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## *The Function Called “Commentator” in Some Early Tudor Interludes*

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“Alas, that I had no good fellow here  
To bere me cumpny and laugh at thys gere!  
Thys game was well founde!”  
(*Nature*, II.883-85)

**T**HIS REGRET is expressed by Envy in Medwall’s *Nature*, after he has played a very cruel practical joke on Pride, pretending that the latter was late turning up for the battle against Reason, and so was dismissed from the army of the vices and had consequently lost both his “office” and “fees”. Moreover he has made a fool of himself. In the lines just quoted, Envy passes an encomiastic and complacent comment on his own trick. We, as spectators, have also been witnesses of the same trick and have probably appreciated it for what it is worth. This commentary on a scene we have already been shown as part of the show we are watching is probably meant to set off this embedded game, which can be appreciated in isolation as a short self-contained comedy. It has another effect: to point to the presence of the spectators while pretending the character is alone. In fact, Envy is alone on stage, but not in the theatre or the hall in which the interlude is performed. This comic ambiguity is soon cleared up by Sensuality, who has just come in and declares:

Yes, and ye lust to play the knave  
Some maner of cumpany ye myght have  
Here wythin thys grounde. (II.886-88)

In fact, Envy has already played the knave, and is now going to play it again, but in a different mode: in the account he is going to give of the event we have already watched, he uses a device, frequent in Medwall's plays, and which Medwall is not the only dramatist to use, a device I have elsewhere described as *metalepsis*. This narrative about the same incident stands as another embedded piece, and can be construed as a commentary on the dramatic version we have just had immediately before. Now, it is Sensuality who is the addressee of this relation, and his reaction is a compliment that is another commentary: "Now on my fayth, thys was madly do!" (919).

This example illustrates the very close and subtle interweaving of dramatic, although in most cases purely verbal, action and commentary. This alternation between what one might call, on the one hand, active and, on the other, more reflective passages, seems to point to two different functions of language: performative language, most commonly used in drama, and descriptive or constative language, more typical of narration. The example quoted also shows that the passages of commentary do not mean a pause in the action; on the contrary, they may constitute a new start in the action, if performed by different means. If, in the first passage, Envy directly mocks Pride and so, by this explicit attack, tries to modify the relationship between himself and the other character, in the same way, in the second passage Envy tries to create complicity with Sensuality by telling him a story which he thinks this interlocutor will appreciate—which is the case, as Sensuality's positive commentary shows without ambiguity. At the end of the narrative their relationship is modified.

This effect may possibly be explained by the semiotic status of these discourses: the news reported in both cases has little value as information—Pride being absent from the battle, or Envy having chafed Pride by the said news—but rather for the impression made on the real addressee, that is, the eavesdropper. In each case the main effect of the utterance is in its perlocutory rather than illocutory value.

A related problem lies in what traditional editors call "asides". Let's take Haphazard's well-known entrance at the beginning of *Appius and Virginia*:

Very well sir, very well sir, it shalbe done  
As fast as ever I can prepare;  
Who dippes with the Divel he had neede have a long spoone. (175-77)

The Vice's monologue comes after the picture of perfect family bliss in Virginia's home, which culminates in the preceding scene. In the passage just quoted, whom is the Vice speaking to? The received analysis is that the "sir" he is addressing is the Devil mentioned in the third line, who remains hidden in the wings. So, the first two lines constitute an instance of a usual form of dramatic conversation with a hidden partner. Notice that the language used is performative in a double sense: first as dramatic speech, secondly in this particular case, because the character Haphazard formally promises to do something ("it shalbe done"), as one would do in ordinary life.

Two remarks may be made about the third line. First it is a proverbial saying, which could be paraphrased as "people say that . . .", and as such, needs no particularized enunciator. Secondly, who is the addressee? It is obviously a commentary on the situation created by the first two lines: the conversation with the invisible Devil. But it is no aside, because there is no main speech by whose "side" it would stand. And, being a proverbial saying, it is a particularly strong example of co-enunciation, because it voices a piece of common knowledge, here in the form of a warning perhaps directed at the characters (although they belong to the illusory world of the theatre), but chiefly meant as a guide, in order to facilitate the spectators' interpretation. This line serves as an introduction to the Vice's traditional self-presentation. It is not surprising that, after this neutral and almost enunciator-less utterance, a stronger presence of the enunciator should have been felt expedient. This type of set self-portrait can also be taken as a kind of commentary upon his illusory self and, owing to its ancient ancestry in the traditional rural plays (mummers' plays) it has a status comparable to that of the proverbial sayings; the source of enunciation is shared between character and audience.

Such phenomena as the commentary-like self-portrait (which has, by the way, nothing to do with introspection), or Envy's narration of the trick he played on Pride (in *Nature*), which are numerous in, and typical of, the English Vice-play, I would call dynamic commentaries. They can be considered as one of the springs of the plots and give the audience a structural part to play in such dramatic pieces (one could also cite Sensuality's symmetrical account of man's gallant bout in the Tavern in Margery's company).

I would like to consider now two main manifestations of the commentator: first, how he reinforces the structure of the interlude; secondly, how his commentary is the main motif in a number of late interludes (from the 1560s to the 1570s), in which dramatic action and characters are minimized and limited to the dimensions of short vignettes or *exempla*.

The commentary may be used to emphasize the different stages of the evolution of the plot hatched by mischievous, rowdy, boisterous or evil-minded characters—or by the Vice, if such a character appears among the *dramatis personae*. The commentaries are mostly explicit and take the form of a direct address to the audience. In spite of the variety of structures, most plots reach a climax preceded by an episode of preparation and followed by certain effects or changes in the situation.

The first stage is to be found before the action proper, when plans are being drawn up. I will call this stage the “titillation of anticipation”. Right from the beginning of Udall’s *Respublica*, Avarice appears as the head, or “founder”, of the group of vices, even if he pretends that he has delegated his authority to a follower of his, Insolence. By this delegation is manifested the power of both parties: that of the one at the origin of the delegation, and that of the beneficiary. Referring to their plans concerning the spoliation of *Respublica*’s goods, Insolence comments “this gear will right well accord” (258). He imagines that with *Respublica*’s money he will “have castles and towns in every shire” (274). This daydreaming is also a sort of commentary on an as-yet-unrealized situation, which nevertheless appears real to him.

Likewise, at the beginning of *Nature*, after the introduction involving Nature and World, Pride starts plotting with his friend Sensuality and intimates that if he can approach Mankind, and seduce him, he is sure to make him swerve from the path of virtue:

Aquaunt me wyth that man, and care not thou—  
The mater shall spede. (l.856-57)

After Pride has imparted to him the details of his plan, Sensuality rejoices at the prospect of man’s fall: “Surely thys conseyt ys well found” (886). Likewise, in Bale’s polemical history play, *Kyng Johan*, Usurped Power approves of Sedition’s plan to overthrow the king: “thys counsell ys good” (982). This commentary is the go-ahead signal, and is immediately followed by the return on stage of the conspirators in disguise, and so ready to realize their *coup*.

The most remarkable example of this titillation at the prospect of the undoing of virtuous characters is probably in *Like Will to Like*, by Ulpian Fulwel. After having organized the fall of his own friends and fellow-sinners, Nichol Newfangle alone on stage bursts into laughter at the idea of the fate that awaits his former accomplices, the sinister halter and the gallows. No other Vice is more explicit: “But mark well this game, I see this gear frame” (595). We may note the same reaction on the part of Inclination in *The Trial of Treasure* (743), attributed to William Wager, and Infidelity in Lewis Wager’s *Mary Magdalene* (910-13).

A last example: *All For Money*, by Thomas Lupton, treats this point in a slightly different way. This play has an intriguing structure, somewhat akin to that of John Heywood’s *The Play of the Weather*. The second part is constituted by a round of solicitors who ask All-for-Money for relief in their money problems. After a long introduction which consists of the half-allegorical, half-farcical births of Pleasure, Sin (the Vice) and Damnation, and of a debate in the medieval vein among Learning-without-Money, Money-without-Learning and Neither-Money-Not-Learning, Money and Sin set up in business All-for-Money, who hopes to make still more money as a corrupt judge. Unlike most Vices, Sin is rather pessimistic about his chances of success. All-for-Money finds that “suitors in coming are very slack” (946). This example of pessimism is not unique, however: in *Lusty Juventus*, the Devil also expresses his doubts about the success of his contrivances: “I trow this gear will come to nought” (325).

But is not this a comic trick intended to build up the suspense and so whet the spectators’ interest, and, as a consequence, underline the articulation between “phase one” and “phase two”?

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“Phase two” means success. I suggest we call it “the relish of realization”. One of the clearest and most spontaneous expressions of joy will be found in *The Trial of Treasure*, when Inclination has managed to convince Lust to come round to his views: “Now by my halidom . . . / better sport in my life I never saw” (443). In older plays, the same exultation signals the (temporary) success of Lucifer:

Off my dysyere now have I summe  
 Wer onys brought into custume,  
 Then farwell consyens, he wer clumme [i.e., silent]  
 I xulde have all my wyll. (*Wisdom*, 519-22)

Another way of expressing satisfaction for Lucifer and the characters he has converted to his philosophy is through singing. Unfortunately, the text of the song is now lost, but the intention of such group-singing is clear, as is humorously expressed by Will: “The Devyll hym spede that myrthe exyled” (620). A more subtle and devious way of expressing such jubilation is the use of the interrogative form. Mind asks, “How be this trow ye now?” (621)—a question which may apply to the song or to the situation more generally, which belongs to the phase usually known as “life in sin”. Mind’s companions answer the question, which was perhaps also directed to the audience. Direct address, such as calls for cooperation, is the only device which can suggest the participation of the spectators, who are not supposed to answer or act in any way. As an illustration, one may quote the beginning of Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrez*; when B knocks at the door, nobody opens, as is implied by his reaction:

A man may rappe tyll hys nayles ake,  
Or any of them wyll the labour take  
To gyve hym an answer. (II.78-80)

Similarly, when Worldly Affection in *Nature* asks the “pyld knave” (hairy bloke) to fetch a stool, he gets no answer:

Thou pyld knave, I speke to the,  
How long shall I stande? (II.518-9)

In *Common Conditions*, an anonymous play of a different kind, and with an unconventional structure for an interlude, success is highlighted by a commentary of self-satisfaction, first in the circle of the tinkers: “How say you my masters, how like you this device?” (75). The Vice laughs, “Ah, ah, ah”, and exclaims, “this gear cottons”, several times in the course of the play; he spends more time in announcing his tricks and expressing his admiration for his own wit, than in actually performing them.

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The final phase may be termed “the reckoning”. In many cases, no time is left to the Vice to react to his final success or failure, as he is abruptly whisked off to prison or to Hell, or just disappears to escape punishment.

The most neutral and non-committal reaction is that of Covetous in William Wager’s *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*: “Farewell, my masters, our parts we have played”

(1427). A favourite commentary is that given in an interrogative form. In *Like Will to Like*, Nichol Newfangle never repents. A few lines earlier he is taken to Hell on the Devil's back. This is one of the pseudo-traditional exits for the Vice, remembered by Ben Jonson in the *Staple of News* and by other authors of the seventeenth century, but which in fact happens only twice in the extant corpus: in *Like Will to Like*, *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*, *Kyng Johan*, John Marston's *Histriomastix* and *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art*, also by William Wager. Nichol Newfangle's laughter also marks the last phase of the action—"Ha, ha, ha, there is a brace of hounds, / Behold the huntsman leadeth away" (Fulwel, 1168-69)—and his final words consist in two questions addressed to anonymous members of the audience: "Why then, good gentle boy, how likest thou this play?" (1176); "How say you, little Meg?" (1183). He had previously put the question to the audience in general (1123), then reproached them with their normal and structurally determined passivity: "Do all you hold your peace?" (1175).

A particularly interesting passage is situated at the end of *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*. Worldly Man pretends to be ill and asks for a doctor. The Doctor enters with the well known words, "stand back" and "give room", and finally asks to be paid, which immediately suggests the episode of the fool's death in the mummings' play. This mock-death here receives a grotesque treatment, which prompts the doctor to make this humorous tongue-in-cheek comment: "it is no time to jest". He then asks the audience, "Passion of me, Masters, count you this a play?" (1339). The traditional doctor episode constitutes, indeed, a play-within-the-play, with a strong flavour of co-enunciation, and can therefore be counted as a metadramatic commentary.

The hasty final commentaries offered by those who have provided most of the action and comedy, or even the complete absence of such commentaries in many plays, constitutes an awkward situation and makes for a real anticlimax, for totally passive preachers win the day against the amusers, musicians, singers and dancers who have (even if only partially) enlisted the spectators' sympathy and, sometimes, enthusiasm. Here again the comments reveal the inner meaning and ambiguities of such plays.

#### IV

Proverbial comedies are a special category of play in which the natural features of the interlude are exaggerated to their limits—plays in which commentary eclipses action. These plays usually have proverbial phrases as titles, such as the already mentioned *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art* and *The Tide Tarrieth no Man*.



In *The Longer Thou Livest*, a substantial part of the text is in majority made up of Latin quotations, each followed by an action which is explicitly conceived as an illustration of the corresponding moral sentence: “These verses I may on you signify” (134). A variety of the scene is to be found in the lesson given by Discipline to Moros, there mixed with a farcical element provided by the stupidity of the pupil. (The same scene occurs in John Redford’s *Wit and Science* [444-600].) In such a scene, language prevails over action; furthermore, the random and absurd language used by Moros is in total contrast with the organized argumentation of Discipline. The discourse of Moros is void of sense and unable to reflect an enunciator. Thus it has the same status as the wise sayings of the virtues: in both cases, the use of language hinders the constitution of an enunciator, and so fails to imply the existence of subjectivity behind the dialogues.

*Enough Is as Good as a Feast* contains at least eight occurrences of the saying used as a title for the play. The traditional episodes are included in the temptation cycle (decision to corrupt man, plans for that temptation, change of names, fall of man, illustrative vignettes with social overtones, death of man) and each episode is ended, as by a coda, with the same repeated saying.

In *Like Will to Like*, the proverb of the title is repeated ten times, and in the case of *The Tide Tarrieth no Man*, eighteen times! In the latter play, the commentator is the mock schoolmaster—in fact, Inclination, the Vice (173). The Vice has a particularly important part in *The Tide Tarrieth* and in similar plays, as he is the link between heterogeneous vignettes. The importance of commentary in the period of the late interludes is probably due to the polemical or didactic use that type of play was put to, chiefly by Protestant authors.

## V

In a previous study of the functions of the Vice, I distinguished six functions: three dramatic, and three metadramatic. The latter three were: messenger, manipulator and commentator. Since then, I have had many opportunities of re-working the subject, and the more I pry into these subtle and recondite distinctions, the weaker and more uncertain they appear to me. The categories may perhaps be of some use for the purpose of analysis, but it must be admitted that they constantly overlap and fade into one another. These interferences reflect the close structural proximity of language and action in drama—a literary genre in which language is certainly action, and action may be a language.

In this context, and with reference to the theme of this collection of essays, it is consequently worth considering the question: who is in, who—or what—is

out? Are the manipulators and commentators—i.e., those who come under the generic heading of mediators—more, or less, “at home” in such a play than the more fully represented characters, endowed with social, historical or legendary backgrounds? I think the question worth asking, when one can find, in a piece of modern criticism, the story of Lucrece and her suitors described as the *main* plot of *Fulgens and Lucrece*, while A, B and Joan’s actions are relegated to the *underplot*. I would like to ask: who opens and closes each half of the play? Who manipulates whom? What must one think of Lucrece’s willingness to step down from her socially superior position to join in a bawdy farcical exchange with B, a member of the “underplot”?

In view of these uncertainties, it seems more reasonable than ever to consider the mediating role played by the agonist, and perhaps to go further and suggest that, in Tudor drama, the mediator can play an agonist’s part—then, finally, to imagine that Tudor plays (or, rather, our view of them) can be turned inside-out like Feste’s cheveril glove (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, III.i.12).

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