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Contact : alice.loffredonue@univ-tours.fr

Desacralization in John Heywood's
A Merry Play betwene the Pardoner and the Frere

Olena Lilova
Mediteran University, Podgorica, Montenegro

Desacralization, or the depreciation of religious or sacred status, is one of the principal mechanisms of creating a carnival world-view, elements of which are perceptible in John Heywood's *A Mery Play betwene the Pardoner and the Frere, the Curate and Neybour Pratte*. The play, published in April of 1533 by William Rastell, represents a humorous dispute aimed against the clergymen's hypocrisy in carrying out religious practices. It is believed to have been written somewhat earlier, though, in the late 1520s, since some dramatic, topical and textual similarities have been traced between it and such plays by Heywood as *The Four PP* and *Johan Johan* (Heywood, Axton and Happé, eds., p. 38). Their farcical tonality happens to be one of the discursive features that the three plays mentioned have in common. This observation has encouraged researchers to suppose that *The Pardoner and the Frere* might turn out to be an adaptation of a French source, as *Johan Johan* is. Indeed, scholars have made a clear link between *The Pardoner and the Frere* and *La farce d'un Pardonneur, d'un Triacleur, et d'une Tavernière* (The Farce of a Pardoner, a Charlatan and a Woman Innkeeper), from which Heywood took "burlesque saints" , like "swete saynt Sondaye" (l. 134), whose arm the Pardoner possesses, and some relics, like "the great too of the Holy Trynyte" (l. 139) or "of Saynt Myghell . . . the brayn pan" (l. 162).[1] These are just incidental borrowings, however, and not sufficient to establish the French farce as a comprehensive source. The fact that a source text has not been identified suggests the originality of Heywood's idea of making the Pardoner and the Frere the two central characters in the play, as well as of having them talk simultaneously—indeed, talk over each other—for the larger part of the performance.

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1 See Axton and Happé, eds, p. 38-39. References to *The Pardoner and the Frere* are taken from this edition.

The Pardoner and the Frere compete for influence over the churchgoers to whom they serve up their sermons and whom they ask for offerings. This verbal contest finally turns into fighting, which makes the parson of the local church, with the help of "neybour Pratte", arrest the two rogues so as to discipline them. But the knaves escape punishment by breaking out of the place. This is in contrast with the French farce, where the two central characters make peace at the tavern and then fool the innkeeper by leaving her.

In keeping with farce's closeness to carnival travesty, things that are sacred and respectable in real life become laughable objects of mockery and derision in the drama. Thus *The Pardoner and the Frere* focuses upon the churchmen's fraudulence, as well as the worthlessness of the actions they perform. It is usual enough for farce dramaturgy that two rogues are made antagonists. They normally represent typical social characters, with the wittier one—as is interesting—usually losing out to his opponent (Михайлов, p. 25). So the dramatic pattern in *The Pardoner and the Frere*—the verbal combat between two rogues that turns into a physical fight—seems to be typically farcical. This dramatic structure conforms to the basic plot for all plays written in this genre. According to the prominent Russian expert in French literature Andrey Mikhajlov, a farce's main plot consists of "permanent, persistent and cruel war of everyone against everyone" (Михайлов, p. 21; my translation).

The mutual misunderstanding of characters that is a common device in popular drama is quite characteristic of farces, too. It is particularly flagrant in the central part of Heywood's play, in which the Pardoner and the Frere make efforts to outdo each other, crying as loudly as they can, without listening to one another.

Mikhajlov points to several sources that the French medieval farce springs from. On the one hand, it reflects a philistine individualism, the untrusting attitude of the bourgeois towards his neighbour, his joyful discovery of various flaws or problems in his neighbour's private or professional life. On the other hand, one cannot but notice typical features of popular culture in the French farce: unquenchable joyfulness, a readiness for tricks that are not innocent at all, including more or less cruel cheating and other such devices. So, according to Mikhajlov, farce's dramaturgy is closely connected both with denunciatory tendencies in medieval town culture and with its carnivalesque laughter (Михайлов, p. 12).

Despite all its similarity to farces, Heywood's play is not a pure example of the genre. It appears that the playwright's choice of characters for the central figures in his play involves transforming the typical farcical conflict—which is ordinary, deprived of acuteness, confined to the sphere of everyday life (Михайлов, pp. 18-19)—into something essentially different. This has implications for the probable responses of Heywood's audiences. A majority of spectators would undoubtedly perceive *The Pardoner and the*

Frere as light entertainment. At the same time, certain spectators would be able to see the serious issues behind the usual farcical devices, as well as to feel behind the joyful laughter in the play the author's anxiety about the current crisis in both the religious and social spheres, with his apprehension concerning the possibility of solving this crisis.

Let us focus on the motif of desacralization as one of the prominent motifs in the play that is associated with its farcical nature. It is especially made evident in the Pardoner's speeches, mainly through his references to "holy relics".

It is well known that the cult of relics was an indispensible part of the medieval cult of saints. Already in late antiquity, the idea formed about a saint's presence in his remains or the objects he used during his lifetime (Парамонова, p. 405). The cult of relics became particularly important at the time of the medieval crusades, especially to Jerusalem and to Constantinople.

In many works of western European literature of the Middle Ages, especially those of the popular or "low" variety, as opposed to courtly or religious texts, relics are closely associated with the figure of the pardoner (just as in *The Canterbury Tales*, to which we will return a bit later). He is a typical comic character in the narrative genres of medieval literature. His presence in novellas, fabliaux, jests and schwank helps to create laughter based on the principle of desacralization. The emphasis in different genres may differ, however. As scholars observe, in the tradition of Romance languages and literatures, in fabliaux in particular, the clergymen's moral faults are mainly criticized, while the schwank and jests of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance focus criticism on the institutions of the Catholic Church itself, as well as the practice of the Latin service. As to the range of the clergymen's vices, in different national literatures their nature obviously depends on the social and historical conditions in a particular time and place (Сидоренко, p. 14). As far as pardoners are concerned, their greed and intention to gain as much as they can, which makes them deceive naïve churchgoers, are usually the focus of authors' attention. In their long speeches, while displaying extraordinary inventiveness, brilliant acting and rhetorical skills, pardoners normally demonstrate sheer hypocrisy and, finally, profound ignorance.

As an example, let us recall the pardoner from the tenth novella of the sixth day in *The Decameron* (1353), by Giovanni Boccaccio (pp. 519-28). Among his relics he has a feather from the Archangel Gabriel's wing, which he promises to demonstrate to the churchgoers in the afternoon. The action takes place in Certaldo, a town in the vicinity of Florence, where Boccaccio lived the last years of his life, by the way. The local jesters make up their mind to make a laughing stock of the pardoner, Frate Cipolla ("Brother Onion"), and steal his relic. Instead of the feather they put some coal into the pardoner's bag. According to the narrator, this feather was taken from an ordinary parrot, a bird that had not yet come into fashion at that time, because not many of them had been brought from Egypt to Italy. On finding some coal in his bag in the middle of his pas-

sionate speech, Frate Cipolla does not get confused; he says that he must have mixed up the bags of relics and have taken the wrong one from home. Nevertheless, he sees nothing but God's will in this situation and is happy to demonstrate to the people the coal from the fire in which saint Laurencia was burnt. In this case, the pardoner's quick wit and inventiveness might inspire the reader's admiration, together with indignation at his deceitfulness. This is also a clear example of how the clergy exploited ordinary people's belief in miracles—and more broadly in the supernatural—to serve their own interests.

As is emphasized by A. Gurevich in a work whose title can be translated as "Medieval World: Culture of the Silent Majority", medieval clergy constantly came across ordinary people's persistent desire for miracles. Churchgoers sought to satisfy their need for the supernatural, the magical, as compensation for the imperfection and prosaic nature of their everyday existence. So it is only logical that in medieval society miracles, as a powerful means of psychological and social influence on the masses, were placed under the ideological control of the clergy (Гуревич, p. 54).

Geoffrey Chaucer depicts the Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales* in a similar way. As Axton and Happé state, the Pardoner of *The Pardoner and the Frere* is taken most directly from Chaucer's "vehement and unscrupulous salesman, while the mendicant Frere, with his hackneyed diction of the friar song-books ... develops the lisping preacher from the *Canterbury Tales* too" (pp. 16-17). Heywood's text has much in common with the Pardoner's Prologue, in particular. This likeness is manifested in the Pardoner's greediness and disingenuousness, his treatment of his public as easily deceived, and the set of relics that the rascal offers to the people's attention. As an example, Chaucer's Pardoner produces a piece of bone from the shoulder of a Jew's sheep. It is to be put in a well, and then domestic animals can be healed with the help of the water. It also helps to get rid of jealousy. Another relic of his is a mitten that allows one to increase the grain harvest.[2]

Similarly, in Heywood's interlude the Pardoner is equipped with "of a holy Jewes shepe / A bone" (ll. 105-6) and a mitten ("He that his hande wyll put in this myttayn, / He shall have encrease of his grayn / That he hathe sowne") (ll. 129-31). Besides the items already mentioned—"The blessed arme of swete saynt Sondaye", so as not to get lost "by se nor by lande" (l. 136), "the great too of the Holy Trynyte", which helps to relieve toothache (ll. 141-44), "of Saynt Myghell ... the brayn pan", which preserves one from headaches and injuries (ll.163-66)—he also offers "of Our Lady ... / Her bongrace, which she ware with her french hode" (ll. 145-46), which helps in childbirth (ll. 148-50), and "Of All Helowes the blessyd jaw bone" (l. 153), which protects against poisoning (ll. 155-61). The only mischief that holy relics are powerless to cure is women's infidel-

2 See Chaucer, ll. 350-76.

ity. Therefore, the pardoner dissuades sinful women, who have betrayed their husbands, from buying. A relic will not wash away their sin (ll. 173-80). Continuing in the misogynist vein, which was typical enough of medieval farces, the comic device in this passage is used to make sure that women come to buy rather than expose themselves as guilty.

In a present-day performance, those stage objects or props used by Pardoner in Heywood's play would probably be of particular interest. It is known that in the modern theatre things can lose their characteristic properties, turning into toy mechanisms, abstractions, when they acquire the status of esthetic or poetical objects (Паві, p. 342), or metaphors, so that they virtually become *dramatis personae* and act on the stage (Паві, p. 576). Thus, in a staging today the way of representing relics in *The Pardoner and the Frere* could become an interesting element of the play's scenography, which would contribute even more to the intensification of the motif of desacralization in the play. Contrastingly, in Heywood's day, as we know, props were normally scarce in indoor theatrical presentations. The emphasis was placed on the characters and their interaction. At the same time, it is important that modern methods of representing props should correlate with the setting of the play. In Heywood's conception, the setting is obviously a church, with the audience serving as the congregation.[3] As John M. Wasson observes concerning *The Pardoner and the Frere*, "any setting except the nave of the church would have been entirely inappropriate for this particular play" (p. 34). A nave as a setting certainly imposes some restrictions on the use of props, though present-day light shows on church walls and other artistic presentations that take place on church premises widen our notions about the possibilities of a church as a playing space.

As far as the second principal part of the play is concerned—the preaching and retorts of the Frere—in this case one of the effective means of desacralization seems to be his use of numerous verbs that are synonymous with "talk" and belong to the colloquial or low style. Paradoxically, this combines with his claims that he has come to bring God's sacred Word to the congregation: "Wherfore I now, that am a pore frere, / Dyd enquere were any people were / Which were dysposyd the worde of God to here" (ll. 60-62). Already at the beginning of his introductory speech, the Frere gives notice that he has come not for tattling but to deliver a serious sermon: "I com not hyther to glose nor to flatter, / I com not hyther to bable nor to clatter, / I com not hyther to fable nor to lye" (ll. 11-13). But his piling up of verbs meaning "to tattle" with the negation of "not" stylistically produces the opposite impression. That is, in the public's perception, the Frere is revealed as a boring babbler, who complains of everything in the world. Similarly, when giving his first comment on the Pardoner's presence close to him, he uses the

3 See Bevington, p. 39.

same lexicon: “What a bablynge maketh yonder felow!” (l. 212). A bit further on he asks the question, “What standest thou there all the day smatterynge?” (l. 254). In this way he again expresses his discontent with the Pardoner’s presence and his rival’s interference with his sermon. The two characters are also desacralized by the numerous curses they exchange so freely—to say nothing of the fighting between them that occurs at the end of the play.

Clearly, the author’s intention in *The Pardoner and the Frere* is quite different from the subversion of the existing social order that can, according to Mikhajlov, result from the farcical denunciation of social flaws and vices (Михайлов, p. 12). The playwright warns against such religious figures as the main characters of the play by showing that their activity is potentially destructive, not only for the church, but also for society in general. His critique cuts deeper than typical anticlerical satire by means of the opposition of the two rogues to the figures of the Parson and neighbour Pratte, who try to restore peace and order in the church and punish the disrupters. The rogues’ reaction to the representatives of the official religious and civil authorities (Pratte is a constable) adds a further dimension to their characters and discloses the possible consequences of their destructive activity. Neither of them feels sorry for quarrelling and starting a fight in the church. While the Pardoner tries to cheat Pratte with his feigned contrition and the promise, “I wyll never come hether more” (l. 599), he contradicts himself a few lines later, saying, “Than adew, to the devyll, tyll we come agayn!” (l. 640). The Frere is quite bellicose. He demonstrates his contempt for the Parson (“I defy the, churle preeste” [l. 617]), threatens him and finally starts beating him. This actual subversion of order by the chaotic forces in the play, with the rogues beating the Parson and the constable severely on stage, was intended, not to arouse careless laughter on the part of the spectators, but rather to provoke disquietude and apprehension in them. Besides, the two central characters’ unanimity in the final scene of the play, their finding themselves on the same side of the fence in beating the officials who fulfill their duty and try to pacify the church, betrays them as Vice-figures. This supposition is only intensified by the hint that *they* may be going “to the devyll” till they “come again”. This conventional division of the play’s characters into Vices and Virtues is a clear allusion to the allegorical drama that was still very popular in Heywood’s time. Definitely, it would not leave the viewers hesitant about the nature of the two main characters in *The Pardoner and the Frere*.

In this way, the early Tudor dramatist makes an attempt to protect society from the possible tragic consequences of the current alarming situation in the state of religion. Heywood places himself among those English humanists, statesmen and artists who perceived with much apprehension the emergence of the Protestant movement in Europe and traced its features in the English context with anxiety and desire to warn their compatriots against what Thomas More termed “those perilous and pernicious opinions”

(More, p. 5 [Table, bk. I, chap. 2]).[4] The salient examples of books in this vein are More's polemical *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) and *Confutation of Tyndale* (1532, 1533). Certainly, scholars have noted similarities in "the tone and specificity of satire" in works by More and *The Pardoner and the Frere,* similarities which they consider to be "evidence of the climate of a particular time" (Axton and Happé, eds, p. 39).[5] At the same time, one cannot but see a difference between the approaches to the topic of relics in More's work and Heywood's play. While in the former rejection of relics is considered to be heretical, in the latter it is not the concept of relics but the Pardoner's abusive practices that are being critiqued. It is shown that such subversive manipulations involving relics, which could provoke Protestant attacks on their use, form part of the vicious and chaotic world that the Pardoner and the Frere represent in Heywood's play.

Heywood leaves behind the generic boundaries of farce: his way of interpreting problems and ideas in the play is far from farcical at a simplistic level. The English playwright takes the play's subject matter to a new level of comprehension. He focuses his attention on the clergymen's violation of ethics in fulfilling their duties, on their interaction with each other, with the authorities and with the churchgoers. And he exposes their hypocrisy and mendacity, vices which should be eradicated so as not to threaten peace and order in society. Heywood's intention testifies to his conscious civic-mindedness and his sense of responsibility for the events that occur in the life of a society. He transforms the farcical basis of his play by setting and developing topical themes and problems within it. This could have hardly been done without the introduction of characters representing certain tendencies within the English clergy of the late 1520s. Their activity is interpreted by the playwright as menacing social order. The exposure of the two central characters' vicious nature, which is made particularly evident at the end of the play, creates a somewhat similar effect to that of a medieval morality play. Consequently, the nature of the laughter provoked by *The Pardoner and the Frere* would be rather different from the laughter heard at a typical farce: there is likely to have been bitterness beneath its surface of nonchalance and carefree enjoyment.

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4 More includes among heresies the denial of validity to pilgrimages, images and prayers made to saints; prejudices against miracles and relics are also mentioned.

5 See also Greg Walker's essay on Heywood's *The Four PP* in the present volume.

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