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The Vice-characters' Conspiracy in the Interlude Respublica (1553)

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Allegorical characters in the English drama of the Middle Ages and Renaissance can usually be referred to one of two opposite sides—Virtue or Vice. And it is not rare that the forces of Virtue or Vice are represented by multiple characters who cooperate actively with one another. This essay aims at defining the essence of the Vice-characters' interrelations in the interlude *Respublica*, putatively by Nicholas Udall,¹ and at demonstrating how their relations turn into the mechanism that sets in motion the schemes at once of playfulness and morality in the interlude.

It is widely accepted that *Respublica* was written in 1553 on the occasion of the coronation of Queen Mary Tudor with the intention of drawing the new sovereign's attention to corruption in state institutions as well as to

¹ Although there is no direct indication of Udall's authorship in the text of *Respublica*, the play is usually attributed to him. In arguing for Udall's authorship, scholars refer to the warrant addressed by the Queen to the officers of the Revels in December 1554, in which Udall's name and his diligence in presenting some performance at court are mentioned (Greg, ed., pp. viii-ix). Since there is no evidence of other plays being acted in the first year of Mary's reign, *Respublica* is believed to be the one indicated. Besides this, the textual analysis carried out by Leicester Bradner to connect plays presumptively attributed to Udall with the text that certainly belongs to him (*Roister Doister*) leaves no doubt as to his being the author of *Respublica* too (Bradner, p. 380).

the impoverishment of vast segments of the population. As such, the play is distinguished by topical political and social problematics. The playwright obviously belonged to the political class of England that was conscious of the necessity to reinforce the state after the six-year rule of the Regency Council, which had governed the country for Edward VI in his minority. Udall adapted the interlude form so as to expose some of the most painful sores in the body politic of his day.

The English interlude inherited from medieval religious drama a bipolar system of characters.² Within it, virtuous and vicious characters fight over the central (neutral) figure of the play, who usually personifies mankind. This figure can sometimes comprise references to the personality of the monarch (see, for instance, *Nature* by Henry Medwall or *Magnyfycence* by John Skelton). In Udall's drama, this central personage is the widow *Respublica*, who is the embodiment of the state system in general. Four "ministers" hire themselves to manage the state economy for *Respublica*, *Avarice* being the head of the company. *Insolence*, *Oppression* and *Adulation* act as his co-conspirators. The four of them make up a virtual composite character of corruption—we might risk calling it "the Vice"—which is aimed at demonstrating the degree of turmoil and economic devastation in the country.

The leading role in the group thus belongs to *Avarice*, which is the only true sin among the negative figures of the play. This character's essence is made clear at the very beginning of the interlude, with his first appearance on stage in the first scene. In a monologue, *Avarice* introduces himself to the public and declares his desire to conceal his true identity. He requests that he be called "polycie in stede of Covetise" because "The Name of policie is of none suspected" (I.i.80, 83).³ The Vice-character obviously has the whole enterprise of *Respublica*'s destruction already designed. He begs pardon in advance for his wittiness and those japes or tricks he is going to play on *Respublica*, as well as admits his intention to get the better of the "noble dame" (92), as he calls her, "if I maie have the grace, and happe, to blynde her" (I.i.107). It is typical of Vices to trick the audience, so it is no surprise that *Avarice* resorts to ploys to move the audience to pity by mentioning his substantial daily expenditures, low income and urgent need to provide for his old age. He stands out for being the only Vice-figure in

2 See Bevington, pp. 126-27, on the casting formula and the principles of organisation in late medieval drama.

3 *Respublica* is cited in the edition of Greg, though without his use of italics to signal expanded contractions and missing letters.

the play that is, from the beginning, aware of *Respublica*'s attitude to him and his associates. And he understands perfectly well that the case devised by him may bring them all to the gallows. That is why his jokes are sometimes full of grim humour—for instance: “Els will some of youe make, good hanging stuff one daie” (I.iv.376).

The role of mastermind is kept by Avarice till the end of the play. It is he who engrafts in his associates' minds the necessity to conceal their true selves behind false names. As soon as the idea is articulated to them, Insolence accepts it. The character of People, who sees and understands clearly enough the essence of the “ministers” despite their claim to be improving his living conditions, proclaims Avarice to be the leader of the villains, who actually leave him without means of subsistence: “he teacheth them to rake and scrape vp eche whytte” (III.iii.698). It is to Avarice that the other three Vice-figures apply for advice when their deeds are unmasked by Verity (V.viii.1642-58). It is he that Verity calls “moost stinking and filthie Avarice” (V.iii.1376), while Nemesis addresses him as “the plague of Comonweales as all men doo note” (V.x.1893). Through these and other references the idea is emphasised that Avarice underlies those manifestations of social behaviour that are embodied in the figures of Insolence, Oppression and Adulation.

In their turn, the latter three characters, too, have a leader among them, one whose very name indicates that he possesses the energy of action that other practices of corruption can profit from. The viewers' acquaintance with the three rogues starts with Adulation's honeyed addresses to Insolence: “Oh noble Insolence if I coulde singe as well” (I.ii.123); “ye are one of suche goodlye personage / of suche wytte and beawtye and of sage parentage / So excelente in all poyntes of everye arte” (I.ii.131-33). Oppression seems to be of the same opinion: “if he wer disposed to take the charge in hande, / I warraunte hym a chive to Rewle all the whole lande” (I.ii.139-40). Avarice, too, in playing up to the knaves, recognises Insolence's advantages over the others:

No, syr, ye shall bee chiefe to bring all thinges abowte.
 ye shall emonges vs have the chiefe preeminence,
 And we to youe as yt were, oughe obedience.
 ye shalbe our leader, our Captaine and our guyde
 Than must ye looke a lofte with thandes vnder the side. (I.iii.272-76).

Insolence thanks his friends for their support and declares himself ready to serve them, but at the same time he admits that in their deeds they cannot but ask Avarice for advice and direction: “But we maie herein, nothing attempte in no wyse / withowte the Counsaile of our fownder Averyce” (I.ii.49-50). So again, the fundamental role of Avarice in designing and realising the Vices’ plans is emphasised.

It is notable that the Vices keep quite closely to the function that the playwright assigns each of them. According to this division of powers, Adulation talks to People when the latter can still be influenced and put off guard by the Vice’s hearty reassurance (as in III.iii). A bit later, when People no longer believes Respublica’s “ministers”, the problem is dealt with by Insolence and Oppression, who menace People and behave rudely towards him (IV.iv).

The play gets more complicated and interesting at the same time when the rogues adopt false names to deceive Respublica and to conceal their principal goal—to enrich themselves: “And so shall we be sure, to gett store of money, / Sweter then sugar. *Avar.* sweter then enie honey” (I.iii.287-88). To disguise his nature Avarice takes the name of Policie, Insolence that of Authoritie; Oppression welcomes the chance to be called Reformation (or Reformacyon), and Adulation becomes Honestie. They jokingly practise calling each other by their new names before going to Respublica. Their playful humour is associated with rivalry and the drive for leadership. Though Adulation claims he would like to keep the name of Policie for himself, Avarice does not agree to forfeit it. In this way Avarice’s strong position is accentuated.

The new names and, thus, the new guises the four Vice-figures receive in the play refer to the concept of the state order. This new governing arrangement, as Respublica sees it, should repair the chaos and destruction caused by corruption. Quite logically, Avarice, as the mastermind, structures the new system of government for Respublica and thereby justifies the need to bring his associates into action (I.ii.512-29). He asserts that the country cannot be run without Honestie, which is the moral foundation of all state affairs. With the help of Reformation, the present system will be changed and Authoritie will guarantee the implementation of new laws. In this way, one can observe in *Respublica* not only the alternation of serious and comic material—one of the principal structural methods of Tudor morality drama⁴—but also the alternation of scenes in

4 See Bevington, p. 248.

which Vices act according to their true characters and those in which they are disguised as responsible statesmen.

It is corruption that remains the focus of the playwright's attention in *Respublica*. And the four Vice-figures emerge as integral parts of this phenomenon. This becomes evident when we look at them as facets of the entire action and not as stand-alone figures. Each of them fulfils a fixed role within the hierarchy of relations between them, contributing to a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts.

As a composite character, "the Vice" in *Respublica* impresses us not only with its complexity, but with its psychological depth as well. One can discern the inner motives of the Vice displayed in the character of Avarice. At the same time, the actions of the three other negative figures could be interpreted as the Vice's behavioural reactions to various situations he finds himself in. The Vice either fools his opponent and wins him over with the help of flattery, or displays rudeness, tries to suppress him and keeps him at bay. An element of psychology can also be traced in the capacity of the Vice to choose this or that demeanour in different situations, or to combine the elements of various tactics in a particular case. This happens in Scene Four of Act Four, for instance, in which the Vice-figures have to defend themselves and make excuses for the absence of positive changes in People's life. As soon as they see their attempts to prove that they work for the good of the country fail, they go on the offensive. They stigmatise People's ill-breeding and backwardness, which, to their mind, should be corrected: "he is so headstrong he muste bee bridled with Lawes" (IV.iv.1111). Thus Flattery gives place to Insolence and Oppression. This disdainful manner of communication with People is preserved further on (for instance, in V.viii.1617-30).

When the forces of Virtue eventually come to *Respublica*'s rescue, the Vice-figures seem unable to establish communication with them, as in Scene Nine of Act Five. All of them, except Avarice, are at loss, benumbed with fear, while their mastermind, as the most endangered member of the company, makes vain attempts to insinuate himself into their confidence. Avarice starts with greetings and courtesies to Verity and, when he sees that his advances do not work, finishes by exposing his associates. The audience is shown the instruments of corruption fading away in the face of Verity, while its vicious basis continues fighting.

When seen as separate characters, the Vice-figures in *Respublica* resemble similar personae from Tudor morality plays and interludes. As such, their per-

formance counterpoises the serious material in the drama, creating the relaxed, free and easy atmosphere of entertainment and play that the audience enjoyed so much. The pranks the Vice-figures play in communicating with each other in *Respublica* comply with the typical patterns of action that evil characters usually have recourse to in medieval theatre. For instance, having adopted a new name, Avarice changes his gown as well (he actually turns it inside out), which is supposed to help him in deceiving Respublica. He initially applies to Adulation for assistance, but on recalling his associate's new name, which is Honestie, turns his help down (I.iv.422-24). The action is made more sportful, entertaining and vivid by the Vices' slips of the tongue, their use of short words, word-play and singing, articulated conflicts between the form and the contents, and other similar devices.⁵ This sort of playful banter and foolery marks the Vice-figures' interaction from beginning to end.

Feigned lack of understanding and disputes are not rare among the Vices. For example, in Scene Three of the first act of the play, when all the four Vice-figures come together for the first time, Avarice pretends not to recognise his future accomplices. He takes them for rogues, which of course they actually are. And in so doing he tries their patience, making them again and again show obeisance to him:

Adul. Nowe if ye have done[,] I pray youe looke this waye backe.
Avar. Whoo buzzeth in myne eare so? what? Ye sawecye lacke?
Adul. Are ye yet at leysure with your good frendes to talke?" (I.iii.179-81).

An example of rivalry among the knaves can be observed in the fourth scene of Act One, in which the friends request Insolence not to forget about them when he gets his hands on great riches. Oppression believes that Insolence should pay him first and best. The rogues' appetites are particularly striking:

Insol. I muste have castels and Townes in everye shierc.
Adul. And I change of howses one heare[,] and another there.

5 See, e.g.: "*Adul.* . . . And I will for youe take suche paine / that ere I deserve one / ye shall geve me twayne. / *Avar.* Honestie your tong tripth" (II.iii.560-62); "*Avaryce* ye whooresone? Policye I tell the" (I.iv.391); "*Oppression?* hah? is the devyll in thye brayne?" (I.iv.397); "*Hipocrisy*, hah? *Hipocrisy*, ye dull asse?" (I.iv.401); "we enfourmed them and we defourmed them, / we confourmed them, and we refourmed them" (III.v.805-6); and "Thou saiest even trueth tis a bagg of Rye in dede, / vsiree, periuree, pitcheree, patcherie, / pilferie, briberee, snatcherie, catcherie . . ." (V.ix.1739-41).

Inso. [*sic*] And I muste have pastures[,] and townships and woodes.
Oppr. And I muste nedes have store of golde and other goodes. (I.iii.305-8).

Listening to his accomplices, Avarice remarks that they resemble a pack of hungry dogs: “these hungri dogges will snatche all” (I.iii.314).

Scene Six of the third act is also notable for its presentation of rivalry or pretended disagreement among the knaves. In this episode Avarice boasts of his newly acquired riches. Like a true showman he demonstrates to the others thirteen sacks of goods he got in various unfair ways. In so doing he warns his friends against coming closer to his riches, conspicuously showing no trust in them:

For your learning I will youe a spectacle sette
but first gette ye from me, and stande a goode waie hence,
This shall not lye within your reache by youre lycence. (III.vi.848-50)

No wonder that employing several Vice-figures in theatrical presentations became one of the generic particularities of allegorical drama in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The presence of several evil characters in the play space allows them to act as a group and thus helps to create many more possibilities for witty pranks, farcical situations and buffoonery. This accords with the prominence, among the principal “deception techniques” (Pineas, p. 163) commonly identified in the Tudor morality play, of lying and truth-twisting, trying on other people’s clothes, adopting false names, and so forth.

There is no doubt that, in the audience’s mind, the Vices’ significance was conditioned not only by their characteristically *vicious* behaviour towards virtuous figures in the play, but also by the quarrels occurring among them. This effect can be clearly observed in particular scenes, especially those from the beginning and the end of the interlude. At first, the Vices cannot agree on their new names and, consequently, on who is to be their leader; later they shift the blame for the evil deeds they have committed onto each others’ shoulders.

All in all, the manner in which evil is represented in these four characters in *Respublica* fits into the tradition of comprehending moral and ethical categories in medieval drama. Splitting an abstract category into multiple personae turns out to be a particularly effective means of creating dramatic tension. In interrelating with each other, with each trying to gain more riches than the others, and more quickly, the Vice-characters obtain more opportunities to produce ludic action.

According to the usual practice, the Vice group in *Respublica* is depicted in greater detail and more expressively than the Virtues are. As an indication of the temper of the times, and especially the new humanist outlook, all the Vice-figures, except Avarice, mimic the behavior of civil servants tainted by corruption. In this way these allegorical characters become charged with topical social content. At the same time, Avarice emerges as the driving force that can inspire such forms of behaviour in human beings. It is precisely the division of roles among the Vices in *Respublica* that allows them to be perceived as a composite figure of evil in the play.

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