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Laughter and Sin: Vice Families in Tudor Interludes

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From *New Guise, Nowadays and Nought* in the late fifteenth-century *Mankind*, to *Falset, Flattery and Dissait* in David Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (1552-54); from John Skelton's quartet of courtly vices in *Magnyfycence* (c. 1515) to *Temerity, Inconsideration and Precipitation* in William Wager's *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (c. 1565), interludes are full of gangs of comic vices. Vices, like the fools with whom they are often associated, seem to thrive in groups. The dramatisation of the group and the inter-relations within it often forms a deliberate and significant element of their theatrical presence, with the close bonds between them, whether co-operative or fractious, often key to their dramatic roles and performed personae. The vice-family is sometimes biological, drawing on notions of kinship and portraying the vices as brothers, parents and children; but at least as often it appears to be conceived in terms of the household, the central familial and social unit of medieval and Tudor times. Whatever the basis of the group, Ill Report's effusion to Voluptuousness and Sensuality in Thomas Garter's interlude of *Virtuous and Godly Susanna* (1578) is typical of the way that playwrights emphasise the close, if often quarrelsome, familial ties between its members:

Thou louest me, and thou louest me, and I loue thee, and I loue thee,
And is not Ill Reporte, Voluptuousnesse, and Sensualitie,
A glorious and blessed trinitie, a pestelence on you both. (sig. Ci^r)

The plays seem almost as familiar with the trope of a “vice-family” as they are with the ambivalently theatrical individual figure of the Vice himself.

A range of different impulses and traditions seems to feed into what became this stage motif of the vice-family. It is very likely, for example, to have some relation to earlier medieval schematic representations of sins, like virtues, as related to each other. Branches of sin were often represented in family trees, asserting direct kinship, while various of the schema of the Seven Deadly Sins also suggest that vices are inherently familially linked.¹ As Chaucer’s Parson explains of the Seven Deadly Sins,

Alle they renne in o leas [leash], but in diverse maneres. . . . [T]hey been chief and sprynge of alle othere synnes. . . . [O]f this roote spryngen certain braunches. . . . And everych of this chief synnes hath his braunches and his twigges. (ll. 386-89)

The family tree model asserts the inevitable indivisibility of sin. Each leads to another, generates and is generated by the others, assaulting in their multiplicity the coherence of the human soul and the individual’s ethical identity.

This kind of diagrammatic understanding certainly involves a strong theoretical notion of family via the family tree: a sense of kinship and connection, of cause and derivation; but it cannot account for the lively and comically abusive human intimacy that generally characterises the stage presence of the groups of dramatic vices. This is more likely to be related to popular traditions around the influential topos of the Ship of Fools, which present companies of festive sinners in riotous and disordered companionship.² While similarly schematising and categorising relationships between different branches of foolish

1 For images of family trees of vices, see, e.g., the twelfth-century *Liber Floridus* of Lambertus a S. Audomaro, Ghent University Library MS 1121, fols. 231^r-32^r: <<http://adore.ugent.be/OpenURL/app?type=carousel&id=archive.ugent.be:018970A2-B1E8-11DF-A2E0-A70579F64438>> (image 241); and *Speculum theologiae*, Beinecke MS 416, fol. 4^r: <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3432531?image_id=1063685> (both accessed 9 May 2016). For further representations, see Bloomfield.

2 For an illustration of this topos, see Hieronymus Bosch’s late fifteenth-century painting *The Ship of Fools* in the Louvre, Paris: <<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/ship-fools-or-satire-debauched-revelers>> (accessed 9 May 2016).

vice, the Ship tradition sets out to represent readers and viewers to themselves in more entertainingly direct and representational, even dramatic, mode. Alexander Barclay, the English translator of Sebastian Brant's original *Narrenschiff*, foreshadows Hamlet's advice to the players in pointing out:

This our Booke representeth vnto the eyes of the Readers the states and conditions of men, so that euery man may behold within the same the course of his life and his misgouerned maners, as he shoulde beholde the shadowe of the figure of his visage within a bright Myrroure. (Brant, sig. ¶¶ v^r)

The interludes' characterisation of the vices as authentically colloquial, squabbling and comic family groups makes theatrical play of these various traditions. While serious theoretical ideas of inter-related sins underlie the structure of many of the plays, the dramatisation of these ideas tends towards comically recognisable families of Folly. The laughable vices of the interlude stage are as likely to present the follies that tempt to sin as the sins themselves, even though they often convey a sense that there are strong connections between slight follies and serious sins. New Guise, Nowadays and Nought are agents of Mischief and ultimately despair; Wantonnes, Placebo and Solace lead to Falset, Flatterie and Dissait.

The intimate family nature of the vice-groups is plainly connected to the patterns of ideas and the various ethical, political or spiritual allegories the interludes present. The quartet of courtly vices in Skelton's *Magnyfycence*, for example, dramatise not only the complex range of interconnecting political dangers that may covertly abuse a ruler—deceptive countenance, secret collusion and furtive fraud—but also the confusing environment of the court, in which true qualities are constantly concealed and deceptions hard to penetrate. In the anonymous *Interlude of Youth* (c. 1532) the three vices' close association with each other charts the developing psychological and ethical progression of the youthful protagonist from careless Riot, to self-centred Pride, to irresistible Lechery, enacting the particular vulnerabilities of the young man. Idleness and Incontinence in William Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest* (1569) debate over whether they are parent and child, or equal companions, as they examine the relationship of their qualities (sig. Cii^r).

Subtler cues to recognising ideas of moral and spiritual inter-relationship can be seen in the repeated swearing by the Trinity that accompanies meetings of vice-families. Like Ill Report in *Virtuous and Godly Susanna*, quoted above, vice-

groups in the *Thrie Estaitis*, *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*, and *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* all invoke or allude to the Trinity as they define their association, signalling an unholy alliance in reflective opposition to divinity. George Wapull's *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576) provides a gloss on this characteristic oath. Hurting Help declares to his colleagues Painted Profit and Fained Furtherance: "Nay syrs you two shall not go alone, / For I doe meane to beare you company, / And so shall we be euen a whole trinity" (sigs. Bi^v-Bii^r). This is then picked up in a jesting tale by the Vice, Courage, who compares the vices' trinity to "the trinity of late" that appeared in a farcical story of domestic violence, concluding:

... in fyne, these three began to agree,
And knit them selues up in one trinity.
And after they loued like brother and brother,
For very loue, they did kill one another. (sig. Bii^r)

Courage's playful nonsense obliquely reinforces the spiritual implications of the casual allusion, suggesting that sharp spectators may well have recognised the parodic intent of the other vice-family Trinity references.³ In this paper, however, I would like to concentrate not so much on this kind of play of ideas as on the theatrical and performance use made of the vices' family relationships. The comic vice-groups have a particular stage-presence, which generates laughter in particular ways. By exploring their theatrical strategies, we may be able to understand something more about the purpose of this laughter: whether it operates as an end in itself, designed purely to hold the spectators' pleasurable attention, or works to shape the audience's understanding of some moral purpose. If it does contribute to the meanings audiences take from the plays, can we establish how this effect is achieved?

The foolish vice-groups are often explicit about their family relationships, whether within their own group, between themselves and the Vice (who is generally both one of and yet apart from the rest of the group he dominates), or even with the Devil himself. The forging together of a close association between them is often a part of the vices' first appearance, establishing them for the audi-

3 See, e.g., Lyndsay, *Thrie Estaitis*, ll. 639-40, cited below, and William Wager, *Enough Is as Good* (the Vice Covetous to Temerity, Inconsideration and Precipitation): "I reioice to see you, I swere by the Trinitie" (sig. Biii^r).

ence at first encounter as intimately connected. So in *Magnyfycence*, Counterfeit Countenance asks Crafty Conveyance and Fansy:

Counterfet C. Why, shall we dwell togyder all thre?
Crafty Con. Why, man, it were too great a wonder
That we thre galauntes sholde be longe asunder.
Counterfet C. For Cockys harte, gyve me thy hande! (Skelton, ll. 509-12)

Similarly, when Falset, Flatterie and Dissait enter in the *Thrie Estaitis*, they assert their close friendship:

Flatterie. Quhy, Falset, brother, knawis thou not me?
Am I nocht thy brother, Flattrie?
Falset. Now welcome, be the Trinitie:
This meitting cums for gude.
Now let me bresse the in my armis:
Quhen freinds meits, harts warmis. (Lyndsay, ll. 637-42)

Only then is this followed by a more formal moral statement of their association:

Dissait. I pray yow as my brother,
That we ilk ane be trew to uther.
I mak ane vow with all my hart,
In gude and evill to tak your part. (ll. 702-5)

One striking feature of these introductory scenes is that they script an action of physical engagement between the vices, as well as verbal exchange. “Gyve me thy hande”, “let me bresse the in my armis” present tacit stage directions that are echoed in almost all the first encounters of vice-groups: “Geue me your handes also I pray you one by one” (Infidelity in Lewis Wager, *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, sig. Biii^r); “And shake handes. Then geue me thy hand if thou be content. / Now are we friendes, as at first we were” (Courage in Wapull, *Tide*, sig. Aiv^v). Visible staging of tactile togetherness by embracing or clasping hands reinforces, or even outweighs, the theatrical effect of the dialogue. A similar effect of co-operative unity may be staged through the songs in which the groups of vices often join. In the anonymous *Godly Quene Hester* (written c. 1527), *Respublica* (1554), Lewis Wager’s *Marie Magdalene* (1566), *The Trial of Treasure* (1567), William Wager’s *The Longer Thou Livest* (1569), Ulpian Fulwell’s *Like Will to Like* (1568), and Wapull’s *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576), the groups of vices all cement

their association by singing together. Sometimes their songs are invented, relating directly to their characters or actions, sometimes pre-existing popular compositions; but at least as important as the words they sing is the effect of joining in harmony or unison, in part-songs or burdens, which perform theatrically, rather than merely verbally, their interaction and common purposes.⁴ It seems that the vices are meant to be understood in groups rather than individually.

The Vice himself often, though not always, joins in these embraces and songs, and the relationship between him and the rest of the vice-group is similarly very often couched in directly familial terms: in *Respublica* (often attributed to Nicholas Udall) the Vice, Avarice, is addressed as the “Fownder and chief maister” (l. 173) of the other three vices. This firmly ensconces him as the head of household, the social rather than biological family leader who, as Caxton records in *The Book callid Caton* (1481), “oughtest to haue the cure and the gouernement of thy famylle or seruauntes / For thou arte called fader of thy seruaunte” (sig. Avii^v). In *Mankind*, Mischief speaks to the vices as his “fayer babys” (l. 427), setting up a more intimate family relationship. The Devil, when he appears in the later interludes, often presents himself as the father of the Vice, as in R. Wever’s *Lusty Iuventus* (c. 1550) (“I am thyne owne father Sathan” [sig. Biii^r]), sometimes even, as in *Virtuous and Godly Susanna*, being disrespectfully addressed and referred to as “Dad” (e.g., at sig. Aiii^r).

Establishing these family groups immediately sets up an intimate interconnection between the qualities they represent, physically and visually making the moral point about the indivisibility of sinful folly. But equally interesting is the way the groups are subsequently developed in performance: the theatrical presence and characterisation of the group will inevitably work to shape audience attitudes to these vices and the roles they occupy in their plays. There was, of course, an embedded and long-standing tradition of presenting vice characters in late medieval and Tudor drama as comic, and the interludes often use the notion of the family to make a particular contribution to provoking that laughter. Closely interacting groups can easily become the foundation for a variety of comic routines: physical tropes, wordplay and sparring interaction. But some interludes play explicitly on the intimate relationships and colloquial language of domestic family life, and especially of childhood, to prompt audience laughter.

4 See Happé, *Song*.

We find a number of plays in which the vices behave, or are parodically treated, as infants or children for comic effect. This can easily arise as a form of regression within a family unit, and has the effect not only of reinforcing the close bonds between the characters, but of satirically infantilising the potentially threatening adult vices. Presenting adults as children (and vice-versa) is an enduring source of laughter which may have no explicit moral or political intent. But it remains a familiar satirical technique still evident in, for example, political cartoons which reduce the powerful to helpless babies in order to undermine their status and diminish the threat that they pose. This seems to be the effect when Mischief, in *Mankind*, pets New Guise, Nowadays and Nought after their initial defeat by the protagonist, re-casting the aggressive vices as big babies:

Alac, alac! Ven, ven! Cum hethere wyth sorowe!
 Pesse fayer babys, ye shall have a nappyll to-morow!
 Why grete ye so, why? (ll. 426-28)

The wailing vices are comically diminished in the spectators' view; but the consequent underplaying of the threat they present encourages the audience to dismiss the seriousness of their attack, luring the spectators, like *Mankind* himself, into a false sense of moral security.

In *Virtuous and Godly Susanna*, Ill Report reverses this process; as the hideous Satan speaks to his son with grotesquely paradoxical tenderness, the Vice insults him by turning him into an ineffectual father while casting himself as a naughty child:

Deuill. O louing Boy, and dayntie Chylde,
 As euer thou didst me good,
 Let me now craue thy good aduyce ...
Ill Report. How say you now my maysters all,
 Thinke you my Dads not light ...
 You neuer saw such a one behynde,
 As my Dad is before.
 But Dad what would you haue me to doe herein. (Garter, sig. Aiii')

"Dad" at this time was a word specifically associated with infants, often identified as one of the first words a child will speak. Thomas Elyot's 1542 dictionary *Bibliotheca Eliotae* defines *Papas* as "a father, as chylderne do call dadde" (s.v. "*Papas*"), while Robert Greene's pastoral romance *Pandosto* (1588) describes the upbringing

of the abandoned infant Fawnia in these terms: “The shepheard euery night at his comming home, would sing and daunce it on his knee, and prattle, that in a short time it began to speake and call him Dad” (sig. Di^r). In infants the term is characterised as endearing, as shown in Thomas Wilson’s example of a rhetorical persuasion to parenthood in *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553): “you shall haue a pretie litle boye, runnyng vp and doune youre house ... suche a one as shall call you dad, with his swete lispynge words” (fol. 31^r). But when the term is used between a father and adult offspring it is clearly understood as diminishing to the status of the parent, dismissing him as foolishly weak or fond. So in *Kind-harts Dream*, Henry Chettle describes the indulgent father of riotous young men: “While they are in the ruffe of ribaudrie ... the olde ale-knight their dad breakes out into admiration” (sig. Ci^r). Ill Report’s words implicitly present himself as such an arrogantly uncontrolled son, the Devil as a foolishly doting father.⁵ In these kinds of exchanges, the use of vernacular baby-talk caricatures and diminishes all the vices, making them less overtly threatening, if in fact more insidious.

Such infantile terms, however ironically used, draw on the affectionate intimacy of early family experience. Alternatively, many interludes use the bickering and squabbling of domestic family life to mock the closeness of the bonds between the vices. Having made family bonds, the vice-groups then frequently fall out with each other, insult, mock and attack each other for little obvious reason. These moments, too, are crafted to allude to childish interaction. In *Magnyfycence*, Crafty Conveyance and Cloked Collusion fall into a brawling squabble at the very moment of their success:

Cloked Coll. By the Messe, I shall cleve thy heed to the waste.
Crafty Con. Ye[a], wylte thou clenly cleve me in the clyfte with thy nose?
Cloked Coll. I shall thrust in the[e] my dagger.
Crafty Coll. Thorowe the legge in to the hose.
Cloked Coll. Nay, horson, here is my glove; take it up an thou dare.
Crafty Con. Torde! Thou arte good to be a man of warre! (Skelton, ll. 2173-77)

Avarice in *Respublica* similarly goads on his childishly squabbling vices:

5 These connotations clearly continue to be familiar in later drama with Feste’s disrespectful reference to the Devil: “Pare your nails, dad” (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, IV.ii.103); or the bastard Spurio’s flippant response to his father’s gruesome death in Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*: “Old dad dead?” (V.i.116).

Avar. I wolde have a bone here rather then a grote
to make thes Snarling curres gnawe owte eache others throte. (ll. 311-12)

Supposed group loyalty is turned upside-down, but in ways that persuasively echo the recognisable and familiar underside of quarrelling siblings. These encounters suggest that both the initial bonding and the subsequent falling-out of the vice-groups are expressed primarily through tactile and physical gesture, through hugging and fighting, rather than through discussion or debate.

All these strategies allow the idea of family to be used to provoke laughter, without explicitly addressing the moral ills or the individual characters of vices. A play's allegory may well define these characters as dangerous, but we are encouraged to laugh at them in ways that diminish and infantilise them by drawing on familiar experiences of family and of childishness, setting us in a place of imagined safety. This kind of laughter seems initially innocent; in the first moment of the joke, we are not forced to think about what the vices mean, or invited to reject the ethical qualities they represent. But these routines also have more complex effects. They may undermine the status of the characters by mocking them and the seriousness of the threat they present, allowing spectators to feel superior, however mistakenly. Equally, the innocence of such laughter may be contradicted, as plays set up a contrast between infantile manners and dangerous moral violence. Laughter at the vices may begin simply, but is always a double-edged sword.

Thinking about the ways in which laughter is generated around the vice-families inevitably leads to the central persona of the Vice himself. He is the lead figure in any group, the most vibrantly theatrical performer and the centre of the plays' generation of laughter. His ambivalent generic title, and sometimes the specific provocative quality he personifies, might seem to attach him firmly to the vice-families. But it is well to remember that the first directly identified dramatic Vice is Mery Report in John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*, who seems not to represent any kind of morally negative, or even moral, quality: the play includes no personified group of vices with whom he might be associated, and Mery Report himself does no harm but characterises his own role as simply "to reporte a sad mater merely" (l. 138). Although later Vices such as Avarice in *Respublica* or Iniquitie in the Protestant children's play *Nice Wanton* (pub. 1560) are more likely to carry names identifying them as vicious, there are many who appear to embody uncertainly ambiguous qualities: Inclination in the anony-

mous *The Trial of Treasure* (1567), Haphazard in “R. B”’s *Apius and Virginia* (1567), or Courage in Wapull’s *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576). The mischievous Jack in the non-allegorical *Jack Juggeler* (1562) is another character who, like Mery Report, is named as the Vice without carrying any obvious moral charge, in a Plautine comedy of mistaken identity. These two both appear in plays where there is no family of supporting vices to define their moral status.

Confusingly, there are also different possible meanings for the term “vice” itself in the sixteenth century which tug away from the allegorical sins. While the sense of “depravity” or “evil”, opposed to “virtue”, was a common meaning for “vice”, the word might also refer among other things to a “device” or mechanical contrivance, often being associated, like the Vices themselves, with spectacle and theatre. So, in a 1516 report of Richard II’s reception into London, “an aungell come down fro þe stage on high, by a vice, and sette a croune of golde & precious stone3 & perles apon þe Kinge3 hed” (*The Brut*, II: 347). It also seems gradually to have become another name for a household fool or jester. At the end of the sixteenth century, Anthony Copley, in a series of tales of “Jesters”, uses the terms “Vice”, “Fool” and “Jester” wholly interchangeably,⁶ while in *The Devil Is an Ass*, Ben Jonson speaks of a time “When euery great man had his Vice stand by him” (I.i.84).

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that reminiscences of and commentary on the stage Vice during the sixteenth century concentrate almost without exception not on any ethical role or allegorical status he might have, but on his function as a generator of laughter. The poet Thomas Churchyard, satirically complaining of his own departure from the court in 1566, claims that he had been “gladde to playe the vice / To plesure eche estate” (“Churchyard’s Round”), while in a companion piece he repeats that he “serves no turne but for a Vice, / since first to courte I came. / To make the Ladies laugh” (“Churchyard’s Farewell”). John Rastell, attacking an opponent in a religious controversy in 1567, gives a similar sense: “Set him vpon the Stage with a furd cap and a motly cote, he wil plaie the Vice without a vizarde, and make gaie sporte to the cumpanie” (fol. 15^v). Some years later William Rainoldes, a student of divinity, belittles a Protestant opponent by recalling the same role without even needing to attach the name “Vice”, speaking of “such kinde of iesting [that] would better become some merie fellow making sport vpon a stage, with a furred hood & a wood-

6 See Copley, pp. 130–33 *passim*.

den dagger” (p. 523). Mery Report has continued on into “some merie fellow” without any necessary association with viciousness. The role is even sometimes attributed directly to a “Fool” rather than a “Vice”, as by John Barthlet in 1566, who, mocking the Papists by his comparison, proclaimed: “the foole in the play, doth lightly vse his dagger to euerye trifle and iest” (fol. 45^v).⁷ This all suggests that, although association with vice-families may be one strand of his identity, the role of the Vice himself might be understood as primarily to “make sport”, using fake irascibility with his fake dagger to generate laughter.

If laughter is his primary theatrical function, then analysis of the kinds of laughter he generates must help our understanding of the Vice’s wider role. His humour has always attracted critical attention. Contemporary comment on dramatic Vices was often scornful of the way laughter generated by the Vice was felt to undermine the spiritual seriousness of the plays’ action. Samuel Harsnett’s well-known criticism in *A Declaration of Egreious Popish Impostures* (1603) objected, for example, to the Vice’s invitation to laugh at and thus trivialise the Devil:

It was a prety part in the old Church-playes, when the nimble Vice would skip vp nimbly like a lacke an Apes into the deuils necke, and ride the deuil a course, and belabour him with his wooden dagger, til he made him roare, wherat the people would laugh to see the deuil so vice-haunted. (pp. 114-15)

Critical analysis has continued to recognise the Vice’s comedy as ambivalent, uneasily poised between the plays’ necessity to entertain and desire to instruct. Robert Jones in 1973 and Agnes Matuska in 2008 both persuasively identified and thoughtfully analysed the problem raised by this theatrical trope—namely, that “what engages the spectator is the representation of the very vices that it is the play’s business to make them reject” (Jones, p. 45). Or, as Matuska explains of the Vice, “it is first of all his comedy that makes him appealing, but if he is to be morally condemned, this is his major corrupting tool as well” (p. 100). Without wishing to repeat their suggestive discussions, I would like to explore a little more closely the particular theatrical nature and effect of the laughter generated by the Vices.

7 Cf. the record of “One vyces dagger & a ladle with a bable pendante ... deliverid to the Lorde of mysrules foole” (Feuillerat, ed., p. 73), as well as the report of the charge made by the Earl of Lincoln against an allegedly libellous play, which refers initially to the “person that acted the parte of the vice or foole, in the said plaie”, at times dropping the term “vice” in favour of “fool”; see *Records of Early English Drama: Lincolnshire*, I: 271-98.

This will inevitably broaden our focus from the character himself to the audience and their participatory contribution to the dramatic encounter, since laughter is a key element in this exchange. We might ask how the Vice persuades spectators to laugh, and what role their laughter then plays in their response to the play as a whole. Is he comic in the same way as the rest of the family group of vice and folly, where there is one, and for the same dramatic ends, or is his humour of a different kind and purpose? Much excellent work has been done on the Vice and his stage characteristics, and we have a well-developed picture of his theatrical role.⁸ Particular kinds of language (especially nonsense) and routines (as with the dagger) are common, as are recognisable functions within the plot, often hinging on deceit and temptation. But one feature, identified by all commentators, emerges as fundamental to the special theatrical persona of the Vice: his direct engagement with the audience. The most characteristic laughter he provokes appears to arise not from his encounters with other characters, but in the monologues in which he openly addresses the spectators. This makes the Vice a crucial figure in manipulating audience response, shaping that response not only to himself but to the play as a whole. In mediating between stage and audience, he generates and controls the mood and receptiveness of the spectators, openly drawing them into a theatrical experience that he creates.

The techniques the Vice uses to generate laughter when addressing the audience tend to differ somewhat from the in-play dialogues and routines of the vice-family groups. As performances, these techniques are in fact intriguingly close to the methods of later audience-interactive comedy—the kind familiar today from contemporary stand-up comedy, and perhaps from the music-hall and variety comedians of the more recent past. As with the Vice, the over-riding aim of these comedians is to provoke laughter. Analysts of contemporary stand-up have identified a range of common techniques aimed at this effect, observable in performance, which echo those in the Vices' monologues; these defining strategies may also cast revealing light on the relationship of the Vice to his Tudor spectators.

A number of characteristics have been defined as distinguishing stand-up comedy as a performance mode.⁹ Oliver Double has recently proposed three central elements: a personality (or character) displaying him or herself to the

8 In addition to Jones and Matuska, see, e.g., Mares, Happé, “The Vice”, and Somerset.

9 See, e.g., Rutter and Double.

audience; direct communication between the performer and audience; and what he refers to as “Present Tense”, a focus on the stage routine happening in the here and now, thus acknowledging the fact of performance and the specific performance situation (pp. 19–20). It is striking how aptly these features also seem to characterise the performance mode typically created by the Vice. One of the earliest traces we have of the characteristic stage manner of the Vices comes, interestingly enough, not from an interlude or allegorical morality, but from *The Trial of Joseph and Mary*, a pageant from the late fifteenth-century N-Town manuscript. Reysesclaunder, one of the detractors of the Virgin, bounds on to the stage at the opening of the pageant, exclaiming to the audience:

A, a, serys, God saue 3ow all!
 Here is a fayr pepyl, in good fay.
 Good serys, telle me what men me calle;
 I trowe 3e cannot be þis day. (*Trial*, ll. 34–37)

In just these four lines he establishes immediately his direct, interactive communication with the audience in the here and now, acknowledging the performance situation and inviting the onlookers to focus on his own “character”.

This manner, seemingly already established and familiar, remains recognisable throughout the sixteenth-century heyday of Vice interludes. We find, for example, Avarice in *Respublica* working the same effects, as he enters bantering with the audience:

Now goddiggod every chone, bothe greate and smale,
 From highest to lowest goddiggod to yowe all!
 Goddiggod—what sholde I saie? even or morowe?
 If I marke howe the daie goeth, god geve me sorowe! ...
 But nowe, what my name is and what is my purpose,
 Takinge youe all for frendes, I feare not to disclose:
 My veray trewe unchristen name ys—Avarice. (ll. 1–13; punctuation mine)

Like Reysesclaunder, Avarice plays up to the audience in colloquial current idiom to establish himself in the “here and now”, using verbal teasing to draw them into the performance, and to engage them with his personality. The form of the speech reminds us, too, that comedy of this kind depends not just on

the words themselves, but on the immediate effects of the moment of performance—on functions such as expression, pace, cadence, timing and tone.¹⁰

The specific means by which modern stand-up comedians achieve these central effects can also be seen to pepper the Vice's performance. Jason Rutter's study of stand-up lists, among other routines, Greeting the Audience, Comment on the Setting, Comment on the Audience, Reference to the Local Geography, Self-Reflexive Remarks on the Act, Request for Audience Action (pp. 166-90). Almost all of these can be seen in the first few lines of Nichol Newfangle's self-introduction in *Like Will to Like*:

Heer entreth Nichol Newfangle, the Vice, laughing, and hath a knaue of clubs in his hand, which as soon as he speaketh, he offreth vnto one of the men or boyes standing by
Ha, ha, ha, ha, now like vnto like: it wil be none other.
Stoup, gentle knaue, and take vp your brother.
Why, is it so? And is it euen so indeed?
Why then, may I say God send vs good speed!
And is every one heer so greatly vnkinde,
That I am no sooner out of sight, but quite out of minde? . . .
How say you woman, you, that stand in the angle?
Were you never acquainted with Nichol Newfangle? (Fulwell, sig. Aii^v; punctuation mine)

The opening business with the dropped card demands action from a specific spectator, using insult to draw him physically into the performance. The following line, which makes little specific sense on the page, appears to allow space for the comedian's ability to capitalise on whatever response he gets to his trick, generating laughter from the audience which is directed at the victim spectator as much as at the Vice. Newfangle then draws the focus back to himself, commenting on the audience's poor responses and on his own inability to make himself recognisable and hold their attention. Next, he picks on another audience member, in a specific part of the hall, aiming to embarrass her, to turn her into a target of laughter, and to introduce himself.

The tone and manner of this kind of Vice-monologue seem to correlate closely with the ways in which stand-up comedians engage with their audiences by direct address and bantering interaction, sharing their space, while

10 Cf. Wilson: "Some mannes countenaunce will make pastyme, though he speake neuer a worde. Yea, a foolishe worde, vttered by an apte manne, or a gesture straungely vsed by some pleasant body, settes men ful oft vpon a laughter" (fol. 74^r). Some of the techniques Wilson describes are also used in the Vice's wordplay.

consciously performing their own personalities. Other familiar features of the Vice's repertoire—nonsense talk, virtuoso lists, comically involved anecdotes and speed stories, shared innuendo, open obscenity and insult—are equally paralleled in the acts of many stand-up comics, as also in the accounts of Victorian music-hall comedians such as Dan Leno.¹¹ Given that the comedians' techniques are so similar, it is worth exploring whether the responses that modern stand-up comedy provokes from its audiences can also throw light on the interlude Vices, and on what their roles contribute to the plays they inhabit.

The emphasis of both modern stand-ups and Tudor Vices is centrally on provoking laughter. According to John Limon's recent study of the modern form, "laughter is the single end of stand-up. . . . Constant, unanimous laughter is the limit case" (pp. 12-13). This chimes well with our first identified Vice, Mery Report in Heywood's *The Play of the Weather*, whose name defines his function and whose ambition for each spectator will be fulfilled if "I left her meryer then I founde her" (l. 150). Similarly, the entrance of Avarice in *Respublica* is heralded by the Prologue: "Nowe yf yowe so please, I wyll goe, *and* hither send, / That shall make youe laughe well yf ye abide thend" (ll. 57-58). Complex as laughter undoubtedly is, perhaps one of its most immediate and crucial effects in successful comic performance is to draw an audience together. However much spectators come to a show as individuals, and may continue to have very different responses and thoughts about what they see and hear, the act of laughing pulls them into a community; the effect is partly physical, as they share the bodily effects of laughter.¹² Anthropologically, the effect of laughing together echoes Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*: those intense, almost transcendent feelings of social togetherness and belonging that can be engendered by certain kinds of social practice and ritual.¹³ By generating sufficient laughter, a theatrically successful Vice may in this way actually create a new "family of Folly"—not this time on the stage, but between himself and the audience. As Somerset also observes, the Vices "forge, through laughter, a group of individual

11 For examples of Dan Leno's use of such techniques, see Antony, pp. 97-108.

12 For reflections on the physicality of laughter see Fudge, pp. 280-84. Photographs of the audiences of comedy reflect the bodily community imposed by laughter; see, e.g., the image at <<http://979litefm.com/comedy-reigns-this-weekend/>> (accessed 9 May 2016).

13 For an account of this contested term, see Edith Turner's later overview. Matuska, pp. 108-9, pursues the relation of the Vice to Victor Turner's associated notion of "liminality".

spectators into an audience. Hence they remind us of the communal nature of theatre” (p. 68).

Tudor theories of laughter in performance, following from Aristotle’s familiar dictum that we laugh at what is worse than ourselves, ugly or deformed, tend to focus on the divisive, satirical and negative: this is the view Philip Sidney supports in *The Apology for Poetry*, insisting that “Laughter hath only a scornful tickling. . . . We laugh at deformed creatures . . . rather pained than delighted with laughter” (p. 112).¹⁴ However, the function of laughter in bonding groups is also recognised at times. This seems particularly to be found in practical comments addressed primarily to performers, rather than in more philosophical reflections on the responses of spectators. The sixteenth century saw a burgeoning of jest books and collections of comic stories gathered for social purposes.¹⁵ One such publication, Thomas Twyne’s *The Schoolemaster, or Teacher of Table Philosophie* (1576), offers stories specifically for social performance: “many mery honest Iestes, delectable deuises, and pleasant purposes, to be vsed for delight and recreation, at the boord among company” (sig. Oi^r), since “the assembling together of men for honest myrth . . . is commendable” (sig. Oii^v). Laughter is specifically to be used to prompt sociability and companionable delight. Wilson’s *The Arte of Rhetorique*, a work which addresses itself largely to the effectiveness of public speaking, also contains an extensive section on humour and how it can be provoked, since “good wil is got therby (for what is he that loueth not mirth?)” (fol. 75^r).

The effect of laughter in drawing an audience into community with the Vice is theatrically powerful but, as critics have pointed out, potentially morally problematic. It raises questions that many commentators on the Vice have examined about the ethical implications of Vice-generated laughter, and how they shape or problematise the response of an audience to the moral trajectory of the play.¹⁶ Following the neo-Aristotelian understanding apparent in Sidney and many other early modern critics, spectators may be expected to laugh critically at the failings of the onstage folly families, enabling them to feel superior to the vice-groups they scorn; but the Vice, like the modern stand-up comic, more often appears to be drawing his audience to laugh in alliance with him. And if

14 For negative views of laughter, see, e.g., Ghose, pp. 22–23.

15 For a valuable overview and checklist of jest books, see Woodbridge, Appendix B, pp. 285–94.

16 See, e.g., Jones and Matuska.

spectators are drawn by this laughter into community with the Vice, that might seem to put them at odds with the moral fable of the play.

This is inevitably a difficult and uncertain issue, given the complexity of laughter and its meanings. But considered in the immediate context of live performance, it seems clear that laughing at a comic—or a Vice—even if it involves both pleasure and partnership, does not necessarily imply straightforward approval of the performer’s theatrical persona or expressed attitudes. There are many popular stand-up comics, active since the 1990s, who deliberately cultivate highly morally suspect personas: in Britain such performers might include Al Murray, with his well-established character as the Pub Landlord, or Frankie Boyle, whose stage persona is deliberately offensive.¹⁷ Similarly, there are modern comics who make it their trademark to invite laughter at morally disturbing and dangerous issues such as terrorism, sexual violence and racism.¹⁸ These figures often attract moral concerns about condoning the un-condonable that might equally apply to Vices representing qualities like Avarice, Revenge or Iniquity.¹⁹ But while the audiences of modern stand-up comics may well, worryingly, include those who approve the sentiments expressed by the stage personalities, most spectators would argue that their own laughter involves a more ambivalent recognition of the moral challenges those personalities represent.²⁰ Laughter does not necessarily imply simple assent.

In a performance context, laughter is a form of licence not only for the performer, but for the audience: it permits us at least a momentary release from forming moral judgements. In the act of laughing we are indeed made receptive to ideas we might expect to reject, that beat down or slip in under our normal guard. But that is not the end or the sum total of the experience of a moment of theatrical laughter; there may be a variety of shorter and longer term effects. As many medieval and Tudor educationalists would have argued, laughter may enable us to focus with more alert concentration on the serious moral messages being presented by texts. Mixing “merry matter” with “sad matter” is a respected technique in maintaining focus and learning.²¹ Alternatively, laughter may lend

17 See Double, p. 271 (on Boyle) and pp. 486-87 (on Murray).

18 See Double, pp. 261-85.

19 Avarice in *Respublica*; Revenge in John Pickering’s *Horestes* (1567); Iniquity in *Nice Wanton*.

20 See, e.g., Cohen and Richards.

21 Well summed up in, e.g., Robert Henryson’s translation of Aesop’s *Fables*, here as published in an anglicised version in 1577: “With sad maters some myrrinesse to ming. / Accordeth well

us strength and power by allowing us to contemplate and thus disarm threat, danger and taboo; or the process of drawing us pleasurably into what we do not intellectually or morally approve can show us how easy it is to be seduced by folly, giving us inside experience of the temptations of vice that can arm us against it for the future. Laughter can even allow, or force, us to confront painful or difficult issues that we would normally resist, prompting us to think about them afterwards: it is an uncomfortable but not an uncommon experience for spectators to leave thinking “I shouldn’t have laughed”—at the rape joke, at the Pub Landlord’s racism, at Feste’s humiliating taunting of Malvolio (“like to the Old Vice” [*Twelfth Night*, IV.ii.97]).

The Vice’s laughter, like that provoked by the best stand-up comics, is therefore at its best multivalent. When the Vice “makes us sport” he draws us, however briefly, into his family. He may pleasurably energise us, bringing us into community with our fellows. His comedy may release us from moral responsibility for the duration of his act. But by doing this he can also draw us into an experience that may enable further, fuller, even clearer ethical understanding. By dominating us, even making us helpless with laughter, he can actually lend us power to address rather than to evade moral questions, if not during the performance then in reflection afterwards. As the stand-up comedian can provoke us to sharpen, rather than blurring, our ethical perception, the Vice can work to enable, rather than suppressing, an audience’s capacity for moral judgement. The interludes use vice-groups to provoke us to laughter in a range of different ways; but perhaps the most dynamic, pleasurable and disturbing is when the spectators find themselves belonging to the family of the Vice.

thus Esope sayd iwis, / *Dulcius arident seria picta iocis*” (p. 1). Latin versions of the *Fables* were widely used school texts, and Henryson cites from the familiar prologue of the Gualterus Anglicus translation.

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