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“To speak before the king, it is no child’s play”: Godly Queen Hester in 1529

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The anonymous early Tudor *Interlude of Godly Queen Hester* dramatises the events narrated in the Old Testament Book of Esther, from King Ahasuerus’ decision to seek a wife and his choice of Hester (there is no reference here to his previous marriage to Queen Vashti), up to the execution of Haman (here named Aman) and the pardon and restoration of the fortunes of the Jews. (Again there is no mention of Jewish revenge upon their would-be persecutors.) But it retells the story in a distinctly English vein, taking in a short humanist debate on the nature of kingship and references to local concepts such as the statute of apparel (l. 378), the equity courts (l. 601) and the prospect of war with Scotland or France (l. 479), as well as the signal intervention of a trio of morality play vices, Pride, Adulation and Ambition, and a still more idiosyncratic court fool named Hardyardy.

As I argued in an earlier study, the play’s representation of the Vulgate narrative retells it as a reflection on contemporary events at the time of the calling of the Reformation parliament (Walker, *Plays*, pp. 103-32). In this reworking, the Jews in part function as allegorical representations of the English clergy, especially the regular religious—monks, nuns and friars—but also the bishops and the officers of the ecclesiastical courts. Aman

reflects aspects of the role of Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor and chief minister, Thomas, Cardinal Wolsey, while Hester herself in some ways echoes the case of Henry's first wife, Katherine of Aragon. This allegorical dimension unsurprisingly influences the terms in which each element of the story is represented. Most obviously, perhaps, Haman's biblical accusation that the Jews form an alien privileged community within the Persian Empire is given a particular inflection in a debate that revolves around their provision of charity and hospitality and religious services for the commonweal—issues that were central to the religious debates of late 1529. Similarly, Aman is criticised in the interlude, not only for his hostility to the Jewish "households", but also for his domination of the law courts (specifically as "Chancellor"), his interference in appointments to ecclesiastical benefices through "bulls" and his capacity to benefit from the estates of those who die intestate—powers and prerogatives that closely resemble those obtained by Wolsey as papal legate, and which formed the substance of a number of the charges levelled against him at his fall (Walker, *Plays*, pp. 104-6). Finally, Hester is not the beautiful, young, sensual and partisan figure of the Book of Esther, but rather a more mature woman (if that is what the reference to her "ripe years" [l. 231] is taken to imply) who is the king's first wife, and chosen for her wisdom rather than for her beauty.¹

The last analogy is perhaps the most unexpected of the play's contemporary resonances, for it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the interlude uses the representation of Hester for some at-times-none-too-subtle advocacy on behalf of the embattled Katherine of Aragon, who was at this time resisting the king's attempt to annul their marriage. The playwright stresses that Hester comes to the king "a virgin pure, / A pearl undefiled, and of conscience clear" (ll. 255-56), an observation that, while it points to a commonplace of wifely virtue in the period, gains a sharper edge in the light of Henry's claim that Katherine did not come to him a virgin, having previously consummated a marriage to Henry's deceased older brother, prince Arthur (a claim that formed the basis of the king's objection to the match, and which Katherine in her turn strenuously denied). Moreover, the drama seems to allude favourably to a number of Katherine's more conspicuous triumphs during the years of their marriage. Prime among these was her period as regent of England during Henry's invasion of France in 1513, during which time she oversaw the successful defence of the realm against a Scot-

1 See Dillon, *passim*.

tish attack and the crushing defeat of the Scots at Flodden. In the light of these events, it is striking to note the terms of Hester's response when Assuerus asks her what virtues a queen should possess—an exchange that has no equivalent in the Vulgate text. Queens, she argues, should possess the self-same virtues as kings, as they are likely to meet many of the same challenges and responsibilities.

Eftsoons it may chance at sundry season,
The king with his council, most part of all,
From this realm to be absent when war doth call.
Then the queen's wisdom sadly must deal
By her great virtue to rule the common weal.

Wherefore as many virtues be there must
Even in the queen as the prince,
For fear lest in war some treason unjust
The realm should subdue and falsely convince [*conquer*],
And so the queen must safeguard the whole province. (ll. 282-91)

Similarly, Katherine drew praise from chroniclers and other observers by formally intervening on a number of ceremonial occasions to seek pardons from Henry for individuals and groups facing the death penalty for various crimes. Such events add contemporary resonance to Mordechai's instructions to Hester in the play that, if she is selected as the king's spouse, she should

Break not the course that queens have had
In this noble region most of all:
They have aye been good and none of them bad,
To their prince ever sure, just and substantial;
And good to the commons when they did call
By meekness for mercy to temper the fire
Of rigorous justice, in fume or in ire. (ll. 177-83)

Again, symbolic intercession with kings in pursuit of mercy was a common role for queens in this period, but once more the terms of the allusion seem marked. And even if spectators did not detect a precise contemporary *ad hominem* allusion here, the broad defence of queens of "this noble region" as good women, ever true to their princes, "and none of them bad", would surely have raised eyebrows in the light of the arguments surrounding the present royal marriage.

In such details the play reveals itself, as I have argued elsewhere (Walker, *Plays*, pp. 102-32), as the product of a particular moment in Henrician history, the period in late 1529, immediately following Wolsey's fall from power, during which

the Cardinal was still being pursued by his critics and rivals, and the issues of clerical privilege and power and the status of the religious houses were the subject of fevered debate. But in my earlier study, I did not see the full significance of its close dialogue with two other texts of that period, a dialogue that allows us both to date it with some confidence to the Christmas period of 1529-30 and to appreciate how quickly it must have been written (or, perhaps, as has recently been suggested by Janette Dillon [pp. 130-39], adapted), to respond to those texts and to the events that they provoked and reflected. Nor did I appreciate the degree of subtlety with which the interlude engaged with contemporary debates, forming part of what seems to have been a concerted strategy adopted by defenders of the institutional church to take advantage of the fall of Cardinal Wolsey and to head off the fierce assault on clerical liberties and prerogatives that had been launched in the first session of the Reformation parliament (which convened on Candlemas Day, 3 November 1529 and closed six weeks later on 17 December). If we read the interlude in the light of the events of this anxious, pivotal period in the early history of the English reformation, a new understanding of both its intense topicality and its bold and detailed intervention in contemporary debates can be teased out.

To gain a sense of the specificity of the play, and of the audacious opportunism of the playwright, we need briefly to remind ourselves of the principal events of the long fraught summer of 1529 and their place in the history of the reign. By May 1529, Henry and his agents had been striving for almost two years, at first confidently and covertly, and then with increasing publicity and desperation, to secure a diplomatic and legal resolution to the “Great Matter” which was exercising the royal conscience, the legality of his marriage to Queen Katherine. Finally, after much lobbying, Wolsey had obtained what he had assured the king was the solution to his difficulties, a papal warrant to try the matter in England, and in May 1529 a court met at Blackfriars in London, presided over by Wolsey himself and Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggio, sent directly from Rome for the purpose. Things did not, of course, go to plan. Not only did Katherine appear personally at the trial to attest powerfully to the validity of her marriage and the invalidity of the court set up to try it, but Campeggio proved unwilling to follow Wolsey’s script, and, instead of finding in the king’s favour, prorogued the court on 23 July with the matter still undecided. The explosion of royal anger that this verdict prompted cost Wolsey his position, and ultimately his life. Its first manifestation was the intervention of Henry’s friend, Charles Brandon, Duke

of Suffolk, who, slamming his fist down on the judges' table with a mighty clap, declared to the assembly that the court had proved what everyone already knew, that no cardinal had ever done good in England (Hall, fol. clxxxiii^r). The implications of that declaration were obvious. Wolsey spent the summer in a prolonged and largely fruitless attempt at damage limitation, but by October he had conceded defeat, resigned his secular offices and left London, never to return (Hall, fols. clxxxiii^{r-v}; Cavendish, p. 100).

On 3 November, a new parliament convened, and Wolsey's successor as Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, "standing on the right hand of the king, before the bar", opened the session with "an excellent oration" to both houses, the terms of which, although well known to historians, are extraordinary enough to warrant rehearsal here. Having begun by drawing the conventional comparison of the king to a shepherd, More put the analogy to a more specific and striking use. "As you see", he observed,

that amongst a great flock of sheep, some be rotten and faulty, which the good shepherd sendeth from the good sheep, so the great wether [*castrated ram*] which is of late fallen, as you all know, so craftily, so scabbedly, yea and so untruly juggled with the king that all men must needs guess and think that he thought in himself that the [king] had no wit to perceive his crafty doing, or else that he presumed that the king would not see nor know his fraudulent juggling and attempts. But he was deceived, for his grace's sight was so quick and penetrable that he saw him, yea and saw through him, both within and without, so that all thing to him was open, and according to his desert he hath had a gentle correction, which small punishment the king will not to be an example to other offenders, but clearly declareth that whosoever hereafter shall make like attempt or commit like offence shall not escape like punishment. (Hall, fol. clxxxvii^v)

This speech marks a signal moment in the reign. That the Lord Chancellor, flanked by the king himself and clearly speaking with his authority, should so publicly denounce the man who had held his own office only months earlier, and who had effectively dominated the administration of church and state for fifteen years (and was still, it must be remembered, both Archbishop of York and a cardinal of the church), and that he should do so in such a lurid vocabulary, more redolent of literary polemic than of sober political discourse, was itself astonishing. That he went on implicitly to present the king as the long-term dupe of this crafty and scabbed juggler (for, no matter how much he praised the king's acute insight, everyone knew that he had trusted Wolsey absolutely) must

have seemed extraordinary, both to those who witnessed it and to those who only read or heard about it later.

The unforgettable nature of the speech, and of the turbulent parliamentary session which followed, can be judged in part from the ways in which it reverberated in the literature, and especially the drama, of the following months and years. The fall of the “great wether”, and More’s declaration elsewhere in the same speech that the king had summoned the assembly to address “diverse great enormities” sprung up in the realm under his oversight for which as yet no legislative solution had been devised, resurface, for example, in the opening lines of John Heywood’s *Play of the Weather*, probably performed at court over Christmas 1532-33, in which the god-king Jupiter talks of replacing his old father Saturn and taking supreme power into his own hands, and of a fractious parliament of the gods called “for the redress of certain enormities / bred among them through extremities / Abused in each to other of them all” (ll. 25-27). (Indeed, did the title of that play itself, perhaps, also contain a punning echo, if perhaps only an unconscious one, of More’s depiction of Wolsey as a “great wether”?)

For our purposes here, the parliamentary session, with More’s speech depicting Henry as the newly-enlightened victim of Wolsey’s deception, resonates still more immediately and insistently in *Hester*. It underpins the final scene of the interlude, with its depiction of the sudden, calamitous fall of the Chancellor Aman, where another formal instrument of Henrician rule, a royal proclamation, stands in for the speech to parliament as the method by which the nation is informed of the king’s change of both heart and chief minister. In Assuerus’ proclamation, designed to be read to the people in every province, the king acknowledges that he, like Henry, has been deceived by the wiles of a cunning adviser, and has come close to countenancing a monstrous crime. It acknowledges the sudden reversal in the king’s attitude, so much so that the current proclamation is so opposed to his last message that it is “clean repugnant” to it (l. 1111). But it reassures his subjects:

When ye know our mind ye shall be content
To think it no lightness, nor wit inconsistent,
But the necessity of times variant,
And as cause requireth for the utility
Of our whole realm, heads and commonalty. (ll. 1112-16)

Hence, the text declares, Aman, who had so recently been the king's most trusted lieutenant, has been dismissed and despatched to sudden death:

The son of Amadathy, called Aman . . .
Which by his subtlety, both now and then,
Our gentleness so infecteth for certain
That near we were like all Jews to have slain.
We favoured him, that he was called
Our father, and all men did to him honour,
But his heart with pride so strongly was walled,
That by his sleight and crafty demeanour,
Had we not espied his subtle behaviour,
He would have destroyed Queen Hester our wife,
And from us at length have taken our life. (ll. 1118, 1121-34)

Twenty-five lines later, in concluding the play, the actor playing Assuerus, now no longer necessarily in character, turns to address directly both the on-stage court and the audience beyond, to point up the wider political moral of the interlude:

My lords, by this figure ye may well see
The multitude hurt by the head's negligence,
If to his pleasure so given is he
That he will no pain take nor diligence.
Who careth not for his cure oft loseth credence,
A proverb of old sometime in usage.
Few men that serve but for their own advantage. (ll. 1155-61)

The Hester actor then takes his turn in outlining and developing the theme, again addressing a "you" that takes in both his fellow actors and the gathered spectators:

And yet the servants that be untrue,
A while in the world their life may they lead,
Yes, their wealth and worship daily renew;
But at the length, I assure you indeed,
Their favel [*fraud*] and falsehood will come abroad,
Which shall be to them more bitter than gall.
The higher they climb, the deeper they fall. (ll. 1162-68)

Performed at court or anywhere in London or Westminster over the Christmas season of 1529-30, these speeches could not but have brought to mind More's words to parliament only weeks before, and Henry's dismissal of Wolsey that

prompted them. The description of a king “infected” by the subtlety, craft and sleights of a minister whose deceptions he has (finally) seen through seems clearly designed to echo More’s account of the crafty and scabbed Cardinal who had “so untruly juggled” with Henry VIII until his “quick and penetrable sight” saw through his tricks.

Hester is, then, an interlude that seems determined to press upon some very sensitive political nerves. But, while at first sight it might seem politically suicidal to have produced a play (whether at court or elsewhere) that implied that the reigning sovereign had been foolish enough to ignore conventional wisdom and become the dupe of a villainous minister, in the context of More’s speech to parliament, which had said the same thing in even more lurid language, the idea becomes readily explicable. Indeed, it is clear that there was at the time of Wolsey’s dismissal a concerted effort on the part of Henry and his ministers to tell the story of the king suddenly having come to his senses and deciding to rule in his own person rather than through a chief minister. The royal secretary, Sir Brian Tuke, told the Spanish Ambassador, Eustace Chapuys, that Henry had previously left matters of administration in Wolsey’s hands, but now intended to take control of them himself, and “manage his own affairs” (*Calendar of State Papers, Spanish* [hereafter *C.S.P., Sp.*], IV [i]: item 257). And in January 1530 the king himself repeated the same message, telling Chapuys that formerly “those who had the reins of government in their hands had deceived me [and] many things were done without my knowledge, but such proceedings will be stopped in future” (*C.S.P., Sp.*, V: item 250).²

For a ruler to pose as newly enlightened and resolved to dispense with evil counsellors and to govern virtuously himself was, of course, a useful, if rather melodramatic political strategy. It enabled a king to wipe the slate clean of former mistakes and unpopular policies and dismiss them as the deceitful schemes of the disgraced minister. So one can see the advantages of the pose for Henry. Indeed, he had used it before more than once to escape the consequences of difficult situations. When in 1519 a group of his senior advisors came to him with complaints about the unseemly behaviour of some of his young male companions, known informally as his “minions”, Henry claimed ignorance of their antics and told the advisors they had free licence to investigate the situation and inform him of the facts (Walker, *Persuasive Fictions*, pp. 35–53). Similarly, when

2 See Walker, *Plays*, p. 164.

in 1525 an ill-judged demand for a so-called Amicable Grant, deigned to raise money for an invasion of France, provoked widespread resistance and popular unrest, Henry again posed as the bemused innocent. The demand, he claimed, must have been devised by Wolsey without royal assent, and the Cardinal duly admitted as much at a public ceremony where he sought royal forgiveness for a demand that had in truth been Henry's own idea.³

Such a strategy was, however, double-edged. It allowed the king to discipline or dismiss no-longer useful ministers and walk away (almost) unscathed from unwanted policies, but it also allowed others within the circle of courtly politics to exploit the same agenda. They could appeal to the “newly enlightened” monarch to repeal or moderate other policies which he had previously promoted, but which, it might now be suggested, were also the product of the previous, discredited regime, the brainchildren of the fallen favourite. Thus a brief period of flux opened up in the turbulent days or weeks following such an event, before the precise terms of the new dispensation had been clarified, in which it was possible for various interested parties to suggest which other parts of the existing political agenda might be consigned to oblivion with the crafty deceiver who could be “discovered” to have devised them—and see whether the king might agree. The nature and direction of policy were suddenly up for renegotiation, and anyone with an interest in shifting the agenda was licensed to lobby for their own ends. It is just such a process of lobbying that, I will argue, we see happening in the winter of 1529, and to which the performance of *Godly Queen Hester* is a significant contribution.

But before we leave this subject it is worth noting what appears to be a sly satirical swipe at Henry's strategy in the interlude itself. Just as the king had brazenly denied all knowledge of Wolsey's sleights at the time of the Amicable Grant, and was doing so again in late 1529 in relation to the undefined “enormities” which parliament had been called to redress, so King Assuerus in the play seeks to dissociate himself from the suppression of the Jews when challenged by Hester. When she pleads with him to repeal the proclamation that condemned the Jews to death, he implies that he knows nothing about the proposed genocide, asking her, “What is he, or what is his authority / That is so bold this act to attempt?” (ll. 915-16). Hester takes the question at face value, or seems to, as she carefully explains Aman's role in the plot. But the audience would have been

3 See Bernard, *passim*.

under no illusions about the king's calculated hypocrisy here. For less than two hundred lines earlier it had watched Aman explicitly request royal approval for the slaughter, and receive it. The chancellor identified his intended victims from the outset as "A great number of Jews within this realm . . . / A people not good for your common weal" (ll. 726-27), and advised Assuerus to eliminate them:

Your Grace, by your power royal,
Shall give sentence and plainly decree
To slay these Jews in your realm over all,
None to escape (let your sentence be general),
Ye shall by that win, to say I dare be bold,
To your treasure ten thousand pound(s) of gold. (ll. 750-55)

And the king equally explicitly consented to the request. "As touching the Jews", he responds,

. . . which be so valiant,
Both of goods and great possession,
We do agree unto their suppression. (ll. 760-62)

And, just in case any doubt remains about the nature of the suppression he is agreeing to, he subsequently agrees that the Jews should be "quench[ed]" (i.e., extinguished) (l. 768).

Thus, while Assuerus' words to Hester in the play are a direct echo of his namesake's answer to Esther in Scripture, their implication is entirely different. For where the biblical king can honestly respond that Haman did not name the Jews as the people whom he wished to suppress, as he said only that there was a dangerous group in the realm living by separate laws, in the interlude both Aman and the king himself name the Jews specifically as the victims of the intended pogrom. Hence, when Assuerus responds to Hester's account of Aman's animus against her people, his admission only that the minister had mentioned a redistribution of Jewish wealth for the benefit of the people at large seems both economical with the truth and obviously self-serving:

He signified unto me that the Jews did
Not feed the poor by hospitality.
Their possessions, he said, were all but hid,
Among themselves living voluptuously;
Thinking the same might be, verily,
Much better employed for the commonweal
Where now it little profiteth, or never a deal [*not at all*]. (ll. 936-47)

The playwright seems to be using the licence of the festive occasion gently to mock the conceit that he was himself allegorizing, suggesting that, of course, everyone was aware of the disingenuous nature of Henry's claim to ignorance of Wolsey's schemes, but was happy to conform to Henry's script if there were benefits in it for them. But this barbed moment is only a sideshow to the writer's main campaign.

The Church Beleaguered

Thomas More's announcement to parliament that Wolsey had fallen and the king was ready to amend any enormities that had sprung up since its last meeting (in 1523) prompted an energetic discussion of allegations of clerical abuses and plans for closer regulation of the church in both houses. These ideas did not spring from nowhere. A number of members came to the session already prepared to try to force debate on clerical issues (Walker, *Plays*, pp. 158-60),⁴ while religious radicals in London chose the day of the opening of parliament for a public display of their strength and demands, scattering copies of Simon Fish's virulently anti-clerical tract, *A Supplication for the Beggars*, along the route of the procession to parliament and in the streets of the City. More formally, the London Mercers' Company had drawn up a list of articles that they hoped to have discussed in the Commons, one of which requested the King to compensate those Londoners who "have been polled [*close-shaven*] and robbed without reason or conscience by the ordinaries [*bishops*] in probating of testaments, taking of mortuaries [*death taxes*] and also vexed and troubled by citations, with cursing one day and absolving the next day, *et hec omnio po pecuniis* [*and all for money*]" (cited in Miller, p. 114). More's opening declaration gave all of them formal approval to speak out.

The debates began with discussion of probate fees, and critics of the church were further emboldened to contribute when Sir Henry Guildford, the controller of the royal household, intervened to criticise the allegedly excessive fees charged for the probate of the will of another senior courtier, Henry's groom of the stool, Sir William Compton, by Wolsey and Archbishop William Warham of Canterbury. For someone so close to the king to lead the criticism was a clear

4 As early as October the French Ambassador, Jean du Bellay, reported that Wolsey's aristocratic critics intended, after he was dead or ruined, to "impeach the state of the church, and take all their goods, which it is hardly needful for me to write, for they proclaim it openly" (*Letters and Papers*, IV [iii]: item 6011).

signal that Henry was willing to listen to suggestions for institutional reform of the church courts, and so others responded more confidently: “and after this declaration were showed so many extortions done by the ordinaries for probate of wills that it were too much to rehearse” (Hall, fol. clxxxviii^r). Debates about mortuary payments, clerical pluralism and non-residence followed (Lehmberg, p. 83), and the vociferousness of the criticisms of the clergy emerging from the Commons and the City prompted ambassador Chapuys to report on 13 December that “nearly all the people here hate the priests” (*C.S.P., Sp*, IV [i]: item 232).

Meanwhile a meeting of the king’s counsellors, both lay and clerical, drew up a set of charges against Wolsey that might be used in the courts or as the basis of a parliamentary bill of attainder. This document, known to historians as the Lords’ Articles, was a comprehensive list of indictments against the Cardinal’s character and his administration, ranging from serious criticisms of his handling of foreign policy to claims that he knowingly breathed on the king when he was infectious.⁵ Among these were a series of accusations concerning the exercise of Wolsey’s legatine regime, under which, as legate *a latere* (literally sent as if “from the side” of the Pope with delegated papal powers), he could override the jurisdictions of the bishops and religious orders to instigate reforms, claim first right to taxes and duties and impose his own candidates to vacancies in parishes and other positions. Such charges were clearly the work of the senior clergy on the king’s council, anxious to reclaim some of the prerogatives, jurisdictions and privileges that had been taken from them by Wolsey. But they were careful to present these claims in terms most likely to find favour with the king, as reassertions of the rights of the crown against foreign, Roman interference. Wolsey, the first article claimed,

hath not only hurt your said prescription, but also . . . hath spoiled and taken away from many houses of religion in this your realm much substance of their goods. And also hath usurped

5 For a full transcription of the Articles, see Herbert, pp. 266–71. Although the document bears the seals only of laymen, including Thomas More, prominent nobles, judges and officers of the court, it is evident that senior clergy were consulted during its compilation, both from the content of specific allegations about Wolsey’s handling of ecclesiastical issues, and from the claim of the chronicler Edward Hall, who was present in parliament as member for Wenlock in Shropshire, that “when the nobles *and prelates* perceived that the King’s favour was from the Cardinal sore minished, every man of the King’s Council began to lay to him such offences as they knew by him, and all their accusations were written in a book, and all their hands set to it” (Hall, fol. clxxxiii^r). For the suggestion that the king was considering acting against Wolsey through a bill of attainder, see Cavendish, pp. 112–13.

upon all your ordinaries within this your realm much part of their jurisdiction, in derogation of your prerogative and the great hurt of the said ordinaries, prelates and religious. (cited in Herbert, p. 266 [Article 1])

That Wolsey should be criticised for hostility to the regular religious houses is unsurprising. During the 1520s he had used his legatine powers to visit and reform a number of religious orders, including, controversially, those, such as the Observant Franciscans, exempt from episcopal scrutiny, and between 1524 and 1529 had suppressed twenty-nine small religious houses, diverting their revenues to Cardinal College, Oxford (re-founded after his death as the modern Christ Church). The Lords' Articles drew attention to these suppressions in Article XIX, which claimed that

the said Cardinal hath not only, by his untrue suggestion to the Pope, shamefully slandered many good religious houses, and good religious men dwelling in them, but also suppressed by reason therefore about thirty houses of religion. (cited in Herbert, p. 269)

These suppressions, being piecemeal, provoked limited resistance at the time.⁶ What made them suddenly contentious in 1529 was the prospect that Wolsey was intending a more radical dissolution at the time of his fall. In the five months to April 1529 he had obtained bulls from Rome investing him, either alone or in conjunction with Cardinal Campeggio, with the power to dissolve a number of abbeys, including some large ones, as part of a scheme to create new English bishoprics, and to dissolve outright any house with fewer than twelve inmates which he judged was no longer functional (*Letters and Papers*, IV [iii]: items 5667-68; Knowles, III: 160; Gwyn, pp. 466ff). With Wolsey's fall the process stalled, but the precedent set was a dangerous one, especially as the more radical evangelical reformers were arguing loudly at just this time for the wholesale abolition of monasticism on doctrinal grounds. Indeed, the case for abolition was a major theme of Fish's *A Supplication for the Beggars*, which had been so provocatively scattered in the streets on the day that parliament convened.

It is in the context of this debate that we need to read the discussion of the Jews in *Hester*. That their representation there is a defence of the regular religious and the clergy in general in the wake of these attacks in parliament and else-

6 The townsfolk of Tonbridge in Kent had unsuccessfully petitioned Archbishop Warham to intervene to save their local house (*Letters and Papers*, IV [i]: items 1470-71, 4920), and there had been a short-lived popular rising in Baynham in Sussex in 1525, during which the brothers were briefly restored to the local abbey (Goring, pp. 1-10), but the suppressions largely passed without difficulty.

where is made clear by the otherwise curious terms in which they are discussed throughout the play, which at times echo the text of the book of Esther, but for the most part focus on the seemingly idiosyncratic issue of charity. Aman launches his attack upon the Jews by accusing them of both separatism and licentiousness, telling King Assuerus,

The precepts of your law
They refuse and have in great contempt;
They will in no wise live under awe
Of any prince, but they will be exempt. (ll. 735-38)

And Aman himself is accused (in what sounds like a direct allusion to Wolsey's claim to the right to suppress religious houses, rescinding the terms of their foundations if he found them wanting) of setting his own judgement above those of the founders of Jewish houses and the authors of their rules:

For all rulers and laws were made by fools and daws [*jackdaws: idiots*],
He sayeth nearly.
Ordinances and foundations, without consultation,
He sayeth, were devised;
Therefore his imagination brings all out of fashion,
And so all is disguised [*disfigured*]. (ll. 459-64)

Elsewhere, as we have seen, Assuerus tells Hester that Aman had convinced him to punish the Jews because they “did / Not feed the poor by hospitality” (ll. 943-44), but rather hoarded their wealth for their own use: “Their possessions, he said, were all but hid / Among themselves living voluptuously” (ll. 945-46).

What the vices Pride, Adulation and Ambition reveal, however, is that it is Aman's rapacious *taxation* of the Jews that has reduced their capacity for alms-giving, not any lack of charity on their part (ll. 475-82). And, as Hester argues, well-established and regulated religious communities of the kind that the Jews provide are vital for the spiritual and the material well-being of the realm, as they offer not only prayers and services for the community but material sustenance to travellers and the poor, keeping them in good health should the king ever need to call on them for military service (ll. 311-16). Thus, she argues,

Let God always therefore have his part,
And the poor fed by hospitality,

Each man his measure, be it pint or quart,
And no man too much. (ll. 318-21)

And later she specifically warns against the “dissolution” of Jewish houses,

Since God therefore hath begun their household,
And aye hath preserved their hospitality,
I advise no man to be so bold
The same to dissolve, whosever he be,
Let God alone, for he shall orderly
A fine ad finem, both here and there,
Omnia disponere suaviter.⁷ (ll. 964-70)

The Jews be the people of God elected,
And wear his badge of circumcision.
The daily prayer of the whole sect,
As the psalms of David by ghostly [*spiritual*] inspiration,
Eke [*also*] holy ceremonies of God’s provision,
To God is vaileable [*effectual*], that nothing greater,
And the whole realm for them fares the better. (ll. 1089-95)

Focusing in this way on the Jews’—and so the religious houses’—charitable functions and status as engines of prayer, played, as I have argued elsewhere (Walker, *Plays*, pp. 108-9), to the monasteries’ strengths, stressing their social utility in ways to which few could object, while avoiding the more contentious questions raised by Lutheran reformers about monastic morality or the doctrinal basis of their functions as providers of prayers and services for the dead. Precisely the same defence was mounted in the Lords’ Articles, which condemned Wolsey’s dissolutions in very similar terms:

Where good hospitality hath been used to be kept in houses and places of religion of this realm, and many poor people thereby relieved, the said hospitality and relief is now decayed and not used, and it is commonly reported that the occasion thereof is because the said Lord Cardinal hath taken such impositions of the rulers of the said houses . . . as they are not able to keep good hospitality as they were used to, which is a great cause that there is so many vagabonds, beggars and thieves. (cited Herbert, p. 268 [Article XIII])

7 “Reaching from one end to the other . . . ordering all things mightily and sweetly”, quoting Isaiah 11:2-3 and 28:29, the antiphon for 17 December: “O Wisdom, Who didst come out of the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: come and teach us the way of prudence.”

So there was good strategic sense in defending the religious foundations in these terms. But there was also a more specific edge to the choice, as it was precisely in terms of the clergy's *lack* of charity and support for the poor that Simon Fish had chosen to couch his strident assault upon church wealth (and implicitly on the whole idea of purgatory) in *A Supplication for the Beggars*, a book that seemed so alarming to Sir Thomas More that he immediately wrote a strident (and far longer) response, *The Supplication of Souls*, to counter its claims.

Printed anonymously, Fish's short tract claimed to be a petition from the starving poor addressed "to the king, our sovereign lord". It asserted that deserving beggars were deprived of the alms that normally sustained them by the institutionalised begging and impositions of that mass of "strong, puissant and counterfeit holy and idle beggars and vagabonds", the clergy. The latter, it claimed, have increased in numbers to the point where they now constitute a separate "kingdom" within the realm. As a result "the goodliest lordships, manors, lands and territories are theirs", but they are still not satisfied, and so extract ever more wealth from the hard-pressed laity through "probate of testaments, privy tithes, and by men's offerings to their pilgrimages and at their first masses", as well as through mortuary payments, funeral fees, and "by cursing of men and absolving them again for money" (Fish, p. 2; my pagination). Working up to a rhetorical crescendo, Fish presented the wealth and privileges of the clergy as a direct challenge to the prerogatives of the crown and the military capability of the kingdom:

What tyrant ever oppressed the people like this cruel and vengeable generation? What subjects be able to help their prince that be after this fashion yearly polled? ... And what do all these greedy sort of sturdy, idle, holy thieves with these yearly exactions that they take of the people? Truly nothing, but exempt themselves from th'obedience of your grace. Nothing but translate the rule, power, lordship, authority, obedience and dignity from your grace unto them. Nothing but that all your subjects should fall into disobedience and rebellion against your grace and be under them. (Fish, pp. 3-4)

Therefore, Fish concludes, the king should rouse himself and punish the clergy by depriving them of their temporal wealth, property and privileges:

Where is your sword, power, crown and dignity become that should punish (by punishment of death, even as other men are punished) the felonies, rapes, murders and treasons committed by this sinful generation? Where is their obedience become that should be under your high power in this matter? (Fish, p. 7)

Set these sturdy lobbies [*idlers*] abroad in the world to get them wives of their own, to get their living with their labour in the sweat of their faces according to the commandment of God (Gen[esis] III) to give other idle people by their example to go to labour. Tie these holy, idle thieves to the carts to be whipped naked about every market town till they will fall to labour. (Fish, p. 14)

Much of the queen's defence of the Jews in *Hester* reads like a direct response to charges such as these levelled in Fish's *Supplication* and the debates in parliament, charges that themselves find direct expression in the interlude in Aman's malicious criticisms of Esther's people. The deceitful minister accuses the Jews of multiplying exponentially,⁸ living in separate communities ("dispersed over all your province, / Within themself [*sic*] dwelling de-severed from our nation" [ll. 728-29]), "exempt" (l. 738) from domestic laws, hiding their wealth and living "voluptuously", while, conversely, Hester defends them as socially beneficial communities that are integrated into—and indeed vital to—the kingdom at large, using their wealth to fund almsgiving and hospitality.

More subtly, a number of the other allegations that Fish and the reformers in the Commons levelled at the church resurface in the play, not as allegations levelled by Aman at the Jews, but as Aman's own crimes and vices, which are "revealed" by Pride, Adulation and Ambition. As Fish protests that "the best lordships, manors and territories are in church hands, and rails against the practices of the church courts, probate fees, mortuaries and funeral duties, and "cursing of men and absolving them again for money", so Adulation denounces Aman's dominance of the law courts (ll. 411-12), his grasping of the best positions ("For if it be a good fee, Aman sayeth 'That longeth [*belongs*] to me!' / Be it benefice or park" [ll. 439-41]), and profiting from the execution of wills and testaments (ll. 566-75). Indeed, the play may well acknowledge the link between its own allegations against Aman and the charges in *A Supplication for the Beggars*, in Ambition's somewhat arch comment that

8 There is perhaps an allusion to Fish's assertion that the clergy were swelling in numbers to the point where they constituted their own separate kingdom in Aman's claim that the Jews' "possessions be of substance / So great and so large that I fear at the length / They will attempt to subdue you by strength" (ll. 746-48). The equivalent claim in Fish's tract warns that the clergy "have ... gotten into their hands more lands ... than any duke in England ... yea, have they not ... translated into their hands from your grace half your kingdom ... and of one kingdom made twain ... ? And which of these two kingdoms suppose ye is like to overgrow the other, yea to put the other clear out of memory? Truly the kingdom of the blood-suckers, for to them is given daily out of your kingdom" (Fish, p. 9).

Beggars now do ban [*curse*], and cry out of Aman,
That ever he was born.
They swear by the Rood [*Holy Cross*] he eateth all their food,
So that they get no good, neither even or morn.

And many that be poor, though not from door to door
A-begging they did go;
Yet had they relief, both of bread and beef,
And drink also.

And now the door stands shut, and no man can we get
To work neither to fight. (ll. 469-78)

For it was precisely the conceit of Fish's tract that it was voicing the cries of the poor folk, who had once enjoyed alms and relief from their neighbours, but were now denied these because the clergy were sucking up all the available charity and keeping the proceeds for themselves.

As I have argued elsewhere (Walker, *Plays*, p. 123), *Hester*, like Fish's *Supplication*, seems carefully designed to encourage royal intervention, albeit to exactly the opposite effect. On one level, it represents an appeal to Henry VIII, figured in king Assuerus, to assert himself and take policy firmly into his own hands. By the time the play was performed, of course, this was an appeal that the playwright knew was likely to be favourably received, as Henry had declared publicly that he intended to do exactly that after Wolsey's fall. Thus the interlude was preaching to the converted in terms of its general thesis. But what the playwright also sought to do was to use that general plea to achieve something quite different to the ends pursued by Fish, at least where intervention in the governance of the church was concerned.

The interlude begins with a short debate between Assuerus and a group of courtiers over the best way for a king to govern. Of all the things a king must possess, from riches and noble blood to wisdom, the best, it emerges, is virtue, and of all the virtues a king might possess, the most necessary is a love of justice. But how should justice be exercised? After briefly considering the merits of ruling through favourites, the debate is resolved in favour of personal rule without intermediaries, as only monarchs themselves can be relied upon to govern impartially, free of greed or ambition. But, as soon as the discussion ends, Assuerus reveals he has misunderstood its terms. For he immediately decides to appoint a chancellor to administer the realm in his name. He chooses Aman on rather suspect grounds (ll. 106, 109-10), and through that choice invites the near

disaster that is forestalled only by his personal intervention at Hester's insistence at the end of the play.

In this way the play gives potent expression to the moral that kings need to avoid favourites. But beneath what presents itself as a parable of the virtues of personal rule, what the playwright actually offers is a plea for clerical self-regulation. Hence, in the final scene, Assuerus, having asserted himself and dismissed Aman, does not keep power in his own hands, but appoints Mordechai, Hester's uncle, as governor of the Jews in Aman's place. The new minister, we can assume, will be a strong champion of the rights and privileges of the Jews, just as his near namesake, lord chancellor More, would prove a champion of the church and clergy. Likewise, the proclamation prepared for the king by Hester, which pardons and sets out the future constitutional arrangements for the Jews, places their governance, not in royal hands, but with "them that can do best", the Jews themselves. The queen requests that Aman's cruel plan

Against me and all the Jewish nation
May be revoked, and upon convocation,
A new devised by them that can do best. (ll. 1078-80)

Here again the vocabulary seems rather pointed. "Convocation" might mean simply a gathering, as it does elsewhere in the play (for instance, in line 1169). But it was also the name of the governing body of the church, the clerical assembly that sat in Westminster and York alongside parliament. Thus the play tacitly suggests that clerical regulation and reform should be taken out of the hands of the laymen in parliament and returned instead to the clergy's own assemblies, a move that would effectively have secured the church from the assaults of its more radical critics.⁹

If my arguments are correct, *Hester* was thus playing politics in a very direct and immediate sense, in that it parodies and celebrates an analogue of the fall of Wolsey only weeks after his resignation of the Great Seal and the compilation and signature of the Lords' Articles against him in December 1529. This was not an unprecedented use of drama to reflect upon contemporary events. Wolsey was to be the posthumous victim of an even more direct and offensive dramatic representation of his fall a year later, in January 1531, when two of his

9 The proclamation enshrines the right of the Jews to live by their own laws and regulations: "The Jews to their laws themselves should prepare [*dedicate*] / Duly to keep them and not from them square [*deviate*]. / And no man to hurt them ..." (ll. 1141-43).

principal critics, Thomas Boleyn, earl of Wiltshire, and Thomas Howard, duke of Norfolk, entertained the French ambassador with a “farce” depicting Wolsey “going down into Hell” (*C.S.P., Sp.*, IV [ii]: item 615). But, while that play seems, on the limited evidence available, to have been motivated by little more than triumphalism, *Hester* seems designed, as we have seen, to play a rather more subtle political game.

As I have suggested, the “anti-clerical” furore of late 1529 actually contained two distinct and mutually hostile strands of public criticism of the church. On one side, evangelicals and common lawyers took the king’s signal that he would listen to the grievances of anyone damaged by Wolsey’s administration as a green light to criticise not only the Cardinal but other aspects of the church, including its privileges and even aspects of doctrine to which they were opposed. Hence, the commons introduced and debated a series of bills aimed at curtailing the interference of the clergy in lay affairs, especially the rota of levies and taxes imposed upon the laity and the church courts that enforced them, backed by the threat of excommunication or accusations of heresy. In addition, reformers like Simon Fish used criticism of church wealth as a means of implying more radical criticisms of the doctrine of purgatory and the entire intercessionary apparatus that the church had built upon it.

Distinct from this reformist strand of criticism (which it is legitimate to think of as “anti-clerical”), and fundamentally opposed to it, was a second critique coming largely from within the church hierarchy itself and its lay allies, which was aimed much more specifically at the novel, “foreign” jurisdiction imposed upon the church by Wolsey’s legatine authority. Advocates of this position were striving, not to abolish the legal and financial prerogatives of the bishops and the regular clergy, but to restore them, taking back those rights, exemptions and privileges that Wolsey had gathered into his own hands over the past fifteen years. Thus, while the two strands of thought were indeed united in criticising issues such as the handling of probate in the church courts, the potential for corruption in appointments to benefices and the decay of religious houses, and so seem at first glance to contribute to a single mass of anti-clerical agitation, they were in fact based upon quite contrary assumptions about the source of the problem and the means of its solution. The strategy shared by the *Hester* playwright and the authors of those Lords’ Articles proposed by the clergy was to seize the initiative from the reformers and lead the criticism of the church in an ultimately conservative direction, away from legal reform, dissolutions and

greater regulation of the church, and towards a much more limited and manageable dismantling of Wolsey's legatine prerogatives. From such a process, the bishops, the ecclesiastical courts and the religious houses would emerge stronger and more independent, rather than diminished.

Thus in *Hester*, the kind of spoliation of the church advocated by Fish and the more radical reformers is depicted, as it was in the Lords' Articles, as an affront to the royal prerogative, inspired by Aman/Wolsey's pride and acquisitiveness, rather than the patriotic reassertion of royal powers that Fish's tract claimed. By associating Aman/Wolsey with the closure of monasteries and assaults upon the wealth and prerogatives of the bishops, the regular clergy and the ecclesiastical courts, the *Hester* playwright sought to tar these reformist, proto-protestant positions with the unpopularity of the Cardinal's regime. The strategy was a bold and ingenious one. If there was one thing that the king had publicly declared his willingness to entertain, it was criticism of Wolsey's influence, so for the playwright to be able to consign the spectres of monastic dissolution and spoliation of the church to the wilderness with the Cardinal was a deft stroke. If successful, it would deprive the church's most radical critics of their strongest weapons and also, no doubt infuriatingly, associate them with the very man who was the epitome of everything they despised about the clergy.

Moreover, if, as some of Queen Katherine's closest allies seemed to believe, the driving force behind the king's Great Matter was Wolsey's diplomatic aspiration to remarry Henry to a French princess, then it might also have seemed plausible that the Cardinal's fall could lead to a restoration of the queen's fortunes, especially as she remained a part of the royal household which celebrated Christmas 1529 at Greenwich with the king, as Edward Hall tells us, "with great plenty of viands and diverse disguisings and interludes, to the great rejoicing of his people" (Hall, fol. clxxx^r). Indeed, Henry had very publicly praised Katherine in seemingly the most affectionate and respectful terms immediately after her appearance at the Blackfriars' court in the preceding June, describing her as

A woman of most gentleness, of most humility and buxomness, yea and of all good qualities appertaining to nobility, she is without comparison, as I this twenty years almost have had the true experiment; so that if I were to marry again if the marriage might be good, I would surely choose her above all other women. (Hall, fol. clxxx^v)

Given the fulsomeness of such a declaration, it might well have seemed to someone unaware of the king's determination to secure an annulment and to marry

Anne Boleyn that a reconciliation between Henry and Katherine was at least a possibility worth arguing for at this time. The idea of presenting a drama that would condemn the fallen Cardinal and his policies, outflank the church's most strident critics and at the same time urge the virtues of the queen as a champion of traditional religious values, wifely probity and political intelligence might have seemed too good an opportunity to miss for a conservative playwright anxious to defend the causes closest to his heart.

If this reasoning is correct, though, how might the interlude have worked in performance? In great part, of course, this would depend upon where it was performed, and before whom. The text itself provides some helpful evidence in the stage direction calling for "the chapel" to enter and sing a hymn after line 854. This suggests a production in a household large enough to support a chapel choir, whose resources the playwright knew; this would narrow the possibilities to a small number of royal, aristocratic or clerical houses. Additionally, the play's engagement with debates at court, in parliament and the city of London would imply both a playwright and an audience familiar with events and rumours in those places, and their significance. There is also evidence in the text of a concern for the practicalities and mechanics of government that might suggest it is the product of a circle familiar with the machinery of day-to-day politics and administration. When Aman issues the order for genocide, for example, the play specifies that it will be carried by pursuivants with clear instructions to deliver its contents "to the rulers of every town and city" (l. 777) and to ensure that the massacre occurs only on the specified day across the realm. And when Assuerus later agrees to pardon the Jews, the earlier order is rescinded via the same channels, with similarly careful and detailed instructions. Moreover, the playwright is not content simply to have the king issue his order to ensure that all will be well. As we have seen, he is mindful of the likely impact of two such contrary proclamations arriving in the provinces in quick succession, and so writes a preamble to the second edict which (entirely unnecessarily in plot terms) acknowledges the awkwardness of the clash of instructions and seeks to disarm it. This is surely something that would seem necessary only to a writer familiar with the practicalities of royal or episcopal administration, and with the difficulties of ensuring that instructions issued at the political centre were both received and complied with in other localities.

A performance within the royal court itself is thus a distinct possibility. Was *Hester* one of the "interludes" that Henry witnessed with Katherine at Greenwich

over Christmas 1529? The implicitly critical representation of Assuerus as somewhat hypocritical as well as a naive monarch might seem to argue against a royal production, but it need not. As I have argued elsewhere (Walker, *Plays*, pp. 6–36), it was quite possible for playwrights to present the king or his counsellors with quite sharp criticisms of their actions or policies, provided they were careful not to transgress the boundaries of acceptable courtly licence. But if a royal performance is discounted, then a production in a conservative nobleman's, bishop's or abbot's household in or around the capital would seem the most likely context for the play's debut production.

What the interlude's close engagement with the debates in parliament, the Lords' Articles and Fish's *Supplication* suggests more certainly, however, is the speed with which the interlude must have been written, reacting to events as they happened, and turning them into persuasive drama for performance only weeks later. The engagement with Fish's arguments might notionally have been scripted at any point in 1529, as his tract was printed early in that year, and its significance as a dangerous challenge to the prerogatives of the clergy had been signalled by More's decision to write his own *Supplication* against it, and publish it in the following September. The scattering of copies of Fish's book in the streets before the parliamentary procession on 3 November gave added urgency to the situation. *Hester's* reflection of the allegations, language and strategy of the Lords' Articles, however, suggests a later date, as the Articles were formerly drawn up and subscribed to only on 1 December, and even then would have been known only to an inner circle of signatories, courtiers and counsellors for some time after that. Even if the playwright had informants from within that inner circle, then, as seems likely, he would have had a matter of only a few weeks to turn the sensitive material of the articles into the stuff of drama.

In this context, the suggestion recently advanced by Janette Dillon that the scene between the three vices, Pride, Adulation and Ambition, could be a later interpolation into the text, is of considerable interest (Dillon, p. 118). For it is in this scene that the most detailed and sustained discussion of Aman's vices occurs, and there that the material reflects most closely the charges in the Articles and Fish's text. Could this section have been added later, most plausibly in December 1529, to "update" the play to reflect the latest news from parliament and the court, thereby both sharpening the contemporary edge of its satire and furthering the strategy to deflect Fish's and other reformers' attacks on the entire clergy toward the fallen Cardinal alone? Certainly the scene is a curious one in

dramatic terms, and sits awkwardly with the interlude that surrounds it. All of this adds weight to the suggestion that the other vices were indeed added later, along with Hardydardy's brief allusion to their testaments (ll. 800-6), for performance at Christmas 1529, in order to sharpen the play's deft simultaneous attack on both Wolsey's reputation and the polemics of Fish and the reformers.

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