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Responsable scientifique

Richard Hillman

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A Modest Suggestion That Ignorance Dances to the Tune of Folly

Bob Godfrey
University of Northampton

Many *dramatis personae* of dubious, malicious or evil intent may also be described as Folly's acolytes or Folly's children, and Ignorance is no exception. Ignorance may signify innocence on the one hand—even if the innocence is culpable—or wilful denial, on the other, but either way it suggests an outsider, a lost child perhaps, sometimes to be cared for but sometimes to be rejected. As it happens this figure features in only four surviving plays of the sixteenth century, one each by John Rastell and John Redford and two by William Wager. The occasions can only at best be regarded as random, though Wager does have a more developed propagandist agenda than either of the other two playwrights. For, between about 1520, the date of the *Nature of the Four Elements*, and about 1570, the date of *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art*, the social upheavals and upheavals of conscience and consciousness that accompanied the Reformation produced a conceptual shift regarding the public understanding of the quality of ignorance. From being a characteristic arising simply from the context of learning, it became associated with a theological question regarding the possibility of salvation for Roman Catholics past and present. That ignorance might mitigate the error of adherence to the Roman Catholic faith became a kind of theological quandary at the time of the Elizabethan Settlement and the cause of much debate.

Rastell—and we should presume it is his own advertisement—suggests that *The Nature of the Four Elements* is "a new Interlude and a Mery" (p. 30). The plot framework that he deploys is familiar. Humanity, as a single representative of fallible humankind, is obliged to go through a series of testing encounters from which he should emerge purged of his failings. But Rastell had a secular and educational agenda for his play that offered a message differing in essence from that of the moral and religious plays with which it was contemporary. This is immediately made clear in the words of the Messenger Prologue. "This phylosophycall work", the Messenger announces,

> is myxyd
> With mery conseytis, to give men comfort
> And occasyon to cause them to resort
> To here this matter, whereto yf they take hede
> Some lernynge to them therof may procede. (ll. 136-40)

These words foreground Rastell's aim to bring, through dramatic performance, serious matters to a general public, an aim manifest, perhaps, in the possibility that he built a stage on his own ground in Shoreditch in the 1520s (Reed, pp. 280-83; Pollard, ed., pp. 307-21). The Messenger's speech also reveals Rastell's awareness that some members of that public may need the promise of entertainment if they are to attend a performance.

Another aspect of the originality of Rastell's creation can be found in his decision to have the figure of Nature, rather than God, as the final arbiter of Humanity's progression from innocence to mature understanding. In a familiar way Humanity is a conflicted individual but, under the aegis of Nature, is set here between Studious Desire, on the one hand, and Sensual Appetite, on the other. Each is accorded his influence, and Sensual Appetite, though showing a tendency to distract Humanity from his main task, is nevertheless fully acknowledged as an essential attribute of all living creatures. Fulfilling the promise of "mery conseytis", Appetite becomes, quite early in the play, the dominant force tending to overwhelm other aspects of human endeavour in favour of the pursuit of pleasure. This means that Humanity, after a first seminar on the subject of the earth's roundness conducted by Studious Desire, is enticed by Sensual Appetite to take a break. While he is offstage at the tavern, the audience is treated to a long discussion between Studious Desire and a character Experience, based in geography and new world exploration, areas of especial interest to Rastell him-

self. When Humanity at last returns to the stage, he quickly expresses a genuine desire for such learning, a response that shows that he is not utterly subject to his sensual appetites. There is hope for him.

However, these lessons in "philosophy" really do take up a good deal of dramatic time. Indeed, the text just beyond the midpoint shows a great gap of 360 lines, as Richard Axton calculates it. He suggests that what is missing is a further extended lesson in which the character Experience

> demonstrates to Humanity the earth's roundness, using the globe, a candle flame, and a telescope, and tells him of the earth's physical properties. (Rastell, ed. Axton, p. 59)

Furthermore, it may be that this gap is a clue that a travelling troupe had decided that the long lecture by Experience was "sad mater" that their public wouldn't accept and so made a cut. This extant text, therefore, may have been edited for performance in the way that Rastell himself suggested. This interlude, he said,

> yf the hole matter be playde, wyl conteyne the space of an hour and a halfe; but yf ye lyst ye may leve out muche of the sad mater. . . . and than it wyll not be paste thre quarters of an hour of length. (p. 30)

Whatever the case regarding the performance history of the *Four Elements*, it is after this great gap, at a late point in the play, that the character of Ignorance is at last introduced. It seems that he is brought into the drama to indicate the dangers of ignorance, but also, I would suggest, to spice up the action. Resistance to the educational intention of this play is fully encoded in this figure, as his own first words confirm:

> I love not this horeson losophers,
> Nor this great connyng extromers,
> That tell how far it is to the sterres;
> I hate all maner connyng.
> I wolde ye knew it, I am Ignorance. (ll. 1137-41)

His mis-pronunciation is a demonstration of his character and his hatred of "all maner connyng" a self-condemnation. He goes on to boast of having greater power and influence than the kings of England or France. He is, he claims, "the grettyst lord lyvyng" (l. 1144). He also boasts a huge following in England—"Above fyve hundred thowsand" (l. 1150). Through this character Rastell seeks to show

his own deep unease about the level of ignorance in society at large, and therefore the real need for education.

At some point in this gap in the text, prior to or connected with the arrival of Ignorance, Humanity has somehow or other ended up head down and off to the side of the stage. Whatever the manner of his fall, there can be little doubt that this is the moment when the merry conceits begin in earnest to entertain the audience. Sure enough Sensual Appetite and Ignorance, presumably framing, though ignoring, the elevated bum of Humanity, engage in some witty repartee demonstrating their fellowship in clowning. Eventually they pull Humanity out feet first—all good opportunity for slapstick. When Humanity explains that he was almost clean out of his mind, Sensual Appetite quickly replies "it is the study that ye have had / In this folyshe losophy hath made you mad" (ll. 1203-4), and Ignorance concurs: "That is as trewe as the gospell" (l. 1206). Then Sensual Appetite seeks to seduce Humanity with the promise that he will provide an entertainment, dancers, singers, a banquet, good wines and "a feyre wenche nakyd in a couche / Of a soft bed of downe" (ll. 1264-65). He will be "chefe marshall" of these revels "and order all thynge well" (ll. 1287-88). He leaves Humanity alone with Ignorance while he goes off to make provision for this party. Humanity is enthusiastic about having such fun, and Ignorance, speaking on behalf of and, indeed, at this point, to the audience, again just like a good clown, says:

> And so shalt thou best please
> All this hole company.
> For the folyshe arguynge that thou hast had
> With that knave Experiens, that hath made
> All these folke therof wery. (ll. 1296-1300)

Ignorance now takes on an MC role, in which he introduces some offstage singers: "I prey thee be styll. / I wene they be not far hens" (ll. 1311-12). They sing *a capella* and he comments, "It is pyte ye had not a mynstrell / for to augment your solas' (ll. 1326-27). Sensual Appetite takes up the spirit of the occasion—"Ye shall se me daunce a cours / Without a mynstrell, be it better or wors" (ll. 1329-30)—and Ignorance again organises things with "Make rome, syrs, and gyf them place!" (l. 1334) .

The dance concludes and Ignorance steps in with "That is the best daunce without a pype / That I saw this seven yere" (ll. 1347-48). Sensual Appetite exits to the Tavern to get a minstrel to play for more singing and dancing, while Igno-

rance himself comes forward to entertain the company by singing a ballad of Robin Hood. What is recorded in the text after the first line seems to be an absolute mixture of nonsense lines from more than one story, whether or not about Robin Hood is hard to determine. It may be more a kind of résumé of many first lines of several popular songs. While it makes no sense in itself, it could have provided the audience with a number of cues to remind them of a range of songs with which they were familiar. They might even have been encouraged to join in one or another of them. This shows a parallel with the stage direction introducing Moros, Wager's fool in *The Longer Thou Livest*, who comes in "*singing the foot of many songs as fools were wont*" (p. 6, SD). If fools were wont to offer this kind of entertainment, it might appear that Rastell's Ignorance, on this score, may be accounted such a "fool". As such a fool, then, Ignorance keeps the party going until Nature, the figure from the opening of the play, suddenly makes his reappearance. The confrontation is brief since the text ends abruptly after Nature speaks. He brusquely interrupts the fun and in his role as arbiter of all things he remonstrates with Humanity:

> For if thou wylt lerne no sciens,
> Nother by study nor experiens,
> I shall the never avaunce,
> But in the worlde thou shalt dure than,
> Dyspysed of every wyse man,
> Lyke this rude best Ygnoraunce. (ll. 1438-43)

This final swingeing clout against Ignorance characterises him, as Meg Twycross suggests, as a "loutish philistine" (p. 77). But such use of the word "beast" also appears instructively in the first of the *Schoolboy Dialogues* of Juan Luis Vives. A father introduces his boy to the teacher, asking that he "make of him a man from a beast". Philoponus, the teacher, replies:

> This shall be my earnest endeavour. He shall become a man from a beast, a fruitful and good creature out of a useless one. (Vives, p. 10)

Ignorance, therefore, may be an enemy of learning, but he is also an enemy of Humanity, as reflected in a remark of John Colet, founder of St Paul's School and Dean of St Paul's. In a letter to Richard Kidderminster, Abbot of Winchcombe, Colet wrote:

Ex impietate negligentiaque Dei ignorantia exorta est. Ex Impietate, ignorantia, ut a fonte, omne malum profluxit.

[Ignorance arises from impiety and the neglect of God, and from impiety and ignorance, as from a fountain, all other evils flow.] (cited in Knight, p. 267; my translation)

For all his comic appeal, then, Ignorance stands out as a symbol of refractory mankind, a naysayer who refuses to acknowledge the importance of learning altogether. The folly of Ignorance is represented, therefore, in both Rastell's interlude and Colet's text, as a beastly state that the individual Humankind owes it to himself to avoid.

From a dramatic point of view, Rastell's Ignorance can be regarded as a "fool artificial", that is, a fool whose folly is beastly, mischievous and deliberate, rather than innocent. By contrast, John Redford, choir master at St Paul's between 1531 and 1534, introduces us to a figure of Ignorance in his play *Wyt and Science* that must be differently categorised. This is simply the "fool natural", an innocent who cannot learn his lesson, indeed cannot spell his own name. Redford, of course, in contrast to Rastell, was directly involved in the education of children, and, as Twycross has definitively shown,[1] the sequence in his play where Idleness attempts to teach Ignorance the syllabic sounding out of his own name looks to be grounded in Redford's own teaching experience. Its dramatic function, however, is to amuse the audience by showing them an entertaining example of what to many of them would have been a familiar process. The scene is given over to a series of prompts from Idleness, herself a less than competent teacher, and the struggling responses of her pupil:

Idlenes. Say thy lesson, foole
Ingnorance. Upon my thummes?
Idllenes. Ye, upon thy thummes. Ys not there thy name?
Ingnorance. Yeas.
Idellnes. Go to, than; spell me that same. (ll. 450-52)

Ignorance is put through his paces but, unfortunately, he is palpably beyond help. The whole scene, if performed for Redford's school audience, would no doubt have been greeted with peals of laughter at the expense of both the pupil and the teacher. When, at the climax of the lesson, Idleness asks, "What hast thow lernd?", Ignorance looks blank: "Ich can not tell" (ll. 546-47). The fact that Ignorance fails to achieve the intended outcome of the lesson shows by anal-

1 See Twycross, *passim*.

ogy the risks to young Wit's courtship of the Lady Science, the thematic centre of the play. To make his point Redford has the scene with Ignorance played over Wit's sleeping body. He takes it further by having Idleness remove the coat of Science from Wit and substitute the coat of Ignorance. So Wit, for all his promise, "begynth to looke lyke a noddye" (l. 573) and the poor fool Ignorance is given the comment, "He is I now" (l. 583). Redford gives this key moment to the innocent explicitly to mark the change. It just takes Idleness to blacken Wit's face and Wit is "Coniurdd from Wyt unto a starke foole" (l. 594).

So, while the characterisation of the poor foolish child, Ignorance, is possibly sympathetic, the fault of ignorance is the state into which Wit has culpably fallen. The consequences of this wilful fall become evident during the succeeding scene, in which Wyt meets up with his supposed fiancée, the Lady Science. There is instant misunderstanding between the two of them since Wit is unaware of his appearance. Science's indignant rejection of him bemuses him and then angers him to the point where he threatens violence against her. The final exchange again reveals Redford's strategy. Wit claims that Science is treating him as a fool, he thinks a fool natural, to which she replies:

> I take ye for no naturall foole
> Browght up a-mong the innocentes scoole,
> But for a nawghty vycious foole,
> Browght up wyth Idellnes in her scoole.
> Of all arrogant fooles thow art one. (ll. 787-91)

And she sweeps out, leaving Wit, angry, frustrated and extremely puzzled. Reaching for the looking glass of Reason, Wit then sees for himself the extent of his degradation. He looks into the audience and discovers all their faces "fayre and cleere", while his is "As black as the devyll" and himself

> a foole alone,
> Deckt, by Goges bones, lyke a very asse.
> Ingnorance cote, hoode, eares—ye, by the masse,
> Kokscome and all—I lak but a bable' (ll. 814-17).

He blames Idleness, who has wreaked this change on him, so that "the stark foole I playe / Before all people" (l. 825-26). Only admission of his fault and the forgiveness of Reason, and, above all, of Lady Science can recover Wit from the shame of ignorance. And Redford's dénouement, as one can anticipate,

brings all this about because it is in his interest to demonstrate how necessary it is to avoid falling into the trap of idleness. That leads to the stigma of ignorance, where ignorance, far from being the mark of a simple fool natural, is an apparently degenerate state of being, Vives's beast and Colet's fountain of evil.

What Vives or Colet could not have known, however, was that over the sixteenth century changes would come about that would transform these thoughts on ignorance into a Protestant critique of Catholicism. To the Protestant mind ignorance came to belong with superstition and the devotions of the Catholic church as marks of the errors of the old religion. Significantly, in her Coronation Procession, Queen Elizabeth was met at Cornhill by a pageant where she was represented as the epitome of True Religion and Love of Subjects. Beneath her feet lay crushed Superstition and Ignorance. So Ignorance as an emblem of the outdated religion took its place in the public domain of religious observance and faith.

When, therefore, William Wager, in 1569-70, came to write his two plays, *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art* and *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*, we must assume that this conceptual change was sufficiently familiar to be understood by audiences, for Ignorance as a representative Papist appears in both. In *The Longer Thou Livest* Wager constructs his play around the figure of the fool, Moros, who, like Everyman and Humanity before him, is central to the idea that man is a fallible creature. In terms of his life journey, however, Moros is most like the Ignorance of Rastell, antagonistic to everything that will better him. His first advisers, Piety, Discipline and Exercitation, try hard to educate him. By turns they encourage him, threaten him and thrash him in their attempts to transform him and save him from himself. He is totally unwilling, and in the end they are obliged to give up on him.

Within this frame, and when Moros is at the height of his worldly career, he is supported in his folly by Fortune. She introduces first the companions Wrath, Idleness and Incontinence, and then a further trio of advisers, Impiety, Cruelty and Ignorance. They make up a powerfully corrupting sextet, but the character of Ignorance is given an especially interesting persona. Wrath comments at his first entrance that he comes "As he were blind, about he doth pore" (l. 1243). Just as telling, perhaps, is the fact that Ignorance is trailing behind his companions Cruelty and Impiety. He has, therefore, both poor sight and a lack of vitality. The conversation with Wrath also establishes that these three advisers have surrogate names. The other two are Philosophy and Prudence, while

Ignorance is simply Antiquity. Such personification through action and naming is a familiar tactic. In this case it creates for the audience a figure of inadequacy and out-datedness as much as of wickedness.

Ignorance is allowed to speak for himself:

> Ignorance, yea Ignorance is my name,
> A meet mate with fools to dwell,
> A quality of an ancient fame;
> And yet drown I many one in hell. (ll. 1273-76)

Significantly, he reveals that his special clients are the Papists:

> I have so taught them that howsoever the wind blow,
> They shall still incline to my sentence,
> So that though they have knowledge and cunning,
> They are but ignorant and fools. (ll. 1279-82)

Furthermore, he says that though they try to excuse themselves in their erroneous beliefs, nevertheless

> their acts are wicked and evil;
> Therefore, when they shall come before the Lord,
> He shall condemn them with Satan the devil. (ll. 1290-92)

Ignorance, while thus directing his animus against Papists, is also to be understood as their confederate.

Now Moros enters in the company of Impiety and Cruelty. He is disguised with "*a foolish beard*" (p. 53, SD) to give him "a gentleman's countenance" (l. 1298). Impiety does his best to introduce the three advisers by their assumed names of Philosophy, Prudence and Antiquity, but in the spirit of ignorance and folly, Moros renames them again "Pild-Lousy" for Philosophy, "Fip-pence" for Prudence and "Tandidity", possibly meaning "lump of excrement", for Antiquity (l. 1325). Ignorance nevertheless seems impressed by Moros, whom he has greeted as "a proper gentleman" (l. 1306). He expresses the wish to do him the best service that he can. For a while Impiety holds the floor, speaking in the assumed name of Philosophy, but then moves to advise Moros about "Such as go up into pulpits and preach, / Especially these new fellows, to them give no ear. . . . For it is but all heresy that they do tell" (ll. 1391-92, 1396). At the end he exhorts Moros to "Endeavour yourself to be acquainted / With your noble counselor Antiq-

uity" (ll. 1407-8). So in this play Impiety and Ignorance are strongly identified with the old religion and, working together, they advise Moros to oppose the "new fellows" and their preaching.

Shortly Cruelty and Impiety leave the stage, again encouraging Moros to follow the advice of Antiquity, "prudent and full of sagacity; / His counsel see that you do believe" (ll. 1499-1500). There now follows a series of farcical actions that not only provoke laughter but also emphasise the fellowship and shared characteristics of Moros and Ignorance. The first of these concerns a feather for Moros's cap. The feather, says Moros, "will make me a gentleman alone" (l. 1544). Once it's in his cap, he can't, of course, see it, and, twisting round to find it above his head, he trips and hurts his knee. Ignorance then tries to take him in hand. It is obvious that the fellow doesn't wear his finery very well: "your sword is between your legs" (l. 1566), says Ignorance, and, "let me help you to set your gown right" (l. 1569), and such like. He fusses round his *protégé* to smarten him up. Ignorance is now firmly joined with Moros in this foolish exchange.

At this moment Discipline re-enters to confront them and voices an attack on Moros. "Good audience", he says,

> note this fool's proceeding.
> In tender age, in Idleness he was nuzzled.
> In adolency, when pubes was springing,
> Touching virtue as a dog that is muzzled,
> Ill-willing to learn and therefore unapt,
> All his senses he applied to vice. (ll. 1581-86)

This is followed by much more of the same. Finally, he makes a direct link between Ignorance and the old religion—"Behold here he is led with Ignorance / So that he will not believe the verity" (ll. 1605-6)—where, of course, the verity is the Protestant truth.

The character of Ignorance then eggs his man on to combat Discipline, but, in the fashion of comic *lazzi*, stays well out of range of any consequence there might be. "I would see you boldly him to withstand" (l. 1620), he says, "Are you afraid? For very shame, draw near" (l. 1623). Moros puts up a good show of cowardly resistance, shouting, roaring and waving his sword about, while in steady retreat. He has no intention of getting too close to Discipline. At the very last Moros and Ignorance, shamed, retire from the confrontation and disappear offstage. Thus Ignorance as a character has fulfilled his role as Moros's alter ego,

showing antagonism to learning in general and, in Wager's version, adherence to the old religion in particular. Ignorance's capacity foolishly to entertain is shaded with an extreme kind of rebuke to those who continue to resist the spirit of the age moving towards Protestant doctrine and practice. However, it should be noted that while Ignorance serves one purpose in this play as representative of the old religion, Moros is truly the beast of ignorance shown in the previous discussion. He is indeed a child of folly but utterly reprehensible, and he earns his passport to damnation when, at the end, he is carried off piggy-back straight to hell.

In Wager's other known play, *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*, the figure of Ignorance also features. This time, however, the satire against the old religion is more obvious. Ignorance arrives, again late in the play, purportedly as chaplain to Worldly Man, at the moment when Worldly Man has been taken ill, persecuted by God's Plague. Ignorance, alias Sir Nicholas, is represented as a priest who is very drunk indeed and still thirsty: "Cham faint by gisse, would ich had a little more bum" (l. 1252); "I can drink a gallon and eat never a bit" (l. 1254). He is a parody of a dissipated Catholic Priest. Unashamed, he announces he has "spouted with the Genevians, twenty on a row" (l. 1259) and, "With a piece of Latin I set them all on dry land" (l. 1262). On the promise of a pot of beer, he proceeds to spout a piece of macaronic Latin. Despite Covetous's suggestion that it was "out of doubt a worthy piece of learning" (l. 1270), it would be clear to an audience that here was nonsense, with the added suggestion that it belongs with Papist practice. Worldly Man, meanwhile, begins to fail and claims a need for both physical and spiritual help. Covetous and Ignorance panic and fuss over him to try to bring him round. Ignorance staggers off to find a physician. He returns with a doctor with the unlikely name of Dr Flebeshiten who attempts to take charge of the care of Worldly Man. The Doctor's false expertise, however, is as much part of the farce as the antics of Covetous and Ignorance. To that extent he seems to derive directly from the doctors of folk drama who attempt unlikely cures with their quackery. There follows a series of farcical exchanges, with Ignorance running on and offstage, busying himself with drinks and other things to help. But it is all to no avail. Worldly Man is declining fast. He decides to make his will. Ignorance offers to write it for him but his attempts to write are hopelessly inadequate. Before anything significant can be written, Worldly Man falls down dead. So the death of Worldly Man occurs in a comic episode that reflects badly on the two characters. Ignorance, especially, appears inadequate. He is both

drunk and barely literate, despite being able to rattle off nonsensical Latin, and makes only poor attempts at pastoral engagement. Any idea of spiritual support is totally absent from his role. But despite the satirical edge to the presentation of Ignorance as the drunken cleric, he makes his exit with Covetous more in the theatrical manner of a fool. This is confirmed by the fact that Covetous's final lines are a direct address to the audience: "Come, let us go hence, here is no more to be said. / Farewell my masters, our parts we have played" (ll. 1426-27).

To conclude, therefore, it becomes apparent that, despite the infrequency of his appearances, the figure of Ignorance, whenever it was deployed, carried with it a moral dimension that these three playwrights in their different ways sought to exploit. This personification, in at least three cases, was extreme enough to provide an opposition to the central character's attempts to reform his life. In the case of Moros, however, although he clearly is characterised as a fool, the disposition accorded him by the playwright made him an archetype of the kind of ignorance that provoked the anathema of Rastell, Vives and Colet. An audience can be left in little doubt that Moros is unredeemable. In dramatic terms, by contrast, the actual figure of Ignorance was nicely ambivalent in a familiar way. He was both reprehensible and at the same time foolishly entertaining. Audiences, as seems always to have been the case, were thus invited to laugh at and feel superior to such an errant creature, even while they possibly remained critical of the implications and consequences of his folly. It may be impossible to read these different roles of Ignorance other than independently of each other; nevertheless, the different dramatic functions of the figure may sufficiently coalesce to make something like a familial relationship and to allow a suggestion that they all dance to the tune of folly.

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