow us to think about what changes the morality went through the Reformation, and what elements remained associated with the genre even after religious and cultural pressure.

Wever's *Lusty Juventus* bears very close resemblance to *Everyman*. This play is an example of medieval English theatrical literature before any influence from the Reformation could raise questions about what religious morals to portray, and its similarities to *Lusty Juventus* indicate that the latter is also very much an archetypal morality. *Everyman* was written in the pre-Reformation church, and thus supports a very distinctly Catholic doctrine; the play's ultimate argument is that when facing God at the end of one's life, a man can count only on his good deeds, which certainly does not align with a post-Henrician Protestant viewpoint. *Lusty Juventus* tells a much lighter story, in which the main character does not die but instead goes on to live a godly life, but with these differences aside the plays share similarities in structure, tone, and theme.

On surface, these similarities look inconsequential, but they point to far more continuity between the two plays than their religious environments would otherwise suggest. Each play features a young man as its main character, who learns that his life has not been as pious and morally righteous as he had thought. Even without definitively knowing either play's function or performance purpose, there is little doubt that both were written with moral instruction in mind, and were meant to be seen by an audience expecting and receptive to that moralizing. Each character learns that their personal relationships, which have previously supported them, will not help them live devout lives: in *Lusty Juventus*, Fellowship is swayed by Hypocrisy and helps try to tempt Juventus toward Abominable Living, while in *Everyman* Fellowship first promises to

accompany Everyman to his death but quickly changes his mind. In terms of analysis, both plays fill a similar role, and were both written by effectively anonymous playwrights for unknown purposes but with a clear moral message.

Wever probably did not base *Lusty Juventus* on *Everyman*, and it is unlikely that he intentionally set out to make these references (although it cannot be completely ruled out). Ultimately the plots and end morals of the two plays are too different to think that Wever was necessarily inspired by *Everyman*. But these two plays look very similar, and the best explanation is that those themes and styles of writing were still popular and present in English theater. The Catholic-based tradition of the morality was still present during Edward's reign, and did not require many changes to stay relevant. Wever rearranged a few characters, relative to *Everyman*, and substituted a different moral for the one based in Catholic doctrine, but that same didactic, moralizing style was still appropriate for a play that would be presented to a young, very Protestant king.

*Respublica*, on the other hand, resembles John Bale's *King Johan* (1538), and some of Bale's innovations in the morality genre are reflected in Udall's work. Udall's lighter and more comedic style befits the play's function as a piece of lighthearted Christmastime entertainment, as opposed to Bale's dramatic moralization of English history, but the parallels in structure and story between the two plays are small but significant. Both plays are fairly loosely organized in comparison to the rigid structure of most morality plays, which follows its protagonist through the five stages of innocence, temptation and fall, life in sin, repentance, and pardon (it is worth noting that Udall divides his work into five acts, but they do not correspond with these stages).<sup>199</sup> Bale and Udall both depict England as a personified character on stage—Bale's Widow England

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<sup>199</sup> Blackburn, *Biblical Drama under the Tudors*, 19-20.

and Udall's titular *Respublica*—and in both cases, she is portrayed as an abandoned, neglected widow who readily falls prey to the vices' manipulations. Bale and Udall both turned to the morality play to make fairly heavy-handed points, accomplished with specific, non-metaphoric main characters (King John and Nemesis) who are very clearly identified with their real life counterparts.

Bale was aware of Udall as a writer, and praised his Latin and playwriting skills in his first *Scriptorum* in 1548.<sup>200</sup> W.R. Streitberger suggests that Udall's talent and Protestant publishing record would have been more than enough to attract Cromwell's attention, and it is likely that he knew both men.<sup>201</sup> It is too much to assume that Bale and Udall knew one another, or that Udall was familiar with *King Johan*, although both are possible. Thus, without assuming that Udall intentionally emulated Bale's writing, we might conclude that this type of morality stayed in style.

Why might it matter that plays written before and during the Henrician Reformation resemble those written after? Without examining a wide survey of plays written during the Edwardian and Marian periods, for courtly as well as popular audiences, it is difficult to draw any singular conclusion about what the post-Henrician theatrical world as a whole looked like. These two plays, however, can provide us with some interesting insights into how the morality had followed the trends of the Reformation and adapted to new religious doctrines and new argumentative purposes.

The point stands thus: the elements of traditional, Catholic-based, medieval morality were still going strong when that genre reached the 1550s, and existed alongside the Protestant-leaning modifications Bale utilized during the Henrician era. Both styles were easily adapted to

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<sup>200</sup> Edgerton, *Nicholas Udall*, 52, 58.

<sup>201</sup> Streitberger, *Court Revels*, 150.

fit into these new religious environments and to make whatever point the playwright wanted to drive home; Wever may have dropped heavy hints about the dangers of a potential marriage between Edward and a Catholic princess, and Udall judiciously lauded the new queen's superiority. The post-Henrician morality, it appears, could also be adapted to make no immediate religious argument at all, as in the case of *Respublica*, whose commentary is reserved only for the church's past era.

### **Conclusions**

Historians have even less reliable information about *Lusty Juventus* and *Respublica* than Bale's or Heywood's works. Ultimately, any arguments made about these plays must rely on speculation to fill the gaps in knowledge that are not present when analyzing more established playwrights or more famous plays. But the texts have survived nonetheless, and Wever and Udall have left enough clues to think about what their plays meant in the context of the post-Henrician Reformation.

It is very difficult to prove that an author was influenced by any other, and these cases are no different. I am not arguing that playwrights looked back to *Everyman* to shape their moralities, nor that Bale's plays pushed the landscape of English Protestant theater to the point it would ultimately reach in 1553. But *Lusty Juventus* and *Respublica* make clear what continued to be popular and accepted throughout the Henrician Reformation, and that was the morality. This genre weathered the multitude of changes in religious doctrine and culture that complicated the 1530s, and made it through with many of its original elements, like the quintessential *Everyman*, as well as the modifications that had come in response to the controversies of Henry's reign.



Edward and Mary were wary of theater performed outside of their households. Edward banned plays and public performances during Kett's Rebellion in 1549, on the grounds that plays frequently "contain matter tending to sedition" and "like to grow and ensue much disquiet, division, tumults, and uproars in this realm"; Mary issued a similar injunction in 1556 that required performers to get a royal license.<sup>202</sup> In both cases, however, performances at court continued, and Mary's relationship with Udall (and Heywood, for that matter) suggest that she was not personally bothered by plays or performances.<sup>203</sup> Rather, we might think that both monarchs realized what potential theater held for possibly seditious political and religious commentary, and recognized its power as what Bevington called a "two-edged weapon".<sup>204</sup> *Lusty Juventus* and *Respublica* were no different.

Much as Heywood's plays hint at what Henry VIII might have appreciated seeing as entertainment, *Respublica* (and to an extent *Lusty Juventus*, if we accept that it was produced for royal purpose) offers clear suggestions as to what was accepted at court and what the monarch was willing to be entertained by. Mary's experiences during the Henrician Reformation were inarguably traumatic, and her Catholic faith would be a serious point of contention between her and her family until Edward's death in 1553. Udall saw no worry in bringing up the controversies that had plagued the Catholic church before the Reformation, as well as under Henry and Edward, and worked them into an intentionally comedic play that was meant to celebrate Mary. We might conclude then that Mary had no problem with seeing the church

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<sup>202</sup> Edward VI, "Prohibiting Plays and Interludes," August 6, 1549; "The council to the king," May 7, 1556, Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth, 250.

<sup>203</sup> Streitberger, *Court Revels*, 286-294 (Edward), 294-298 (Mary). Mary's court held only three sets of masks, plays, and entertainments in 1556—two in February, one during the Christmas season—but this number is not substantially fewer than performances in the other years of Mary's reign.

<sup>204</sup> Bevington, "Drama and Polemics under Queen Mary," *Renaissance Drama* 9 (1966), 105.

portrayed in this light, and perhaps that she, like many prominent English Catholics before the Reformation, agreed that these problems needed to be addressed from within.<sup>205</sup>

After Henry's politically minded church reforms ended, the English church still had a long way to go, and the Edwardian Reformation was no less contentious. By 1553, the English religious world had changed, and morality changed right along with it. Udall and Wever demonstrate what those changes looked like, how the morality play had adapted to meet new religious environments, and what their audiences might have wanted to see. Medieval morality traditions could coexist alongside innovative adaptations, and *Lusty Juventus* and *Respublica* provide important examples of what English religious theater had come to represent after the Henrician Reformation.

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<sup>205</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1964), 181.

## Conclusion

The morality tradition certainly did not end with Udall's *Respublica*, nor did it stop at all with the end of the Reformation. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, published in 1604 but probably written around 1588 or 1589, is another fruitful example of religious theater that demonstrates some of the effects of the Reformation and Protestantism on English theatrical traditions. Marlowe never reached the same level of fame as a playwright as did his friend and colleague William Shakespeare, and was more known in his own lifetime as an actor. But *Doctor Faustus*, a dramatization of the medieval German legend of Faust, has survived as a demonstration of what religious theater looked like in the Elizabethan era.

*Doctor Faustus* was almost certainly meant to be performed on a stage rather than in a household. This did not mean, however, that the queen never saw *Doctor Faustus*. The world of English theater had changed significantly by 1588, and public performances in dedicated theatrical spaces had started to become the norm. James Burbage (father of Shakespearean actor Richard Burbage) built The Theatre in 1576, which was the first permanent free-standing theater in England and would later be rebuilt into the Globe Theater. The same year, Master of Windsor Chapel Richard Farrant leased the Blackfriars priory (site of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon's annulment trial) to use as a rehearsal space for his choristers, but also held performances for a paying public audience in the space. This new emphasis on dedicated playing spaces reflected an increased emphasis on performing for an audience. Elizabeth also engaged in this trend herself, visiting the Globe for a number of performances among a regular audience. Unlike her father and siblings, we do know the titles of some of the plays Elizabeth saw, and *Doctor Faustus* was not among them; its status as a play for performance in a theater, however, does not rule out Elizabeth having seen it.

The Faust legend was well established before Marlowe adapted it, and had been codified into *The English Faust Book* around the same time that Marlowe was writing. He did not add the Devil, Faust's temptation and damnation, or the dichotomy between heaven and hell. He did, however, intensify the religious conflict in the story. Marlowe added the Good and Bad Angels—an early appearance of the comedic “shoulder angel” trope—who each try to tempt Faustus toward heaven or hell, respectively. Marlowe's Faustus is disillusioned with his scholarly training and knowledge, and specifically rejects theology because he believes that all humans have committed mortal sins and thus there is no point in trying to be saved. Marlowe did little more than heighten the religious themes that were already present in the story, but the result was an extremely, overtly religious play.

*Doctor Faustus* was also the last Elizabethan play to discuss religion so directly.<sup>206</sup> Parliament passed an act in 1606 forbidding the names of God, Jesus, or the Holy Trinity to be used onstage; this act came after Elizabeth's death, but it appears that it reflected a trend rather than mandating a change in behavior. David Wootton points out that references to the Trinity were already being replaced with euphemisms in the 1602 text of *Doctor Faustus*. The central internal conflict of *Doctor Faustus* is at its heart a Calvinist one. It is unclear whether Faustus was always destined to fall to the devil and be destroyed by the corruption of his demonic powers or if he is capable of giving them up to save himself; ultimately, he cannot (even though the worst he does with them is swindle a German man out of his horse and fall in love with an apparition of Helen of Troy). The 1606 act against religious language onstage coincided with pressure from Puritans against religious theater, and theater in general, and these kinds of questions were no longer welcome as Puritan beliefs became more prevalent. William Prynne's

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<sup>206</sup> David Wootton, *Doctor Faustus with The English Faust Book* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005), xiv.

*Histrionomastix*, published in 1632, attacked English theater, and singled out *Doctor Faustus*: Prynne reported that during one performance of the play, real devils had appeared onstage, stunning actors and audience alike and deeply traumatizing everyone who witnessed the apparitions.<sup>207</sup> Prynne's book was not especially well-received, even outside of the theatrical world, but his point was made. By the Elizabethan era, staunch Puritan attitudes had taken a hand in pressuring religious topics off of the stage.

In recent decades, historians have applied the morality label to *Doctor Faustus* in much the same way as they have to Bale's and Heywood's Reformation-era plays. Kent Cartwright describes the "morality theory" interpretation of Elizabethan drama, a critical lens that reads plays in the context of their humanist traditions. Marlowe and Shakespeare are the favored targets of this theory, and Cartwright argues that scholarship has overstated the significance and influence of the morality genre outside of the first four decades of the Tudor period.<sup>208</sup> But the characterization certainly fits in the case of *Doctor Faustus*. Marlowe hits most of the main morality beats: singular, metaphorical protagonist, questions of human salvation, presence of metaphysical characters whose role is to instruct the protagonist and guide them toward godly behavior. It does not take much guesswork or interpretation to view *Doctor Faustus* as a morality play; even if Marlowe did not intentionally set out to write in this genre (and Hardin Craig argues that it is almost certain that he did), it is clear that his work fits neatly to that label, and that the morality was thus still sufficiently influential in the late 1580s to shape his writing.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Roston, *Biblical Drama in England*, 109-112.

<sup>208</sup> Cartwright, *Theatre and Humanism*, 3-4.

<sup>209</sup> Craig, *English Religious Drama*, 384-5.

We might also say that Marlowe's work was shaped by John Bale's *King Johan*. The actual script of *King Johan* was lost sometime after 1563, and we know that Shakespeare did not consult it when writing his own King John play, so it is highly unlikely that Marlowe looked at the work itself. In any case, the plays are too different to say that Marlowe was inspired by Bale's work, even if he had seen it. But the similarities in tone, structure, and storytelling are undeniable, and like Udall's *Respublica*, suggest that Bale's style had found a foothold. Marlowe interprets a well-known story with a morally dubious protagonist and a depressing ending, and does not hold back in his theological and philosophical commentary. He also leans into the cautionary aspects of the tale, so much so that Cartwright calls it a "pedagogical play," paralleling Bale's warnings about the dangers of the Catholic church.<sup>210</sup> *King Johan* and *Doctor Faustus* are similarly-structured plays that make heavy-handed religious points with well-known stories and a familiar storytelling style. Bale's trend, then, held out through the Reformation and into the Shakespearean era.

The morality play was the most important trend in theater during the Tudor period, and playwrights embraced it for a wide variety of purposes. Bale, Heywood, Wever, and Udall—and to an extent, Marlowe—make it clear that this genre lingered through four different dramatic resets in English religious policy, from Henry's Act of Supremacy in 1534 through to Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity in 1558. The morality had medieval Catholic theology at its core, and was created to dramatize the moral conflicts that a sinful human might face in their life. Medieval moralities like *Everyman* urged their audiences to repent for their sins and perform good works to ensure their salvation. It might be understandable for this genre to remain through the Henrician era, while Catholic beliefs were still compatible with the English church and with the

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<sup>210</sup> Cartwright, *Theatre and Humanism*, 50

king's personal opinion, but Edward's reforms officially rejected the belief in salvation by good works and should have affected the use of the morality to make a moral point. They did have an impact, in terms of the messages that playwrights chose to share, but the fact that the morality genre itself hung around through the Edwardian era in particular suggests that perhaps the Reformation did not have enough influence on English theatrical culture to turn playwrights away from these long-standing medieval genres.

In historiography, these playwrights—particularly Bale—are treated as agents of change and examples of English religious theater actively evolving through the Reformation. They are transitional characters who demonstrate the shifts from medieval religious tradition toward the comedies, tragedies, and history plays that would later come to characterize the Shakespearean era of theater. But these four men and their plays are just as valuable as momentary windows into their respective decades. It is clear, from examining these plays that medieval literary and dramatic influence endured through the Reformation, even as writers and theologians began thinking differently about their relationship to English history. Bale highlights Catholic dishonesty and flaws within the church that have afflicted England to 1538, but does so through a theatrical structure that was shaped by the very church and practices he argues against. Heywood is easily able to fit his conciliatory message into medieval genres that existed for literary, not argumentative purposes. Wever and Udall, both dedicated Protestants, also had no trouble shaping the morality tradition to suit their purposes.

Each of these playwrights has something different to reveal about the monarch for whom they wrote. Heywood's proximity to Henry through the 1520s and 30s, as English politics turned to anticlerical positions and Henry began to consider Protestant viewpoints from personal and literary influences, allows us to guess from his plays that Henry might not have supported

aspects of the Catholic church as strongly as previously thought. Bale encapsulates the depths of the Catholic-Protestant divide in the late 1530s, and indicates that Thomas Cromwell believed theater to be a powerful propaganda tool to settle anti-Protestant rebellion. Wever demonstrates that people saw Edward as a child that could easily be tempted by evil, corrupting influences that would then spread to all of England (and that those temptations might take the form of a Catholic wife). Udall suggests that Mary might have agreed with his humanist position on church reform, despite their very different personal religious outlooks. Even though there are no sources that directly reveal what Henry, Edward, or Mary thought about these plays, or that confirm if they did actually see them performed, the fact that they were written with these people in mind allows us to make conclusions about what they might have thought during their respective Reformation periods.

In the pre-Shakespearean era, before public theaters and formal public performances became common, the elite experience of theater took place in the household. The royal family in most cases saw plays that had been prepared for them specifically, or at least written with the knowledge that the monarch would be among its audience. Plays are incredibly useful as windows into what a particular culture looked like in a certain moment, revealing how playwrights interpreted the world they lived in for the stage and what they knew about their audiences. These plays are even more useful, as historiography has shown, because of their playwrights' proximity to important and influential people.



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