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Responsables scientifiques

Richard HILLMAN, André LASCOMBES & Pauline RUBERRY-BLANC

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“For eche of you one tale shall tell”: Religion, Debate and Spectacle in John Heywood’s The Foure PP

Roberta MULLINI
Università di Urbino “Carlo Bo”

When I started reading John Heywood’s plays, many years ago, I felt uneasy about the structure of his interludes, given their debate-like “format”. All this in spite of valuable criticism—such as Joel B. Altman’s—which studied them from the point of view of their hermeneutical content and their intellectual stance. When, though, I had to enact the Friar in my students’ performance of *The Pardoner and the Frere* in 1998, I fully realised how powerful a theatrical means debate can be, when joined to the skill of such an expert man of the theatre as Heywood.

Later, I also wrote about the debate structure, because the paradox of a type of theatre where nothing seems to “happen” is not easily acceptable (Mullini, “Dialogue and Debate in John Heywood’s Plays”; see also *Mad merry Heywood*). And here I am once again, this time limiting my scope to one of the so-called “farces”—*The Foure PP*—which reveals itself to be much richer in its theological and religious intent than expected, while appearing perhaps the dullest of all Heywoodian products from a theatrical point of view, notwithstanding its genre label.

The Religious Debate

The play, printed around 1544 but probably written in the late 1520s (or early 1530s, according to Axton and Happé, pp. 41, 45), has no plot proper, but is merely the “transcription” of a four-character dialogue about which of the protagonists is superior, for the length of 1243 lines. Three of the four protagonists, a Palmer, an Apothecary (“Potycary”) and a Pardoner, take long turns in the first part of the play in showing their individual superiority,¹ until the Pedler—the last to arrive on stage—decides that the controversy will be decided on the basis of a lying contest, which in the end he declares won by the Palmer because of the latter’s apparently inconspicuous and (ironically) misogynistic comment about women:

Yet in all places where I have ben,
Of all the women that I have sene,
I never sawe nor knewe, to my consyens,
Any one woman out of paciens. (ll. 1000-3)

Before and after the contest (the theatricality of which will be discussed later), the characters debate about the best way to obtain salvation. The Palmer defends his going on pilgrimages, the Pardoner his selling of relics, the Potycary his ambiguous and sometimes deadly remedies, which send souls to heaven. The Pedler appears to be extraneous to the argument, since he declares that he has joined the company only to earn “Some money for parte of the ware in my packe” (l. 215). After the Palmer’s victory, the Pedler starts talking about individual talents and virtues (ll. 1137-86), exhorting his companions to overcome all differences because “One kynde of vertue to dyspyse another / Is lyke as the syster myght hange the brother” (ll. 1185-86). At the very end of the play, the Palmer prays that God will guide all people “In the fayth of hys churche universall” (l. 1234).

It is evident that much more than the ending of a playful interlude is at stake, not only in the words quoted, but also in the text as a whole. The topical relevance of *The Foure PP* has often been highlighted: when the play was probably written, King Henry VIII was resolute on his divorce from Catherine of Aragon (and in January 1533 he had married Anne Boleyn), thus going well

1 The interlude is not divided into sections; for the sake of analysis, I propose a division into three parts: the first leading up to the lying contest (ll. 1-698), the second including the two tales of wonder till the end of the ensuing strife (ll. 699-1136), the third extending from the rounding-off of the initial situation to the end (ll. 1137-234).

beyond the breaking point with the Pope and the Catholic Church. It is interesting to note that Heywood uses the English adjective “universal” instead of the more common (but at the time abhorred by the Protestant party) “catholic”, very probably in order, on the one hand, to avoid the immediate accusation of taking sides with the Pope in the divorce cause, but, on the other, to stress his faith in the old religion, here presented as the only possible one in opposition to all heresies, once abuses have been removed. Therefore, the interlude obliquely includes controversial themes, both political and religious, once more showing how its author was able to offer his “conservative” plays by “subliminally” embedding his catholic orthodoxy in them.² It is clear, then, that Heywood was deeply indebted to the Catholic polemical production of the time, especially to his wife’s uncle, Sir Thomas More.

Candace Lines has argued that “The intensity of the salvation debate in *Pardoner* [published in 1533 by William Rastell] is never reached in *The Foure PP*, however. Instead the debate quickly turns ludicrous”, so that we see “the transformation of the controversial into the comic” (pp. 415-16). Despite the nearly total uncertainty about the dates of composition of Heywood’s plays, *The Foure PP* may be supposed to have been written after *The Pardoner and the Frere*, at least considering the elaboration of the pardoner figure from *Pardoner* to *The Foure PP*. This might explain a more virulent attack on abuses in the former play, which was likely composed before More concluded his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529, revised 1531), when things royal appeared perhaps still subject to change and the dispute with the Roman Church seemed capable of being brought by “persuasion” to a less bloody conclusion. Critics have always stressed the presence of More’s influence in Heywood’s drama, finding it, however, in different works. Analysing *The Foure PP* and reading it in the light of *Utopia*, Alcuin Blamires argues that More and Heywood shared “the same cross-currents: satirizing the superstitious abuse of Catholic practices by ecclesiastical hypocrites” (p. 53). In his turn, Altman—who hypothesises that the play was written in 1520-22—perceives a relationship with More’s *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523), because, in his opinion, the play “seems to have been an attempt to address the same problem”—the refutation of Luther’s attack against the king—“with the intent of defusing the potency

2 See Walker’s interpretation of Heywood’s *The Play of the Wether* in *Plays of Persuasion*, p. 167. For an analysis of orthodoxy in *The Pardoner and the Frere*, see Caputo (I thank the author for sending me her article).

of the Lutheran attack on ecclesiastical abuses” (p. 249). Altman also cites the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* in relation to *The Foure PP*, but, given his attribution of the play to the early 1520s, he does not acknowledge any connection between the two, and he calls More’s work an “abortive fiction” written when “the situation had deteriorated”, too late “for this vision to carry much conviction” (pp. 249–50). Axton and Happé, on the other hand, conclude their presentation of the sources of the play by saying that “The defence of pilgrimage and the dramatic authority given to the Palmer’s final utterances align Heywood’s point of view with that of More in *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and indicate [a] roughly contemporary date of composition c. 1528–30” (p. 45).³ Lines agrees that *The Foure PP* “echoes the orthodox position More asserts in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*” (p. 420).

The religious discourse of the interlude is introduced chiefly by the Palmer and by the Pedler in the third part of the text, after the lying competition, but also—before the “tales of marvel”—by the Palmer’s self-presentation and by the Pardoner’s display of his fake relics. In the former case, religion is clearly the main, and serious, topic of discourse; in the latter, it surfaces through the embedded satire against the superstition linked to the veneration of saints’ shrines and to the selling of pardons. (Catholic) Christian tolerance is highlighted in the Palmer’s speeches at the end of the play, after the severe but jocular satire of the first part. It is here, actually, that Heywood’s Catholic stance and alignment with More’s position are at their most evident, since abuses are displayed and attacked at the same time, thus showing the playwright’s oblique way of presenting a contrast with the Protestants’ accusations, while advocating reforms from inside the Catholic church.

Heywood shows all his skill when doing this. Thus, after the Palmer has pronounced his monologue listing all the places of his pilgrimages, the Pardoner sceptically intervenes to deflate his interlocutor’s praise of pilgrimages: “And when ye have gone as farre as ye can, / For all your labour and gostely entente, / Yet welcome home as wyse as ye wente” (ll. 64–66). In the same way, as soon the Pardoner presents himself, saying, “Truly I am a pardoner” (l. 106), the Palmer comments:

Truely a pardoner that may be true
 But a true pardoner doth nat ensew.
 Ryght selde is it sene or never
 That treuth and pardoners dwell together. (ll. 107–10)

3 See also the notes to the text of the interlude, pp. 247–62.

And when the Potycary joins the company, he soon extols his own way of sending people to heaven, commenting to the Pardoner: “If a thousande pardons about your neckes were teyd, / When come they to heven yf they never dyed?” (ll. 189–90).

When talking to his fictional guest, the Messenger, in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, More discusses the practice of pilgrimage at length in the third chapter of Book One, which ends with the following exhortation: “Now maketh your reason, as I said, no more againste pilgrimages, than against every chirch. For god is not bounden to the place, nor our confidence bounden to the place, but unto god (though we reckon our praier more pleasant to god in the chirch than without, bicause hys hygh goodnes accepteth it so) in likewise do not we reken our lord bounden to the place or image where the pilgrymage is, though we worship god there, because hymself lyked so to have it” (p. 123, col. 1).

All the chapters of Book One from Three to Nineteen deal with pilgrimages. More’s general position can be summed up by the words introducing Chapter Fifteen: “*The author sheweth that if of those miracles that are told and written to be done at divers pylgrimages and commonly believed for very trew, we certaynlye knew some falsely fayned, yet were that no cause to mistrust the remenaunt*” (p. 136, col. 2; italics in the original). The parallel with the Palmer’s attitude when defending his participation in pilgrimages and, in the third part of the play, when asking for tolerance and acceptance of diversity, is evident. More’s later discussion of the need to have faith in the Church’s teaching turns out to be similar to the Palmer’s ending lines: “And now sith ye graunt, and I also, that the church can not misseunderstand the scripture to the hinderance of the right faith, in things of necessity [to salvation], and that ye also knowlege this matter to be such, that it must either be the right beleve and acceptable service to god or els a wronge and erronious opinion and plain ydolatrie, it foloweth of necessite that the church doth not misse understand [*sic*] those textes that ye or any other can allege, and bryng foorth for that purpose” (p. 149, col. 1).

The discussion about images, relics, and pilgrimages continues in Book Two of the *Dialogue*, and here again More’s words about the despicable behaviour of pilgrims, as related by his guest, resound in favour of the abolition of abuses, but certainly not of the Reformation as such: “For if it [praying to saints, going on pilgrimage and worshipping relics and imagves] maye bee wel done, then though many wold misseuse it, yet doth al that nothing minishe the goodnes of the thyng self. For if we should, for the misseuse of a good thinge and for the evilles

that grow sometime in the abuse thereof, not amend the mysseuse but utterly put the hole use awai, we should then make marvailous chaunges in the world” (p. 198, col. 2).

Similarly, Heywood undermines the danger represented by the abusive Pardoner by getting him to accept the Pedler’s offer of reconciliation:

Pedler. For his and all other that ye knowe fayned,
Ye be nother counceled nor constrayned
To any suche thyng in any suche case
To gyve any reverence in any suche place.
But where ye dout, the truthe nat knowynge,
Belevynge the beste, good may be growynge.
In judgynge the beste no harme at the leste;
In judgynge the worste, no good at the beste.
But beste in these thynges it semeth to me,
To make no judgement upon ye.
But as the churche doth judge or take them,
So do ye receyve or forsake them.
And so be sure ye can nat erre,
But may be a frutfull folower.
Potycary. Go ye before and, as I am true man,
I wyll folow as faste as I can.
Pardoner. And so wyll I, for he hath sayd so well,
Reason wolde we shulde folowe hys counsell. (ll. 1203-20)

The Spectacle

Introducing his analysis of story-telling in John Heywood’s plays, Richard Axton observes that “the longest of these in-set stories takes about fifteen minutes to perform and requires the actor to impersonate voices and gestures of characters who are never seen by the audience: their presence is a collaborative act of imagination” (p. 43).

Here I would also like to discuss this position, which I broadly share, in the light of Jean-Paul Débax’s view that, in Heywood’s plays, “nothing happens on stage” and that “practically everything is narrative, and the dialogue has nothing to do with action” (pp. 35-36). The two critics do not actually say very different things; indeed, their positions as to the role of long narratives in the interludes result in a major (for Axton) and a minor (for Débax) stress on the relevance and importance of theatrical action vs. dramatic action. My personal stance is

that the way in which embedded narratives are constructed and the theatrical richness they display enhance, in the audience's eyes, the dramatic action itself. The most striking examples of this effect are to be found in the Potycary's and the Pardoner's tales during the lying contest in *The Foure PP*.⁴

First of all, one must keep in mind that lengthy speeches in drama may cause the spectators' attention to slacken, since dialogue seems to stop and give way to something absolutely less active.⁵ However, as John McGavin suggests, there are factors that affect the audience's toleration of long speeches, for example,

the location of the speech, e.g. whether or not it is technically outside the action of the play, such as the opening address of a Prolocutor or closing remarks of an Interpreter ... Some subjects traditionally receive lengthy treatment ... Other subjects permit length because of their generic affinities: sermons and proclamations are obvious examples ... spectators expect a variety of generic affinities stretching out from what is seen and heard, and are prepared to adjust their framework of response constantly to cooperate with this. (p. 91)

These preliminary remarks are necessary in order to stress that in *The Foure PP* the long speeches pronounced by the Potycary and the Pardoner find their full justification in the lying competition. They are located neither at the beginning nor at the end of the play, but in what I consider the second part, and are artfully introduced, so that the audience are ready to listen to the tales, the taller and the longer the better. Their expectations are raised by the Pedler's words, "eche of you one tale shall tell" (l. 700), which dispose of all other possible speech genres and signal a break with the previous repartee, thus soliciting the speakers to start and preparing the spectators to listen.

The Potycary's Tale

The tale of "mervell" required by the Pedler (l. 701) immediately becomes a tall tale, because the contextual frame devised by the speaker sets the events "no lenger ago / But *Anno domini millesimo*" (ll. 708-9). This beginning undercuts the

- 4 No Lover Nor Loved's speech in *A Play of Love* about his past love affair would also be worth analysing, but in this essay I shall focus only on the tales present in *The Foure PP*. I have dealt with No Lover Nor Loved's monologue in *Mad merry Heywood*.
- 5 Shakespeare shows that he realizes the theatrical weakness of long narrations when, for example, he makes Prospero interrupt his speech to Miranda in *The Tempest*, I.ii, with such phrases as "Dost thou attend me?" (78) and "Dost thou hear?" (106).

speaker's reliability yet obtains exactly what he wants, that is, his tale is to be interpreted like a lie. At the same time, the Potycary takes care that his internal audience (the other three protagonists of the interlude) and the spectators at large should be aware of the novelty of what he is going to say: "suer the most parte shall be new" (l. 707). This procedure seems similar to the beginning of jokes, when a person starts to recount "the latest" one—a joke which, presumably, is still unknown and therefore tellable.

The story told by the Potycary evolves up to line 768, developing an increasingly hyperbolic account of the effects produced by the "glyster" ministered to a young woman suffering from "fallen syknes". The sexual innuendoes of both illness and remedy are clear, especially when the Potycary declares that it was difficult for him to bring the girl to health because her mother suffered from the same disease: in other words, both mother and daughter were prostitutes. But soon after being mentioned, the sexual meanings are left aside, because what the speaker is more interested in is the scatological details to follow. The "glyster" becomes a "thampyon" (l. 732), which explodes "as it had thonderd" (l. 740), causing the total destruction of a castle ten miles away. The grotesque and gargantuan effects of the blown-up castle fill the river around it with stones, so that "who lyste nowe to walke therto, / May wade it over and wet no shoo" (ll. 758-59). The remedy, nevertheless, has been efficacious, and the girl is said to have recovered so well that, adds the Potycary, "I left her in good helth and luste— / And so she doth contynew, I truste" (ll. 767-68).

In his speech, the Potycary uses indirect discourse exclusively, without ever letting the "ill" girl say anything. This detail seems to reveal that the speaker's main interest consists, not in the presentation of a specific character as the protagonist of his story (even if, actually, he "creates" her at the beginning of his tale), but in the description and accumulation of the consequences of his cure: that is the "mervaylouse thyng" (l. 705) he wants to tell his listeners. That the focus on the audience is always very strong is witnessed by three very brief references and addresses to his onstage spectators at three crucial points of the tale. At line 717, after explaining that the "fallen syknes" was hereditary, the Potycary adds that, for his medical art, this caused his task to be "more harde ye may be sure". After some fifteen lines, on the point of naming the exact remedy administered to the girl, he calls for the audience's attention with, "Syr, at the last I gave her a glyster" (l. 731). And still later, after working on the spectators' expectations about the results of his cure and comparing them to those provoked by

the explosion of gunpowder, the Potycary manoeuvres the audience's attention explicitly with "now marke, for here begynneth the revell" (l. 742). With his first appeal, the Potycary seems to tease the medical competence and curiosity of his listeners; with the second, he appears to call for attention at the very climax of the "dirty" joke; with the third, he wants to prepare them for the extraordinarily hyperbolic event of the girl's recovery. The rhetorical procedures employed by the Potycary, therefore, rely not only on a skilful orchestration of the *dispositio* of his narrative material (of course, a worthy *inventio* must be taken for granted because of the general purpose of the marvellous tale), but also on an attentive *elocutio*, which is able to profit from the moments when the interaction with the audience is pragmatically more effective.

To the rhetorically rich texture of the Potycary's speech one must also add the physical presence of the actor's body, *i.e.*, the similarly ample gestures, which go hand-in-hand with the words. We cannot imagine such a speech being delivered by a stiff actor; on the contrary, the actor must mimic what he is saying with his whole body, so that the episode of his story-telling becomes a theatrical moment of high comedy, where "something happens", even if offstage and mediated by the speaker's evocative phrases.

The Pardoner's Tale

The Pardoner's tale is much longer than the Potycary's, extending from line 771 to line 976. Indeed, because of its complexity and beauty, it has been considered "an example of 'the short story' in early English literature" (Southern, p. 253).

As soon as the Potycary has finished telling his story, the Pedler comments on it for two lines; then the Pardoner starts, saying, "Well, syr, then marke what I can say" (l. 771). This speaker's attitude is that of a person who is well aware both of his own skill and of the value of the contest. Up to line 796, he narrates the ante-facts, so to speak: a friend of his died when he was away from home, so that he was not able to facilitate her way to heaven with his pardons; very sad and sorry for this, he decided to go on "thys journey for her sake" (l. 796). In this cataphoric way, his audience are invited to expect a travel story, but they cannot yet define what travel the narration will describe. The following line directly requires the spectators' attention (already invoked by the narrative programme of "thys journey"), since the Pardoner says, "here begynneth the story" (l. 797). And in fact the tale starts with "From hens I went to purgatory" (l. 798), a

phrase which contains a fleeting, but powerful hint of the genre of the Pardoner's story: the audience are now expecting a tale about the underworld, possibly a "vision" of the type so well-known throughout European medieval culture. The Pardoner says that he carried with him the sack with his pardons, because in the underworld they might also be of use. Purgatory is provided with gates—*of course*, according to the traditional iconography of the time—but Margery Coorson's soul (the name will be pronounced only at l. 932) is not there, and, since he knew that she was far from being a saint when alive, there is only one other possibility: "Alas, thought I, she is in hell!" (l. 810). Then he moves towards hell. There are gates in hell, too, but the infernal lodge does not strike any terror: "All hayle, syr devyll", says the Pardoner with a curtesy (l. 825), and he is welcomed by the porter devil. The two of them even turn out to be old acquaintances: "Thys devyll and I were of olde acqueyntaunce, / For oft in the play of Corpus Cristi / He hath played the devyll at Coventry" (ll. 830-32).

At this point, the audience have succeeded in situating the Pardoner's story, not among the straightforward medieval visions of hell, but rather among parodies of such visions, and are therefore entitled to expect something extraordinary and marvellous, although along the lines of this first merry infernal encounter. Parody necessarily goes beyond the transposition of infernal visions into comic tales, because it also touches the mystery cycles, in particular the episode of the "Harrowing of Hell". But everything here appears reversed in comparison with the powerful dread and majesty of hell in the mysteries: the newcomer is certainly not Christ; the first words pronounced in front of hell's gates are not "Attollite portas inferi" (actually, as has been seen, they do not sound like a terrible order to the devils but like a deferential greeting); and the devil at the gate is not struck by terror on seeing the visitor. Everything is turned upside down with a comic and carnivalesque perspective which promises further merry marvels.⁶

In fact, soon afterwards the "good mayster-porter" (l. 836) reassures the Pardoner that he has arrived on the right occasion:

For thys daye Lucyfer fell,
Whiche is our festyvall in hell.
Nothyng unreasonable craved thys day
That shall in hell have any nay.

6 On the use of parody in this episode and in Heywood's plays in general, see Mullini, "Better to be sott Somer then sage Salamon".

But yet be ware thou come nat in,
Tyll tyme thou may thy pasporte wyn.
Wherfore stande styll, and I wyll wyt
Yf I can get thy save condyt. (ll. 841-48)

It is no less than the anniversary of the foundation of hell, a time of feasts and benevolence, but, as in any powerful court, one needs a safe-conduct to enter, a sort of invitation to the festival. Soon afterwards, in fact, the porter-devil gives the Pardoner a “passport” written and signed by Lucifer himself. The “letter patent” is certainly one of the climactic points in the tale, and if, instead of summarising it, the text repeats it word by word, this is perhaps because it also parodies similar documents released by the offices of Henry VIII’s court.⁷ The Pardoner addresses his audience, just before reciting the content of the letter-patent, by saying that the words contained in the “passport” were exactly “as ye shall here” (l. 851). The paradoxical beginning—“Lucyfer, / By the power of God chyefe devyll of hell” (ll. 852-53)—is paralleled by the similarly absurd “God save the devyll!” (l. 868) with which the Pardoner in hell welcomes Lucifer’s demonstration of benevolence.

With his passport in his hands, the Pardoner heads to where the feast takes place, and there he finds the most striking parody of medieval pictures of hellish torments, as if in the painting of a Hieronimus Bosch merrily gone crazy. All the devils, in their Sunday suits, are in full magnificence:

Theyr hornes well gylt, theyr clowes full clene,
Theyr taylles well kempt and, as I wene,
With Sothery butter theyr bodyes anoynted—
I never sawe devyls so well appoynted.
The mayster devyll sat in his jacket,
And all the soules were playnge at racket;
None other rackettes they hadde in hande,
Save every soule a good fyre brande,
Wherwith they played so pretely
That Lucyfer laughed merely,
And all the resedew of the feendes
Dyd laugh full well togytther lyke frendes. (ll. 877-89)

7 For the political meanings of this episode, see Lines. Heywood’s treatment of king-like characters is dealt with in Bevington, pp. 64-70; Walker, *Plays of Persuasion*, pp. 133-68; and Happé, “Spectacle in Bale and Heywood” and “Images of Kingship in Heywood and Bale”.

There are no suffering yells in this hell, only laughter; the souls are neither being devoured nor tortured by the devils: on the contrary, they play tennis with rackets fit for the place (fire-brands); the devils themselves do not appear so dreadful, since they do not resemble the roaring and dishevelled creatures appointed to the infernal furnaces, but are clean and well-behaved monsters. Lucifer only, watching the tennis game, is still a powerful figure, to whom the visitor bows as “low as I coude”, as he says (l. 893). It is at this point that the Pardoner portrays Lucifer in a more traditional way, even if the picture is comic once more, given the initial words of the description: “He smyled on me well favoredly” (l. 896). In fact, Lucifer has bushy ears, huge eyebrows and gigantic eyes; he gnashes his teeth and vomits fire from his nostrils (ll. 897-901). In front of such a character, the Pardoner—kneeling down—manifests all his paradoxical admiration for what he sees by exclaiming, “O plesant pycture, O Prince of Hell” (l. 904).

Now the Pardoner uses direct speech to reproduce his dialogue with Lucifer, aiming to obtain Margery’s deliverance from hell. The misogynist traits of the Pardoner’s tale reach their climax at this point, because the devil, instead of refusing to set the woman free, declares all his happiness at the prospect of her departure:

For all we devyls within thys den
 Have more to do with two women
 Then with all the charge we have besyde.
 Wherfore, yf thou our frende wyll be tryed,
 Aply thy pardons to women so
 That unto us there come no mo. (ll. 937-42)

The misogyny is still stronger in the devils’ peals of laughter when the Pardoner and Margery leave and cross the borders of hell (ll. 963-66). Before this, however, the narrator does not forget to explain to his audience where he found the woman: because “many a spyt here hath she turned” (l. 955), she is found “bysely turnynge of the spyt” (l. 954) in the infernal kitchen, where her sexual activities in life turn to images of the world of Cockaigne.

The final details of the story are summarised by the narrator with the introductory phrase, “lacke of tyme sufferyth nat” (l. 969), which allows all listeners to close the long parenthesis of the Pardoner’s story and to resume the threads of the play’s principal narrative, weak as it is. The closing formula is similar to that used by the Pardoner; that is, it brings the effects of the past events of

the story into the present of the protagonists of the interlude, thus paradoxically authenticating the absurdity of the story itself: the Potycary ended with “And so she dothe contynew, I truste”, and the Pardoner finishes with “Who lyste to seke her, there shall he fynde her” (l. 976).

In both tales, and particularly in the Pardoner’s—given its more elaborate form and the presence of speaking characters in a decidedly fascinating “hellscape”—what narration contributes on behalf of action in the play consists in a dilation of the limits of the debate: the narrators acquire extra-scenic depth which enriches the dimension of the characters themselves (the Potycary has “cured” somebody; the Pardoner takes care of the souls), even if all this happens during a lying contest which underlines their abuses. The play’s theatricality is thus enhanced, and not reduced, by the engrafting of divers stories, by the introduction of the characters of the narratives, who are different from the speakers of the debate, and by the lively body language the actors have to use to match their words. In this case, telling really contributes to showing, to spectacle.

The Foure PP thus succeeds in transmitting its message to its coeval audience through a blend of doctrine and comedy, which also helps us understand its playwright’s “tightrope-walking” in his controversial time.⁸ Viewing the play in the context of contemporary polemics shows that Heywood’s drama was not simply conservative, but actually strove to influence events. Its plea for understanding and tolerance, and the veiled discussion of issues perilous at the time, show the author’s resistance and his engagement in contemporary dialectics. As Greg Walker writes, “In the circumstances of the early 1530s . . . the demand for reconciliation was itself a shrewd political tactic, an attempt to continue the defence of orthodoxy by other means” (*Writing under Tyranny*, p. 102).

8 Axton affirms that Heywood, during his career as a courtier and playwright, walked “a tightrope between harmless foolery and capital treason” (p. 55).

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