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Johan Johan (1533): *The Politics of Marriage and Folly in Henrician England*

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Howard B. Norland has celebrated the extravagant comic entertainment *Johan Johan* as “the first play printed in England to represent farce as a dramatic form” (p. 255). The composition of *Johan Johan* might well date from the 1520s, but it was published in 1533 by William Rastell, who also brought out John Heywood’s *The Pardoner and Frere* and *The Play of the Wether* in the same year. Nonetheless, it was not until the Restoration that *Johan Johan* would be attributed formally to Heywood in a bookseller’s listing attached to yet another early play whose origins have been the source of some scholarly contention: *Tom Tyler and his wife an excellent old play* (1661).¹

I See *Tom Tyler and his wife*, p. 12 (2nd pagination set). In the year of its publication, 1661, *Tom Tyler* was attributed to William Wager in Kirkman’s *A true, perfect and exact catalogue* (see p. 15). Milton’s nephew, Edward Phillips, followed this lead in his *Theatrum poetarum* (1675)—see p. 195. However, this attribution has not enjoyed sustained support in recent criticism. With respect to date, in 1900 Schelling identified *Tom Tyler* as “ca. 1578” for his edition of the text published in *PMLA*. Later in the century, Moore referred to “this anonymous farce ... dating from, vaguely, the middle of the sixteenth century” (p. 105); Bradbrook placed it “c. 1560” (p. 83); and Freeburg argued that the play “may date from about 1550” (p. 20). In more recent decades, Brown dates the play to “circa 1558” (p. 130), Lancashire to “ca. 1563” (p. 28), and Bevington to “1558-63” (p. 442). Most recently, *Tom Tyler* has been designated more cautiously as “a sixteenth-century farce” (Fletcher, *The Tamer Tamed*, ed. Munro, p. 77).

If the attribution of *Johan Johan* to Heywood has gained increasing critical consensus, the longevity of the debate surrounding the authorship of the farce constitutes not only a striking insight into the changeful critical politics of textual control across the last hundred years, but also an opportunity to consider further the transforming assessments of the status and function of performance and cultural intervention in the Henrician period. Indeed, in the early years of the twentieth century, Charles William Wallace wished to promote the cause of one William Cornish, Henry VIII's Master of the Boys of the Chapel Royal, and the influence of Sir Thomas More with regard to the composition of this drama: "*The Pardoner and the Frere* and *Johan Johan*, were probably written by Cornish . . . and certainly not by Heywood" (p. 80). In the years preceding the Second World War, R. de la Bère (Ronald B. Delabere Barker) countered such arguments with the submission that "the play must be attributed to Heywood, though I can only base my opinion on rather small evidences" (p. 87). Some thirty years later, Robert Carl Johnson was still proceeding with caution: "*Johan Johan* should perhaps be assigned to Heywood only tentatively. Externally, evidence is lacking; but internally, the style is familiar" (p. 102). However, in 1991, taking into account the critical history and textual transmission of the text, Richard Axton and Peter Happé included the farce in *The Plays of John Heywood*—and there has been little sign of a demur in the intervening period.

Johan Johan and the Early Tudor Government of Marriage

The turmoil-ridden later decades of Henry VIII's reign certainly yielded ample opportunity for his subjects to ponder the government of polity and parish, indeed the nature of all commitments to life in society. The celebrated humanist scholar Juan Luis Vives remained in no doubt of the political continuities which existed between the unity of marriage and the unity of the state, tellingly underlining in 1529 that God

would not, that man untemperately shoulde medle with manye women, nor that the woman shoulde submitte her selfe to many men. Therefore he bounde them together in lawfull marriage, and delivered her unto the man, not only for generations sake, but also for the societie and fellowshippe of life. . . . And what a commoditie is the wife vnto y^e husband, in ordering

of his house, & in governing of his familie & housholde? by this cities are edified & buylded.
(*The office and duetie of an husband*, sigs. A5^r, A7^v)²

In 1518, Erasmus had published his own *Encomium Matrimonii*, and an English version of it appeared in 1532, the year prior to the publication of *Johan Johan*. It was dedicated to Thomas Cromwell by the translator, Richard Tavernour, who advised readers that Erasmus had been prompted to write the tract because “he considered the blynd superstition of men and women which cease nat day by day to professe & vowe perpetuall chastyte before they suffyciently knowe themselves & thinfirmite of their nature.” Indeed, Tavernour proffered further strong food for thought for his readers of the 1530s that the frailty of such unions “(in my opinion) hathe bene and is yet unto this day the rote and very cause original of innumerable myscheves” (Erasmus, *A ryght frutefull epystle* [1536], sig. A2^r).

The Tudor literature of marital conduct and household discipline forms a rich and extensive corpus of diverse textual materials and continued to nourish the remorseless appetite for debate in the period regarding possible models of government to be implemented at all levels of society. Dedicated to Catherine of Aragon, Vives’ *De Institutione Feminae Christianae* (1524), for example, left its readers in no doubt that it did not “[become] a woman . . . to live amonge men or speke abrode. . . . it were better to be at home within and unknowen to other folks. . . . let few se her and none at all here her” (*A very frutefull and pleasant boke*, sig. E2^v). Conversely, in Heywood’s play, it is Tyb who is as ready to complain about her husband’s “bawlyng” (l. 117), as he is about her “catter wawlyng” (l. 110).³ As a consequence, the priest-lover is able to dupe Johan all too easily into thinking that he has censured this shrew’s loose tongue and received his reward: “And therefore I knowe she hatyth my presens” (l. 365).

Erasmus insisted that “No man (if ye give any credence to me) had ever a shrewe to his wyfe, but thrughe his owne defaute” (*A ryght frutefull epystle*, sig. D2^v), and the perils of relaxing the checks of domestic restraint appear all too evident at the opening of *Johan Johan*, where the shamed husband is driven

2 However, my discussion does not seek to extend these analogies to view *Johan Johan* as a *pièce à clé*, but as an engagement with cultural concerns which were widely shared in the Reformation society of Henry VIII’s England. For an example of a *pièce à clé* thesis that sees Johan as a representation of Catherine of Aragon, see Borowska-Szszun.

3 All line references from Heywood’s plays are taken from *The Plays of John Heywood*, ed. Axton and Happé.

to petition an audience of strangers: “God spede you, maysters, everychone! / Wote ye not whyther my wyfe is gone?” (ll. 1-2). Was it with such theatrical capers in mind that the Brigittine monk Richard Whitford submitted, in the very year preceding the publication of *Johan Johan*, that plays did “more harme than good . . . for without fayle they ben spectacles of mere vanites, whiche the worlde callethe pastymes, and I call them waste tymes” (Whitford, fol. 209^v)? Whether in the home or the larger world of the parish, with regard to mental or physical exertions, Johan remains a figure of failed authority. He may secure a position of sustained attention (if not intimacy) with the audience in his numerous asides as the dramatic narrative unfolds, but his collapsed cultural status is never in question, for he is continually defined by the roaming rebelliousness, the marked *unreformability*, of his wife—for Tyb “wyll go a gaddyng very myche / Lyke an Anthony pyg with an olde wyche / Whiche ledeth her about hyther and thyther” (ll. 5-7).

At such junctures we may be reminded that in Heywood’s *Play of the Wether* yet another woman is accused of leading an “ydyll lyfe”: the launder rails that the Gentywoman is devoted to “daunsynge and syngynge . . . eatynge and drynkynge and . . . apparellynge” (ll. 916-17). Nonetheless, if the emphases of the *Frauenfrage* (or *questione delle donne* or *querelle des femmes*) debate which exercised the authors of conduct literature throughout the early modern period must clearly shape critical responses to the unruly, yet resourceful Tyb, *Johan Johan* attends equally energetically to pressing aspects of the contemporaneous *Herrenfrage* debate, concerning the urgencies for masculine self-government and exemplary leadership. In *Johan Johan* we are never allowed to deflect our attention from the ritualistic humiliations of the cuckold, who may “eate nothyng, nother meate nor brede” (l. 612) in his own house, and is set to the hopeless task of “Mendynge the payle, whiche is so rotten and olde” (l. 639).

Syr Johan remains a key player in this vacated, and then violated, family home. If Johan himself acknowledges plaintively that Tyb “doth nothyng but go and come, / And I can not make her kepe her at home” (ll. 37-38), this husband struggles repeatedly and desperately to unsettle or mask the knowledge of his own sexual displacement by the priest by diverting his energies to the scrutiny and endless re-scrutiny of the evidence before him. Like so many cuckolds locked in domestic comedies, Johan ultimately fears conclusive proof and is riddled with anxieties concerning the public ridicule which will accompany his plight: “The folkes wyll mocke me” (l. 48). Equally significantly, the meagre resources

of his imaginative life are also deeply stimulated by the possible details of Tyb's adventuring—the idea that the priest enjoys the final favours of his wife all too easily and indeed, “gyve[s] her absolution upon a bed” (l. 141).

Syr Johan and the Rigours of Church Discipline

In his wide-ranging study, *Sex, Law and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, James A. Brundage has highlighted that “The attempt to deny legitimate sexual outlets of all kinds to the clergy had a long history going back to the fourth-century Council of Elivira” (p. 369). Indeed, in his highly influential twelfth-century treatise *De arte honeste amandi*, Andreas Capellanus had invested in a key concept in medieval social theory—that ecclesiastics were to be treated as an elite class apart on account of their vows of personal dedication and their spiritual vocation: “the clerk is considered to be of the most noble class by virtue of his sacred calling, a nobility which we agree comes from God’s bosom and is granted to him by the Divine Will” (*The Art of Courtly Love*, p. 142 [Chapter VII: “Concerning the Love of the Clergy”]).

Moreover, as the studies of the historian Margaret Bowker make clear, the medieval clergy’s public commitment to celibacy had rendered them over the centuries palpable privileges of social access and protection. Tellingly, Margaret Bowker recounts that in the early Tudor period, when one Robert Becket of the Diocese of Lincoln informed the wife of William Tailboys that “he must nedes have his pleasure of her” and attempted to sexually assault her, the husband bribed Becket to prevent having his wife’s name cited in the subsequent ecclesiastical court hearing. Equally significantly, despite being insulted as “false perjured churles”, the churchwardens were chary of condemning this priest who otherwise “doth his dewty” in the parish.⁴ Yet if Becket himself had attempted to bribe Mistress Tailboys with the lure of a gold noble placed on the bed, in *Johan Johan* the cuckold makes a rather different wager with his conscience: “But where the dyvell, trowe ye, she is gon? / I holde a noble she is with Syr Johan” (ll. 85–86).

In 1518 John Colet, celebrated scholar and dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, had recognized, with reference to his proposed reform of the Cathedral’s statutes, that “convenit . . . ut qui tam proprie accedunt ad Altare Dei, tam magnisq[ue]

4 See Bowker, pp. 120–21. Bowker notes that “It was very rare for the bishop or his deputy to deprive a clerk for immorality”, but acknowledges that there were inevitable exceptions (p. 119).

ministeriis intersunt, omnino casti & intemerati sint [it is fitting that those who approach so near to the altar of God, and are present at such great mysteries, should be wholly chaste and undefiled]" (cited in Lupton, p. 135). And in the same year, Cardinal Wolsey's provincial constitutions re-affirmed earlier decrees that the concubines of priests risked excommunication and burial in non-sanctified ground.⁵ Nevertheless, under the influence of Lutheran teachings, priests began to be married in Wittenberg from 1521, and Luther himself married Katharina von Bora in 1525.⁶

If Capellanus had argued that the cleric "ought not devote himself to the works of love ... to keep himself free from all bodily filth", he also gave rein to a familiar theme of debate from the medieval centuries, the argument that *necessitas non habet legem*: "hardly anyone ever lives without carnal sin, and ... the life of the clergy is, because of the continual idleness and the great abundance of the food, naturally more liable to temptations of the body than that of any other men" (p. 142).⁷ The scrutiny of ecclesiastical privileges (privileges which might test the priest's sexual continence) certainly appears to have preoccupied the Church courts throughout the period, as in the case of the rector of Addington in Northamptonshire who was summoned before the bishop in 1526. It was reported that he had fathered two children by the wife of one Mr Bryde, who was herself no stranger to the forces of the law and in the past had found herself in the stocks. Furthermore, by way of forestalling any questioning of his authority, rather than attiring himself in the garb of a priest, the rector was given to visiting the parish wearing a suit of chainmail!⁸

Like the Church courts, early Tudor print culture also remained keenly sensitive to the continuing critique of sinning priests. Caxton's rendering of Gui de Roys's *The doctrinal of sapyence* (1489), for example, had poured scorn upon the "preste that lyueth in deadly synne, specialy in sinne of lecherie" (sig. H8^v). And the English translation of Dionysius the Carthusian's *The lyfe of prestes*, published in same year as *Johan Johan*, demanded that those who administer "the sacramentes of the churche be most clene and ghostly", for "it is most vicyous and inconuenient that the minysters of the church and altare shulde so precyous sacramentes defyle & corrupte with that moste fowle fylthye and abhominable synne of the flesh and

5 For further discussion here, see Heal, pp. 77ff., *passim*, and Parish, pp. 128ff., *passim*.

6 In this context, see the extensive discussion in Parish, esp. pp. 152ff.

7 For further discussion of the clergy's status apart in medieval society, see Jones, p. 149.

8 For further discussion here, see Bowker, p. 118.

bestly concupiscenceye and so presume to serue” (sig. C5^r). Greg Walker has justly argued that “The repackaging of . . . late-medieval texts for Tudor audiences was part of a wider strategic agenda on the part of the reformers” (*Writing under Tyranny*, p. 48); and we may be reminded that the cuckold himself in *Johan Johan* appears to be conversant with such well-established critique of the clergy (“The parysshe preest forgetteth that ever he ware clarke” [l. 595]), as he queries plaintively:

But Syr Johan, doth not remembre you
How I was your clerke, and holpe you masse to syng,
And hylde the basyn alway at the offryng? (ll. 596-98)

Orthodox doctrine of the Catholic church had insisted that the purity of the sacraments was in no manner marred (or improved) by the human agent who administered them. *The doctrinal of sapyence* stressed that “Saint Austyn saith that the synnes of an euyl prest empessheth not the sacrament. but he dampneth him right parfondly” (Caxton, sig. H8^v); and, striking a similar note, an anonymous text of 1493, *The compendious treetise dyalogue of Diues and Pauper*, affirmed that “the secrament is not the worsse for the malyce of the preeste” (sig. R8^v). If, in the event, scorn for the erring *clericus* increased both within and without the Church in the decades leading up to the Reformation, it is certainly evident that such criticism also varied in vigour according to regional and national politics operating across the British isles at this time. If the Henrician regime was engineering thoroughgoing reform of Church and State in the early 1530s, we should be mindful that its ecclesiastical authorities had always had to negotiate the diverse customs and practices of the British nations. Felicity Heal argues persuasively for a “difference of cultural assumption” operating across the isles, whereby clerical concubinage “remained a norm for the secular clergy” in much of Scotland, Gaelic Ireland and Celtic Wales, whatever powers the bishops might summon in the attempt to suppress it (p. 77ff.).

This conclusion is certainly supported by Henry A. Jefferies’ studies of pre-Reformation and Reformation Ireland. Jefferies underlines, for example, that if any cleric were accused of keeping a concubine and denied the charge, the court would order him “to purge himself in public by means of his own oath, and those of a number of compurgators who would swear on his behalf. . . . Dnus Cúconnacht O Higha, rector of Aghaloo, purged himself in 1455 of the charge of maintaining a concubine” (p. 108). Jefferies adds that priests might also institute their own court actions: “The rector of Rathdrumin sued his rela-

tive Thomas McLaughlin for alleging in public that the priest had intercourse with his wife” (p. 111). In his own account of Wales and the Welsh during this period, Glanmor Williams stresses that “In 1397 nearly all the many priests of Herefordshire diocese with Welsh names were accused in the course of the visitation of incontinence and maintaining women” (p. 340). Indeed, in 1536 the secular clergy of Bangor in North Wales petitioned Thomas Cromwell to allow them to retain their “hearth companions” (*focariae*), pleading, “No gentleman nor honest substantial man will lodge us in their houses, for fear of inconvenience and knowing our frailty” (Williams, pp. 342, 344). Nonetheless, the *inconvenience* of the lecherous priest is well attested in Church Court records from the opening decades of the sixteenth century. We learn, for example, that in 1503, one Margaret Scott, “beyng a mayde very seke like to dye”, sent for her local priest Sir Roger Johnson, vicar of Petham in Kent, to hear her confession. Once the assembled company had been ushered out, it was reported in later depositions that Sir Roger “offerd to the said Margaret his prevy members”, enquiring, “wull this do you any ease or pleasure?” In the later court proceedings, Scott refused to revise her testimony, and arrangements were put in place for another cleric to replace Johnson in the parish.⁹

Governing Hearth and Home

At the very beginning of *Johan Johan*, the audience is reminded in no uncertain terms that the vacated home is the most powerful indicator that the changeful female body “kepeth not her house, as her duetie is” (l. 28). As a consequence, the abandoned spouse resolves to tame the unruly dame with a passionately constructed fantasy of physical violence:

Bete her, quoth a? Yea, that she shall stynke,
 And at every stroke lay her on the grounde
 And trayne her by the here about the house rounde.

 I shall bete her and thwak her I trow,
 That she shall beshyte the house for very wo. (ll. 12-14, 31-32)

9 This episode is related in Jones, pp. 149-50.

Desiring to compensate for the frequency of Tyb's perambulations and the suspicion of the loss of his sexual privilege, the over-protesting Johan seeks to remedy the dereliction of the hearth with an extravagantly tyrannical regime of corporal punishment (articulated at length, in directly inverse proportions to that of his authority as a patriarch). Equally strikingly, he endeavours to reduce the errant and erring wife to the status of a wild creature: "I shall beate her by cokkes bones / That she shall stynke lyke a pole kat" (72-73). And if he had been afforded the unlikely gift of literacy, the cuckold would certainly have found ample encouragement to adopt this line of thinking. Vives himself insisted that it was in no way "expedient" that a wife "go forth alone, nor that she be accompanied with many. . . . For why? in the societie & company of men, one doth infecte the other, as in frute & beastes" (*The office and duetie of an husband*, sig. U5^{r-v}).

As we enter the disorienting scenes of frantic verbal and physical exchanges between the impoverished, the impotent, the oath-breakers and sexual sinners, Tyb expresses no inclination to defend anything more than her right to access the enticing world of adult experience beyond the marital home—and, as so often in jest narratives from the period, those who fail to participate in this world of merry jests are served up as suitable fodder for universal derision.¹⁰ The environment of the hearth, which Tyb regularly abandons for her "pylde preest" (l. 289), is afforded a palpable, if unappealing reality: indeed, Johan may not even place his coat on the ground ("by cokkes soule here hath a dogge pyst" [l. 247]), and so the audience is invited to take care of it "Whyle ye do nothyng", and to "skrape of the dyrt" (l. 257). In this way, at several reprises throughout the dramatic narrative we are urged to attend to the very specificity of the domestic scene: indeed, the wrathful Johan curses not only the antics of the erring lovers, but the very public correlative of his failed union, the untended home: "a vengauce . . . / On the pot, the ale, and on the table, / The candyll, the pye, and all the rable, / On the trystels and on the stole" (ll. 288-92).

In *De officio mariti* (1529), Vives argued forcefully that the wife should attend most particularly to "those thinges y^t belong vnto y^e kitchen, & to y^e most part of y^e houshold stufte" (*The office and duetie of an husband*, sig. Ur^t), and it becomes increasingly evident that Johan himself cannot be divorced from an *emasculinity* denoted by the neglected objects in his home environment.¹¹ Vives remained

10 For further discussion here, see Hiscock, "Hear my Tale, or Kiss my Tail".

11 For further discussion of "emasculinity" in the context of medieval society, see Swanson.

adamant in his *De officio mariti* (1529) that the husband must remain “maister ouer al the house” (sig. T8^v). However, in the comic inversions of Heywood’s dramatic world, Tyb assumes the authority to surpass Johan verbally and physically, promoting her very own ideals of service: “go to brynge the trestels hyther” (l. 241); “lay the table I say” (l. 265); “Gyve us water to wasse nowe” (l. 442). In this context, Richard Axton and Peter Happé argue persuasively that “This comic inversion of ‘normal’ authority is very much funnier (and less offensive to modern audiences) if, as was probably the case historically, Tyb is played by a man” (Axton and Happé, eds, p. 15).

Nonetheless, the failure to enforce the doctrine of *coverture*, the social and legal subordination of the wife to the husband, failed to amuse cultural theorists of the period: it constituted nothing less than an assault upon the patriarch’s authority and a violation of his property rights. Indeed, in his earlier *De Institutione Feminae Christianae* (1524), Vives showed himself eager to envisage the disorders which might be stirred if the wife compelled her husband “to vse any fylthy occupation or drogery” for her own “welfare”:

for hit were better for y^e to eate browne bread & drynke claye & myry water than cause thy husbände to fall vnto any slobery worke or stynkyng occupation & excedyng labour for to escape thy scoldyng & chydyng at home. For y^e husbände is his owne ruler and his wyues lorde. (*A very frutefull and pleasant boke*, sig. A1^r [2nd pagination set])

Unsurprisingly, given the profoundly gender-marked expectations of labour circulating within early Tudor society, Johan is mocked remorselessly in his repeated performance of domestic chores, with the most stinging attack landing from his rival, the priest himself: “What, Johan Johan, canst thou make no shyfte? / Take this waxe and stop therwith the clyfte” (ll. 455–56).

More generally, as the audience quickly learns to appreciate, the slips between thought, word and deed remain the comic mainspring of the dramatic action in *Johan Johan*. Publicly denied the roles of provider and protector, Johan determines from the safety of his empty house that the “catter wawlyng” spouse must be schooled vigorously on her duties and prevented from entering the wider economy of the parish, where she is given to using her body as a token of exchange.

Hospitality and the Clergy

Despite the energetic cut-and thrust of accusations between husband and wife at the beginning of this intrigue of ruses and humiliations, it is in fact the ousted Johan who initially seeks out the hospitality of another: “How mayster curate, may I come in / At your chamber dore without any syn?” (ll. 314-15). In the event, there is little reason for him to feel disoriented: whether at home or abroad, Johan is harassed by individuals peddling lies of one kind or another. In Heywood’s *Pardoner and Frere*, the audience is cautioned not to “despyse the pore freres / . . . Leste they happen your houses for to leve—/ And than God wyll take vengauce in his yre” (ll. 55, 58-59). In the rather more domesticated dramatic world of *Johan Johan*, the cuckold is released from any such anxiety concerning the clergy, and within the confines of the priest’s house he succumbs once again to tales of communal *doings* in the kitchen (“I / Sayd that I wolde gyve them a pye” [ll. 388-89]) and some coy artifice on the part of Syr Johan, who demurs at first in accepting an offer of hospitality from his harried parishioner.

In *De officio mariti*, Vives had warned in a timely fashion that “The straungers and gastes, the which that thou doste receaue into thy house, do oftentimes become thy enemies, & throughe a certayne beneuolence do cause muche wick-ednes” (*The office and duetie of an husband*, sig. U6^{r-v}). However, in *Johan Johan*, upon entering the couple’s home, the “pylde preest” is able with little trouble to blur the distinctions between guest, predator and itinerant felon. Moreover, in this world of comic frenzy (where the exigencies of the labour economy appear permanently deferred), all the characters have an embarrassment of leisure in which to ponder the devices and desires of temptation:

But I shall tell the what I have done, Johan
For that matter: she and I be somtyme aloft,
And I do lye uppon her, many a tyme and oft
To prove her, yet could I never espy
That ever any dyd wors with her than I. (ll. 348-52)

In case there were any doubt, Vives had emphasised that “true matrimonie can not be betwene thre or foure, but betwene two onelye” (*The office and duetie of an husband*, sig. B7^r). However, rather than demonising Tyb as *luxuria* or unveiling the priest as a wanton reprobate, as might be anticipated from Johan’s many and various muttered asides (“In fayth, all the towne knoweth better that he / Is a

hore monger, a haunter of the stewes” [ll. 233-34]), the drive of this comic narrative is to later eyes distinctly more Molièresque in tenor: *Johan Johan* is remorselessly intent upon probing the farthest limits of the gull’s simplicity. Instead of exhibiting an anti-laical contempt such as John Van Engen has identified as a conventional response of the late-medieval clergy, the fleshly Syr Johan finds himself mostly among like-minded people and has no qualms in tapping the resources of his parish for his own needs.¹² Indeed, in the riotous company of Johan, Tyb and Syr Johan for the final scene, the audience is invited to savour the irony that whilst the priest and his mistress gorge themselves upon a baked offering, the humiliated cuckold repeatedly finds himself in “a very purgatory” where “the smoke puttyth out [his] eyes” as he “Must ... / ... stond here rostying by the fyre” (ll. 486, 509, 534-35).

Closing Thoughts: Johan Johan and Its Audiences

In Thomas More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), amongst the spirited exchanges between the quick-witted “Master chauncelour” and the “specyall secrete frende” or messenger sent by one of his acquaintance, we are asked to partake of a “mery tale” of parish infidelities:

The pore man, quod he, had found the preste ouer famylyer wyth hys wyffe and because he spake hym abrode and coulde not proue it, the prest sued hym before the bysshoppys offycyall for dyfamacyon, where the pore man vppon payne of cursyng was commaunded that in hys paryshe chyrch he shuld vpon the sonday at hygh masse tyme stand vp and saye mouth thou lyst. (More, *A dyaloge*, fol. 13^v)

As might be expected, the “master chauncelour” is not content to let such accounts pass without further scrutiny and reminds the messenger later of the ease with which “a lewde preest” and his “lewde dede” are all too often used to indict the whole of the clergy: “then forgete we to loke what good men be therin and what good counsayle they gyue vs & what good example they shewe us” (fol. 83^r). Striking a similar note in reviewing records from the Ecclesiastical Court records from the period, the historian Helen Parish points out justly that “For every misdemeanour recorded by the courts, it is possible that there were either several others unreported, or as many clergy living a life grounded in

¹² See Van Engen, p. 19.

the celibate ideal” (p. 128).¹³ Nonetheless, as has become apparent in the course of this discussion, a couple of years after the appearance of More’s *Dialogue*, the publication of *A mery play betwene Iohan Iohan the husbnde, Tyb his wyfe, and syr Iohan the preest* might enjoy a robust reception in a Reformation society of the 1530s which was wrestling strenuously with pressing questions of political government and spiritual discipline. Indeed, Greg Walker has argued persuasively that in overseeing this publication, William Rastell “may have thought of it as an animated dialogue, similar in nature to those which he was printing for Sir Thomas More at this time, rather than as a play with distinct conventions and desiderata of its own” (*The Politics of Performance*, p. 19).

Heywood’s play *The Pardoner and Frere*, also published in 1533, concludes with an energetic “fyght” (“Ye horeson, wylt thou scrat and byte?” [l. 543]) between the main protagonists, and the Curate and “Neybour Pratte” are finally called upon to separate the combatants of this “nyse fraye” (l. 578). In the final scene of *Johan Johan*, after the husband has been left for a sustained period to “chafe the wax / And . . . chafe it so hard that [his] fyngers krakkes” (ll. 507-8), it should come as no surprise that the dramatic business ends in a scrimmage between the “pyld preest”, his “drab” and the “horson kokold” (ll. 658, 651, 657). Johan’s revenge is spectacular, if brief and inconclusive: Syr Johan becomes the victim of his own jest (“take thou there thy payle now” [l. 645]), and Tyb is threatened with a “shovyll full of colys in thy face” (l. 654). Not to be bested by her spouse, Tyb proclaims, “I shall make the blood ronne about his erys” (l. 650), but is fended off with the retort: “Nay, get the out of my house, thou prestes hore!” (l. 656).

Johan is more than content to rail against his lecherous priest as “a hore monger, a haunter of the stewes” (l. 234), but, as the historian Karen Jones underlines, earlier in the century in 1515 a Kentishman, one William Baldok of Newington (named “a common defamer of the order of priests”), might easily have risked a heresy charge for calling priests “whoremongers and other words in public”.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the currency of such abuse in late medieval society is not in doubt from the court records of the period, in which the figure of the priest’s concubine recurs with some frequency. Indeed, Jones points out that “priest’s whore” was a common insult cited against female plaintiffs and draws attention to the 1467 case of one Katherine Cheyne of Romney, who was heard to

13 In this context, see also Bowker, p. 120.

14 For full discussion of this case, see Jones, p. 106.

claim that “the gay bedys and gyrdils that Johane Markby hath cam never of her husbondes geft but by the geft of prystes” (pp. 149, 106).

By way of conclusion, it should be added that ribald tales of parish antics may not have been so unfamiliar to the eyes that greeted the publication of *Johan Johan* in 1533. This last phase of my discussion began with Thomas More’s account of an anxious husband called upon to condemn himself before the assembled company at his own parish church, and it would seem fitting to conclude with a final historical example of how erotic and clerical authority in the early Tudor parish might be subject to more general scrutiny and popular judgement, even if ecclesiastical powers proved more reluctant to intervene. In 1531, two years prior to the publication of *Johan Johan*, one Joan Harrow of Hackington, Kent, was summoned before the authorities for accusing her vicar, John Harrison, of sexually importuning her. Unsurprisingly, Harrow was unable to supply the court with the requisite evidence and so was called upon to suffer the same punishment as the husband in More’s account. However, after performing her public act of penance, she immediately turned to her fellow parishioners, declaring:

Beere me recorde that I have doon my penance. Howebeit those wordes that I have said of hym be true or els I pray God and our Lady that this child I go withall and I never departe. (cited in Jones, p. 150)

After this unexpected performance, the courts were at a loss to know how to punish Harrow “for further reformation”, and Harrison himself remained in office until his death in 1545.¹⁵

15 For a full account of this case, see Jones, p. 150.

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