

Jean-Paul DÉBAX, « The Vice Is a Lonely Hunter »,  
« Theta XII, Théâtre Tudor », 2016, pp. 57-68  
mis en ligne en juin 2016, <<https://sceneuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta12>>.

## Theta XII

est publié par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,  
dirigé par Benoist PIERRE,  
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 7323

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## Mentions légales

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ISSN 1776-1026

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## Date de création

juin 2016



## *The Vice Is a Lonely Hunter*

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After sound reflection, the phrases “folly’s family” or “folly’s children” used in the presentation of the overall theme of our collective study of the Vices and other troublemakers in the English plays and interludes of the late sixteenth century seem to me to be rather misleading. It is indeed well known (and advocated by anthropologists and mythologists) that in mythological or popular narratives actorial functions are expressed in terms of family relationships.<sup>1</sup> During our Christian Middle Ages, God was a Father, Mankind was saved by his Son, and his real (or legendary) mother used as an embodiment of the “actant” Mercy. This connection of family relationships with the deity endows them with positive or euphoric values. So, the so-called “children of Folly” cannot flaunt the virtues of perfection and permanency, which by nature exclusively belong to the “holy” family, the members of Folly’s

<sup>1</sup> According to Greimas, “Les analyses de Lévy-Strauss ont montré que la mythologie, pour rendre compte, au niveau des acteurs, des distributions complémentaires des fonctions, manifeste souvent une préférence pour les dénominations actantielles propres aux structures de la parenté” (p. 184). In the “vicious” groups, genealogies obey the same rules as in the “virtuous” groups. Several examples may be adduced: in R. Wever’s *Lusty Juventus* (c. 1550), Hypocrisy is the child of the Devil; in Thomas Lupton’s *All for Money* (c. 1560), we witness several lying-ins onstage and the births of successive evils, descendants of Sin.

family being after all rightly described as criminal ruffians, diabolic agents or deceitful servants.

The basic plot of the Moral Interlude is the story of the competition of one group (virtuous group) against the other (wicked group), and the conclusion always comes as a justification of the victory of the “goodies” over the “baddies”. That justification must be based on a difference of nature—that is, organisation—within each group. And, in view of the evolution of the Vice’s party, it appears to me quite relevant to change one’s critical standpoint. Instead of analysing the construction of that group, why not pay attention to how it falls to pieces, and the constitutive elements get isolated and left to fend for themselves, so that the Vice, the head of that party, will find himself alone in the end: an exercise in “deconstruction”, to use a modish word? Hence, the title of this essay, to take up a phrase which will sound familiar to readers of American literature: “The Vice is a lonely hunter”.



I’ll take for granted that my readers are familiar with the interlude character known as “the Vice”. Indeed, we all owe a clear understanding of the Vice’s specificities to Peter Happé’s numerous and erudite papers, introductions, essays and volumes on the subject. His abundant literature will save lengthy definitions and systematisations. Suffice it to add my own modest contribution to that mass of information: it will consist in suggesting that the Vice, beyond his role as dramatic character—which he obviously possesses—should also be considered as a function, with different possible realisations according to context.

If we get down to the study of the actual texts in which a Vice appears, we may suggest that we find two basic situations: a simple one, and a complex. In the first case, there is one Vice, explicitly catalogued under the heading “Vice”, and endowed with a fairly constant existence all through the play. In the second, we face a more fluctuating situation, in which two or more characters can stand for election to that title; he or they can obtain promotion for only part of the play, or can only reach an abstract or transient status which does not make him (or them) a real character in the play. In both cases, I’ll try first to characterise the permanent—or progressive isolation of the Vice, and then also to study the modalities and meaning of his “loneliness”.

The text selected to illustrate the first case is a play of the late 1560s, Ulpian Fulwell's *Like Will to Like*. This play belongs to the last phase of production of plays built around a Vice-figure, a period in which the part has become a technical, almost mechanical piece of the dramatic machinery of the interludes. This implies that the problems touching verisimilitude or realism are totally irrelevant. Our Vice, Nichol Newfangle, is a knave, a rogue but, if I may say so, this choice is not due to moral considerations on the part of the playwright; it is due to tradition, and to the opportunities offered in the field of comic, quasi-picaresque and sometimes artistic incidents and situations.

The Vice opens the play with a cynical "Ha, ha, ha!" which highlights a visual and lexical pun: he holds in his hand a Knave of Clubs (playing card or bauble?), and hails him (or it) as "gentle knave", playing on the double meaning of "knave"; and so, taking the icon as a mirror of his own knavery, he asks him to "take up [his] brother" (Fulwell, l. 38)—"take as a companion", I suppose, meaning himself—thus echoing the title of the play. One could also follow the suggestion, contained in the stage direction (just before Newfangle's entrance), that a card trick is played upon a spectator (boy or man), but one whose exact nature it is difficult to guess. This confrontation of character and icon is the image of a lone Vice's desperate search for a "like", a "companion" or "brother". Another proof of his isolation is that neither the "knave of clubs", nor a woman-spectator sitting in a corner of the auditorium, can recognize him or remember his name (ll. 47-49).

This Vice has a privileged relationship with Lucifer, who is introduced, of all things, as his "god-father"<sup>2</sup> This family connection with the Devil is symbolic of an essential similarity – they are both immortal: "Nichol Newfangle was, and is, and ever shall be" (l. 67).

But feelings expected from members of a family are here totally absent. Newfangle's connection with Lucifer is traditional and formal. It just means that they belong to the same infernal world, as is shown by his addressing the Devil as "noble prince of Hell" (l. 206), and he remains himself "alone" when Lucifer leaves the stage equally "alone", as the Vice informs us. The benediction Lucifer vouchsafes him is, no doubt, like all demonic blessings, given with his left hand,

2 See Fulwell, ll. 82, 92 and 119; also "godfather Devil" (l. 132). The Devil retorts, "good, good, sweet, sweet godson" (l. 135). He also calls the Devil his "gransier" (i.e., grandfather) (l. 54); on their first encounter, Lucifer hails him as "mine own boy" (l. 77), and again, towards the end of the play, as he leaves the stage carrying Nichol to Hell on his back (l. 1203).

as is the case with Titivillus, when sending the three subordinate vices of *Mankind*, New Guise, Nowadays and Nought, on their pseudo-evangelical mission (*Mankind*, l. 522). And the Vice, with yet another fit of laughter, similar to the one he indulged in on his first arrival, gives a proof of his identity, and rejoices in his solitude, exactly like his god-father Lucifer: “Now three knaves are gone, and I am left alone, / Myself here to solace” (Fulwell, ll. 567-68).

For no understandable reason, the Vice suddenly falls into a fit of anger: he had appointed himself judge, in order to pass judgement on the behaviour of his two visitors, Tossopot and Roister. He gives himself superior airs, demands that they should take off their caps before him, and upbraids them for calling him “plain” Nichol; and, in spite of the submissive attitude and soothing words of the accused, he attacks them physically in three successive assaults, pretending he is the offended party.

The reaction is different with the last two visitors, two cutpurses, when they realise that Nichol is responsible for the sentence which condemns them to be hanged. Their anger reaches a maximum when they understand the meaning of Nichol’s promise of the gift of a new land called the Land of the Two-Legged Mare, that is, the gallows. They insult the Vice and beat him, but the episode turns into a scene of comedy when Nichol tries to pick himself up, asking, “Am I alive, or am I dead ?” (l. 1063). The comedy turns to the macabre when Nichol and the executioner cast lots for possession of the coats of the two cutpurses (ll. 1156-59), recalling the two soldiers drawing lots for the seamless coat of Jesus after the Crucifixion.

One is struck by the numerous occurrences of “friend” and “brother”: because of the tone of the set-up and the nature of the characters involved, these words are not to be taken at their face-value, but rather as a vehicle of flattery and even deception. The dramatic world which is built in that kind of play does not know real brothers; everyone has exclusively in sight his own personal interest, and not universal love and friendship: a “moral” posture which in fact leads them to their downfall. A particularly interesting word in this respect is the term “Captain”, used by the Flemish clown to refer to his drinking mate, Tom Tossopot (l. 530). Three other plays use that word to express the relationships between members of similar gangs. In *Trial of Treasure* (William Wager [?], 1565; l. 235) and *Albion, Knight* (1537; l. 166), Lust is so named; in *Respublica*, Insolence, recognized as

leader, is called “Captain” by Avarice, the Vice (l. 275). The martial connotations of this name sound most appropriate for the Vice group.<sup>3</sup>

It is the fundamental and biting irony of the predicament of such good-for-nothings that their only quest should be for someone similar to themselves, the “likes” mentioned in the title of Fullwell’s play, also called “mates” within the play (ll. 139, 265, 275). This sort of play is the sad picture of thwarted ambitions and an irresistible process of inexorable isolation.

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The second text to be examined here is a much earlier play, John Skelton’s *Magnificence* (*Magnyfycence*), dating back to the beginning of the century, probably 1516. Contrary to some opinions refusing the denomination “interlude” for this play, it can certainly be counted among that class of dramatic productions for three reasons. First, the word “interlude” is used on the title-page. Other factors are the erratic structure of the play and the probable circumstances of its first production at Court (probably before Henry VIII ). Although the argument is totally different from those of Henry Medwall’s plays, yet a comparison between the works of the two playwrights is possible, as both were court entertainers.

Many character-types and motifs are common to both. For instance, the witty servant typical of the Renaissance is prominent in Medwall’s *Fulgens and Luces*: in fact, two representatives of that type of character, together with their respective masters, are used to build a structural symmetry in the plot. In the later development of the Vice of the interludes, we often find Vices belonging to that inferior social status. The motif that goes with that status is that of the recruiting of such masterless would-be servants by masters who need their help in their own love affairs or social promotion. That deal between the two parties involved is of a commercial and economic nature, as each one tries to promote his own selfish interests, rather than the welfare and happiness of the other party.

In *Magnificence* this situation is well illustrated by the recruiting of Fancy by the eponymous protagonist. After he has been convinced by Measure that Liberality can be harmoniously combined with a reasonable management of wealth,

3 The title “Captain” may refer to any type of leader, particularly in popular rejoicings. Philip Stubbs, in *Anatomy of Abuses*, wrote: “All the wild heads of the Parish, conventing together, choose them a Grand-Captain (of all Mischief) whom they ennoble with the title ‘my Lord of Misrule’” (quoted Wiles, p. 11).

Fancy ingratiates himself with Magnificence by giving out his name as Largesse, or Liberality (Skelton, l. 270), and producing a forged letter of recommendation, supposedly written by the wise counsellor Sad Circumspection. So, the recruiting of a royal adviser comes as an occasion to reveal dishonest political practice, and at the same time build an entertaining plot.

It is interesting to notice that this trick is performed through a change of name. We know that this fraud is widespread in interlude plots. It has two consequences: highlighting the arbitrariness of the action of naming through a meta-linguistic operation, and lending a sort of illusory independence to dramatic characters engaged in this performative process. The consequence is a general blurring of the frontiers between “character” and social “type” that reveals the fragility of a flawed society. In this case, the change of name effected by Fancy opens the way to a general borrowing of new names, the signal for the beginning of hostilities, which is hailed by Cloaked Collusion by the phrase, “here begyneth the game” (l. 682).

The blurring of demarcation lines particularly affects Cloaked Collusion, who proves to be a faithful forerunner of the Vice Ambidexter in Thomas Preston’s *Cambises* (1569). He is “Syr John Double-Cope [=cloke?]” (l. 605), has “two faces in a hode” (l. 710), and can “laughe and grone” at the same time (l. 698). Cloaked Collusion’s most telling remarks are his declaration about double-dealing; he boasts, “I can fede forth a fole and lede hym by the eyre” (l. 712), and voices this most ominous comment about his own action: “By Cloked Colusyon . . . / Cumberaunce and trouble in Englande fyrst I began” (ll. 714-15).

So, this wicked trinity—Crafty Conveyance, under the name of Sure Surveyance, Cloaked Collusion, as Sober Sadness, and Courtly Abusion, as Lusty Pleasure—can be considered as a nest of prospective Vices. They can be named “Vices” because they have a collective plan to endanger the peace of the court and Magnificence’s prosperity. But the plan knows only temporary success, and the plotters are ultimately exposed: “*Magnyfycence*. Ye be the theuys, I say, away my goodys dyd cary / . . . / Magnyfycence I was, whom ye haue brought to shame” (ll. 2239-41). Their failure is due to discord within the group. Their association has not been founded under the best auspices, as it coincides with Courtly Countenance’s ode to Counterfeiting. Our group of plotters is defined by one of its members, proud Cloaked Collusion, as “a leysse of ratches to renne an hare” (l. 586). As for Fancy, another among the conspirators, he is accused of being brainless (l. 608). So this was not really a promising start for such an enterprise,



and the nature of the confederates was bound to lead to intestine clashes and quarrels. The plotters tease one another, and what started as a jest promises to lead to bad feelings and unfeigned anger: “ofte peas is taken for frayes” (l. 814).

In the hour of their “victory”, when Magnificence’s coffers are empty (l. 2163) and his power is at a very low ebb, Cloaked Collusion and Crafty Conveyance fall to quarreling, challenging and threatening each other: “*Clo. Col.* Leue thy pratyng, or els I shall lay the on the pate” (l. 2173). But they soon make it up, Counterfeit Countenance urging them not to act as knaves (“iauels” [l. 2211]) of the lowest sort (which in fact they are!) but to behave instead like civilised people: “Now let vs be all one, and let vs lyue in rest; / For we be, Syrs, but a few of the best” (ll. 2202-3). Not being aware of what the discussion was about, Counterfeit Countenance tries to bring the episode to an end and, at the same time, defines it, saying, “what was your quarell?” (l. 2210). But Cloaked Collusion cannot bear Crafty Conveyance’s bragging about his superior skill as a thief: “And I tell you, I dysdayne moche of his mockys” (l. 2227).

The other two characters that could stand for the post of Vice, Fancy and Folly, appear each accompanied by a pet, Fancy by a hawk, Folly by a dog—or rather a cur—and perform a scene that smacks of the minstrel’s comic routine. Fancy acts under a borrowed name, Largesse (otherwise Liberality), in order to deceive Magnificence. He plays a true Vice’s trick when he uses a forged letter.

The same Fancy can boast of another distinctive trait of the Vice. He laughs and weeps in quick succession without knowing why:

Sometyme I laughe ouer lowde;  
Sometyme I wepe for a gew gaw;  
Sometyme I laughe at waggyng of a straw. (ll. 1013-15)

His companion Folly seems almost proud of his weak brain: “as for me, I take but one folysshe way” (l. 1077).

And then they start bickering and openly engage in an absurd competition about the price at which they would sell their respective pets—a deal in which “wise” Fancy exchanges a valuable hawk against a “pylde curre” (l. 1055) and is thus cheated by brainless Folly, and this in the midst of a lot of nonsensical discourse. Fancy and Folly could be described as two complementary Vices: Fancy seems more professional but is finally fooled by an “amateur”, who thus proves that a fool is more efficacious than a real Vice; so Folly himself claims, speaking to Fancy and Crafty Conveyance: “I can make you bothe folys, and

I wyll” (l. 1174). But his supposed “wicked” actions turn out to be sham, or just practical jokes, such as pretending to find a louse on Crafty Conveyance’s shoulder, or stealing some money from his fellow’s purse. These tricks, performed with the complicity of the audience, do not go beyond a comic exemplification of the technique whereby he turns men into fools: “it is I that foles can make”; “Syr, of my maner I shall tell you the playne” (ll. 1214, 1220).

In the same passage we find an old acquaintance of ours: Titivillus, the devil of idle talk. The two wicked characters (explicitly given as wicked), Simkin Titivell and Pierce Pykthank (l. 1268), are described as disciples of Folly: they “hauntyth my scolys” (l. 1265), says Folly.<sup>4</sup> In order to be efficaciously obnoxious, Folly will be introduced into the Palace under the false name of Conceit. Now the two “brothers” speak with one voice: “that is my parte that thou spekest of nowe” (l. 1283). It is significant that, in his commentary on the situation, Folly should pray for the help of his “good godfather” (l. 1313), just like Nichol in *Like Will to Like*. Who is this godfather, if not Lucifer himself?

My last remark will bear on the use of the word “dyser”. It is Crafty Conveyance (who has already been baptised a “hoddypeke”, that is, a fool [l. 1162]) that uses it, addressing Folly: “In a cote thou can play well the dyser” (l. 1177). Other forms of the word can be found in contemporary texts: “disar”, “disard”, “disour”, “desert”. The term seems to have connections with entertainment in general. When quoting it, Stephen Greenblatt explains, “i.e. jester” (Greenblatt, p. 63). The etymological dictionary gives a Dutch origin: “dasaert”, meaning “fool”. It could more probably derive from the French “diseur”, a character partaking in a medieval courting game between a young nobleman and a lady, which seems to have been a kind of dumb-show, the action being commented upon by a manipulator-interpreter, the “diseur”. In *Magnificence* there seems to be more to it than the bare meaning of “jester” suggested by Greenblatt, as it introduces Folly’s rejoinder: “Ye, but thou can play the fole without a vyser” (l. 1178). That exchange tends to equate “diser” and “fool”.

4 Titivillus, who appears or is mentioned in several plays and interludes, is the devil who records the idle words exchanged between parishioners during divine service (see *OED*, s.v. “titivil”). (There may be a connection with the common interjection “tilly-vally”, whose origin *OED* records as unknown.) Pickthank is less known. Is he in any way connected with the Pickharness (or Pickbrain), Cain’s boy in the Towneley *Mactatio Abel*?



This multiplicity of variable characters reminds one of some earlier plays, such as *Mankind* and those of Medwall. It has proved difficult for most critics to decide whether there was one or several Vices in those plays (with a capital “V” or not), or whether their nature was more akin to that of a tempter than a jester, or vice-versa. The difficulty possibly found its origin in a rigid and inadequate conception of the dramatic realisation of the Vice function. There is indeed a consensus among critics that a Vice should be isolated, a bad counsellor, with one or several confederates, unchanged until the end of the play, when he usually comes to a bad end: execution, the traditional fate of criminals, or a trip to hell in Satan’s company, sometimes carried on his shoulders.

In fact, this scheme belongs to a limited number of plays of a fairly late period, and probably under the effect of a slow evolution, a specialisation of dramatic roles, and a change in economic and cultural backgrounds during a time when most plays were no longer court entertainments. This period saw a multiplication of “hybrid” plays, intended for a more popular stage and so having more limited means at their disposal. The “new” Vices (or “true” Vices) in surviving texts are twelve in number, ranging from 1560 to 1570 (1590, if we include *A Looking Glass for London and England*, by Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene).<sup>5</sup>

All things considered, the conclusion to be drawn is more moral than might be expected. The fundamental opposition between Vices and “good” characters is structural: the good naturally keep together, as an ordered household, family or tribe, whereas the Vices, in spite of their oaths of fidelity and eternal friendship, rapidly start quarreling, soon fall to fisticuffs, and finish up isolated by their very iniquity. Rather than being a happy family, their community is organized as a redoubtable gang of thieves and scoundrels, for which there were countless models in the Elizabethan underworld literature.

5 They are: Inclination, in *Trial of Treasure* (1567); Subtle Shift, in *Clyomon and Clamydes* (1570); Covetousness, in *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (1570); Sin, in *All for Money* (1577); Desire, in *The Tide Tarieth No Man* (1578). And among the “hybrid” plays (as defined by Spivack, chap. 8 [pp. 251-303]) figure the following: Ambidexter, in *Cambises* (1560); Iniquity, in *Darius* (1560); Haphazard, in *Apilus and Virginia* (“R. B.”, 1560); Politic Persuasion, in *Grissil* (1561); Revenge, in *Horestes* (1567); Ill Report, in *The Most Virtuous and Godly Susanna* (Thomas Garter, 1568); Radagon, in *A Looking Glass for London and England* (1590).

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