Scène
Européenne

Theta
Théâtre anglais

Theta XIII

Forms of the Supernatural on Stage: Evolution, Mutations

Textes réunis par
Richard Hillman

Référence électronique

[En ligne], Jan Tasker, « The Disappearing God: From Anthropomorphic to Internalised Relationships of Faith in the Earlier Elizabethan Drama », dans *Theta XIII, Forms of the Supernatural on Stage: Evolution, Mutations*, éd. par Richard Hillman, 2018, « Scène Européenne, Theta, Théâtre anglais »
mis en ligne le 09-07-2018,

URL : https://sceneeuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta13

La collection
THETA
est publiée par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,
(Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 7323)
dirigé par Benoist Pierre

Responsable scientifique
Richard Hillman

ISSN
1776-1026

Contact : alice.loffredonue@univ-tours.fr

The Disappearing God:
From Anthropomorphic to Internalised Relationships of Faith in the Earlier Elizabethan Drama

Jan Tasker
The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham

Writing in the 1960s, T. W. Craik claimed that the character of God ceases to appear after the plays of Henry VIII's reign (p. 50). Whilst this is not strictly accurate, God does seemingly disappear as an onstage character from new English dramatic writing by the 1570s. During the period 1533–58, the Christian God is involved in approximately twenty percent of extant plays, compared to only about nine percent in the first twenty years of Elizabeth's reign.[1] However, analysis of these later plays suggests that God was instead internalised, thus illustrating a faith-based relationship with humanity aligned with the new Protestant theology. Starting with the explicitly anthropomorphic God and externalised God-human relationships of the early 1560s, and culminating with the external representation of psychomachia in Nathaniel Woodes's *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581), this paper explores the evolution of God's dramatic representation in the first twenty years following the Elizabethan settlement.

After 1559, God rarely appeared in plays. The second commandment, "Thou shalt not make to thy selfe any graven Image, nor the lykenes of any thyng that is in heaven above" (*The Book of Common Prayer* [1559], p. 152[2]), was being interpreted in an increasingly precise manner. Theologians were concerned about lay perceptions of God as anthropomorphic even

---

1 There are 298 known new plays written between 1533 and 1558, of which sixty-five involved a god or gods. Nearly ninety percent of these were the Christian God. This compares to 374 plays in the first twenty years of Elizabeth's reign, with sixty-nine involving gods and only thirty-three of these the Christian God. (Data calculated by reference to Wiggins, vols I and II; all subsequent play dates come from Wiggins.)

2 *The Book of Common Prayer* is used, as those were the words parishioners would hear regularly in church during the communion service and which they would be required to learn as part of the preparation for Confirmation. The language was probably slightly more accessible to the less educated than that of the Bishops' or Great Bibles (1568 and 1541, respectively), which would have been used when Exodus was the

within the imagination, and such representations were condemned. Only two known Protestant plays written after 1559 featured God as an explicit character: an untitled play probably dating from about 1564, and the re-written Norwich Grocers' play of 1565. The former was possibly written for congregational performance at Limebrook in Herefordshire. It is referred to by W.W. Greg as *Processus Satanae*. Only the actor's part for God, with cues from Satan, is extant, so there is little context for God's characterisation, but it is clearly anthropomorphic. Throughout, the tone is conversational, the answers to Satan reflecting one half of an obviously two-way dialogue. God is clearly responding to Satan's complaints:

> *Satan*. … robbed me
> *God*. Nay Sathan when yt is well knowen
> I have taken that wch was but myne owne (ll. 23-25)

Here is another example:

> *Satan*. … suche pollicye in god
> *God*. Why not Sathan in all thinges w[hi]ch be good. (ll. 55-57)

Additionally, God expresses human emotions towards Christ, referring to him as "my welbeloved" (l. 4), and calls on him to "Sitt on my right hand" (l. 8). Whilst the direct biblical sources of these phrases grant them legitimacy, the personification they imply posed problems for Protestants increasingly averse to anthropomorphic imagining of the Trinity.[3]

Conversely, the Norwich Grocers' play attempts to de-humanise the relationship between Adam, Eve and God in its representation of the temptation in paradise. This play is extant in two versions, one, the "A text" from 1533, by Stephen Prewett, and the 1565 "B text", re-written by an unknown author for an anticipated revival of the Norwich craft guild cycle. It is the last Protestant play known to have been written with a fully anthropomorphic God.[4] Initially, God is distant and there is no conversation between him and Adam. His opening speech takes the form of an apostrophe, indicated by the reference to Adam in the third person:

---

text for the day. These read: "Thou shalte make thee no graven image neyther any similitude that is in heaven above" (Exodus 20:4).

3 For example, Mark 16:19 tells of Christ's ascension to sit on God's right hand. Equivalent references occur in Matthew, Luke, Acts, Romans and Hebrews.

4 Catholic plays for English audiences, written abroad and in England, continued to involve an anthropomorphic God. For example, several of the plays now known as the *Stoneyhurst Pageants* (1624) have a role for God.

> I am *Alpha et homega*, my *Apocalyps* doth testyfye,
> That made all of nothinge for man his sustentacion;
> And of this pleasante garden that I have plant most goodlye
> I wyll hym make the dresser for his good recreacion. (*Norwich Grocers' Play*, "B text", ll. 1-4)

This is immediately followed by instructions to Adam:

> Therefor, Man, I gyve yt the, to have thy delectacion.
> In eatyng thou shalt eate of every growenge tre,
> Excepte the tre of knowledge, the which I forbydd the. (ll. 5-7).

Apostrophe, imperative and avoidance of personal name are distancing techniques, dehumanising the relationship between the characters, and reducing the anthropomorphic effect of having God played by an actor. After the temptation scene, God asks questions of Adam (now named), the Woman (still impersonal) and the Serpent but does not respond to their answers, so there is still no conversation. The formal tone maintains a distance between God and the human characters, and their relationship with him is explicitly exteriorised.

Other plays of the early 1560s humanise God through rhetorical references. *Aegio* (*c.*1560) is a play-fragment used by its presumed author, William Alley, Bishop of Exeter, to illustrate a sermon on providence and free will. The protagonist speaking for these, Phronimos,[5] uses the contemporary understanding of God as a loving parent correcting a wilful child. Man commits "the il of sinne" of his own free will, whilst "Gods *hand* doth inflicte"[6] the "ill of payn" (Alley, sig. 2F5^{v}). These references to God's hand and the parental nature of the relationship personify God. Alexander Nowell, in his highly popular 1570s *Catechism*, insisted that the reference to Christ sitting on God's right hand was simply a metaphor to illustrate Christ's closeness to God and not intended to be taken literally to imply God had hands like humans (p. 163). However, the two metaphors are mutually supportive, creating a mental image of a humanised God. Additionally, the parental metaphor suggests a direct external relationship between God and humans. This implies a physical, rather than spiritual, God.

In the late 1560s, authors of morality plays introduced allegorical characters representing aspects of God's engagement with humans. These present God in terms similar to William Perkins's mental conception of him as "his properties and works" (sig. A7^{r}), as articulated in his popular 1590 catechism, *The foundation of Christian religion*, whilst

---

5 "Phronimos", meaning "in one's right mind", indicates to an educated audience that this was the "correct" argument. I am grateful to Mr John Fox for this translation.

6 All emphases are my own throughout unless otherwise stated.

also acting as agents for those works. They therefore help to reduce the mental perception an audience may have of an anthropomorphic God. Simultaneously, their abstract nature allows a shift from an external relationship between God and humans towards an internal one, based on faith.

For example, in *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool thou Art,* written by William Wager, probably in 1569, God's Judgement declares, "I *represent* God's severe judgement" (l. 1763), and "Hither am I sent" (l. 1765), indicating his separateness from God. He personifies one of God's works, passing judgement, rather than being an abstraction of God *per se*. The characterisation is distant. His speech is directed at the audience, not the protagonist, Moros, whom he refers to in the third person:

> Hither I am sent to the punishment
> Of *this* impious fool, here called Moros
> Who hath said there is no God in *his* heart. (ll. 1765-67)

His distinction from God is also apparent in his use of the present tense for his own immediate actions and the future for God's in the hereafter. After articulating Moros's sins, God's Judgement directly addresses him—"With this sword of vengeance I *strike* thee" (l. 1791)—and then adds:

> Thy wicked household *shall be* dispersed,
> Thy children *shall be* rooted out to the fourth degree
> Like as the mouth of God hath rehearsed. (ll. 1792-94)

The nature of the relationship with God is thus de-humanised by distance, time, and the intervention of a third character.

Another description that Perkins used for God was as a "spirit, or a spirituall substance" (sig. A6^{r}). This metaphor was used earlier in *The Trial of Treasure* (1567), also attributed to William Wager. This play sets two allegorical characters against one another: Just, the elect, and Lust, implicitly reprobate. Lust is supported by the character Natural Inclination, whom Just attempts to restrain. Early in the play, God's spiritual nature and the interiorised nature of his relationship with the elect is articulated by Just when he defeats Lust: "Not of my power I doe thee expell / But by the mighte of his *spirite* that dwelleth *in* me" (ll. 152-53). The use of "in" here reminds the audience that those elected for salvation under the doctrine of predestination were deemed to have God's holy spirit within them, making their relationship with God an internal one. It confirms Just's status as one of the elect. Just's companion, Sapience, also reminds the audience that the fight against sin is an internal one:

> suche as are led by their lust,
> To incline evill are alwayes appropriate,

They have not as you have, battel & combate,
Against the cogitations that *inwardly* spring. (ll. 446-49)

The Elizabethan homily on salvation made it clear that justification came from "a true and lively faith", given as "the gift of God" (*Certain Sermons or Homilies*, p. 22). For contemporaries, fighting one's natural inclination evidenced this grace. This fight is realised literally in the play when Just puts a bridle on Natural Inclination. God's active participation in aiding Just with this is repeatedly articulated. Ultimate justice however, is enacted by God's Visitation. That he is not God is made clear in his opening declaration that "I am Gods minister called Visitation" (l. 963). "Minister" indicates his subordinate status as God's agent, although the activities ascribed to him, which affect both individuals and nations, show his power. His tone is stern and forbidding. The interaction between him and the other characters is distant but direct, emphasising the finality of God's judgement and punishment.

Despite their distinct natures, these allegorical characters still represent God in the plays. Through them, God's relationship with the protagonists is increasingly internalised, usually by making the onstage characters unable to see them. In *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (*c.* 1568), Wager uses a dramatic device to reflect this. God's Plague visits the reprobate, Worldly Man, and speaks into his mind as a dream, while he is alone and sleeping. Worldly Man's companions, Covetous and Ignorance, are unaware of God's Plague when they return, although he is still on stage.

Similarly, in *The Longer Thou Livest*, Moros cannot see God's Judgement. He mutters to himself when struck:

Either I have the falling sickness,
Or else with the palsy I am stricken.
I feel in myself no manner of quickness;
I begin now strangely to sicken. (ll. 1795-98)

This unawareness is reinforced by his immediate reaction to Confusion's appearance: "Here is an ill-favored knave, by the mass / Get thee hence, thief, with a wanion" (ll. 1811-12). The stage directions give Confusion an "ill-favored visure" (l. 1806 SD), clearly referenced here. Conversely, Moros makes no comment on God's Judgement, who nevertheless required a "terrible visure" (l. 1758 SD). If Moros could see God's Judgment he would surely have mentioned this. Instructed by God's Judgement, Confusion replaces Moros's clothes of office with a "fool's coat" (l. 1820), causing Moros to believe he is dreaming: "Am I asleep, in a dream, or in a trance?" (l. 1823). Again this indicates he can neither see nor hear God's Judgement. The references to dreams in both plays internalise the experience for the protagonists. They do not share the audience's physical

awareness of God's representatives. Nevertheless, they do experience what those characters effect. In this way, God's actions are indirectly internalised.

Conversely, all the characters can see and hear God's Visitation in *The Trial of Treasure* and respond directly to his pronouncements. Nevertheless, God's relationship with Just is internalised. Innate human sinfulness, even of the elect, is emphasised when God's Visitation notes that he has already inflicted pain on Just. By not staging this, however, the internal nature of Just's faith and hence his relationship with God are implied, in contrast to Lust's lack of faith, which requires an external, staged, engagement.

The allegorical representative of God is rather different in Ulpian Fulwell's *Like Will to Like Quoth the Devill to the Collier*, possibly written for performance by boys *circa* 1568. God's Promise attends on Virtuous Living with another character, Honour, and makes a similar pronouncement to those made in earlier plays: "I am Gods Promise" (l. 838). Despite this declaration that he *is* God's Promise, he references it in the third person. He and Honour come "As messengers *from* God, *his* promise to fulfil" (l. 845) and he states that "Gods Promise is infallible; *his* word is most true" (l. 865). This distances him from God. However, he differs from other allegorical representations of God, as, instead of being distant, he is intimate, both with the protagonist, Virtuous Living, and with the other allegorical blessings, Honour and Good Fame. Whereas other allegorical representations of God were formal and rather forbidding, God's Promise is friendly and cheerful. His opening line, addressed to Virtuous Living and Good Fame, is very human and friendly: "God rest you merry both, and God be your guide" (l. 835), and at the end of the section he joins them in a song in praise of God. However, this is in keeping with the blessings that he brings. The other plays enacted the punishment sinful Man should expect for transgressions, whilst this character brings reward. Nevertheless, the consequence is that this play does not have the same sense of an interiorised God evident in other plays of this period and genre.

This may reflect the different interests of its author. Although Fulwell was an ordained minister, David Kathman, his biographer in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* ("Fulwell, Ulpian"), suggests he was not very assiduous, preferring to focus on his secular writing. Conversely, Peter Happé ("Wager, William") notes that contemporaries praised William Wager for his pastoral care. *Like Will to Like* is doctrinally sound but is much less careful to reinforce the importance of God's grace. Also, the action implies that the fate of the wicked characters lies with the Vice, Nichol Newfangle, acting on behalf of Lucifer. Nevertheless, the fact that Fulwell avoids a direct anthropomorphic representation of God suggests that this was becoming the norm by 1569.

The process of internalising God and his relationship with humanity is completed in Nathaniel Woodes's *The Conflict of Conscience* (possibly *c.* 1572, pub. 1581). Spirit and

Horror[7] visit the protagonist, Philologus, as messengers from God. In contrast with the earlier plays, they are not allegorical representations of God or his works. Philologus is initially a godly Protestant advising others on the scriptures. Consequently, he is threatened with loss of life and worldly goods by the Catholic Church. So, encouraged by Sensual Suggestion's promises of wealth and power, he renounces his faith. This leads to a visit from Spirit.

Spirit does not introduce himself other than to say that the warning he brings is "given *from* God" (l. 1677). His subsequent reference to "thy Lord and God" (l. 1697) in the third person also indicates his own separateness from God. Spirit's opening remarks warn Philologus of his danger:

> In time take heede, goe not to farre, looke well thy steps unto!
> . . . . . .
> Waigh well this warning given from God, before thou further goe. (ll. 1674, 1677)

The alliteration in "waigh well this warning" creates a sombre, stern tone appropriate to a divine warning, further underlined by the monosyllabic imperatives. This all distances Spirit from Philologus, and hence also the relationship with God that Spirit represents.

However, Spirit is clearly intended to be part of Philologus's consciousness, rather than having an external existence. Although he is given an entrance in the text, neither Philologus nor Suggestion can see him. Philologus asks, "Alas, what voice is this I heere, so dolefully to sounde, / Into mine eares?" (ll. 1681-82). Suggestion, meanwhile, gives no indication of having heard anything. He subsequently responds to Philologus' articulation of the warning that he has received with "These are but fancies certainly" (l. 1712). Spirit's interiority is reinforced by Philologus's heart and conscience responding to the character's words: "My hart doth tremble for distres, my conscience pricks mee sore" (l. 1707). Previous protagonists, like Moros, experienced bodily pains as a consequence of God's message to them, but Philologus's suffering is spiritual, further internalising the relationship with God.

Indeed, there is considerable focus on internal and outward aspects of faith in this scene. Spirit reminds Philologus that Sensual Suggestion, though represented as a separate character, is an inherent part of his own human nature: "Let not Suggestion *of thy flesh*, thy Conscience thee betray" (l. 1675). The association with the flesh is a negative one. As Anna Bertolet explains, flesh was not simply the body but a part of the soul. It was an active agent alongside the spirit, and frequently in combat with it. Accordingly, Spirit

---

7 The full name of the character referred to as Horror is "Confusion and Horror-of-the-Mind". He states that in an early speech, but the speech prefix is Horror throughout, and I will use that name to avoid confusion.

warns Philologus that though "the frailtie of the flesh" has encouraged him to "denye with *outward lyps*, thy Lord and God most deare", he should not "the same to stablish with consent, of Conscience" (ll. 1696-98). He goes on to advise Philologus:

> Shut up these wordes *within* thy brest, which sound so in thine eare:
> The *outwarde* man hath caused thee, this enterprise to take,
> Beware least wickednesse of spirit, the same doo perfect make (ll. 1703-5).

Inner faith is being stressed here, externalised by the actor playing the part of Spirit.

This internal struggle is articulated by Philologus in the next scene, when, under pressure from the character Conscience, he moans: "My flesh and Spirit to [*sic*] contende" (l. 1893). This was a commonplace experience for the godly, and equally indicative of the elect as of the reprobate. Philologus and his pupil, Mathetus, discuss this concept early in the play. Later drama developed the soliloquy to represent inner dialogue and struggle of conscience, but that has the danger of self-deceit, as was recognised by contemporaries.[8] Furthermore, and importantly for these plays' religious didacticism, soliloquy leaves the audience in doubt as to the legitimacy of the protagonists' words—one might think of almost any of Shakespeare's soliloquies, for example. Using a physical character to externalise the engagement with God ensures the audience is clear about the authority of what is said.

The final play from this period with a similar allegorical character is *New Custom*, written by an unknown author around 1573. The internalisation in this is more explicit. God is represented by God's Felicity, who visits the newly converted protagonist. Previous allegorical characters made statements of the form: I *am* God's' Visitation, Plague, Judgement or whatever. This externalises the physical experiences God is sending the protagonists, even when the mode of presentation internalises the relationship. As these experiences are themselves physical, external and visible (death, poverty and so on), this procedure is apt. Although the eternal consequences of their protagonists' lack of spiritual faith are referred to, the immediate outcomes are essentially terrestrial. This is in keeping with the earlier plays' concerns with specified contemporary moral issues.

In *New Custom* the rewards of conversion to the "true" Protestant faith are less tangible, and deliberately unworldly, so the nature of the persona bringing those rewards changes. Instead of "I am God's Felicity", the character says: "Which Felicity in person here I do represent" (III.i [p. 201]). The character standing on the stage only *represents* the state of happiness promised by God. He does not represent God. The allegorical

---

8 For discussion of contemporary understandings of the role of the conscience, see, e.g., Braun and Vallence, eds, esp. Introduction and Walsham; see also Wilks, pp. 7-43.

nature of the representation is explicitly articulated. Clearly, happiness is an emotional state. It cannot easily be shown physically on stage without reference to worldly causes. Here the purpose is to emphasise spiritual contentment. God's Felicity only appears at the end, with no subsequent action other than a prayer of thanks by the recipients of God's Felicity. The protagonist then explains the eternal, spiritual, post-mortem, nature of the happiness Felicity brings: "Give grace to thy people, that *after this transitory / Life*, they may come to thy perfect Felicity" (III.i [p. 202]). This physically external character, God's Felicity, is only representing a temporary worldly state as an exemplar of the "perfect Felicity" to follow after death. God has been fully internalised.

In conclusion, then, during the first twenty years of Elizabeth's reign there was a growing antagonism towards anthropomorphic representations of God as breaches of the second commandment. Plays during this time increasingly reflect this by replacing God with allegories of his works and properties. Furthermore, the protagonists' contact with these is increasingly internalised. Rhetorical descriptions of God in the dialogue also focus on his works and properties in precisely those terms later employed by Perkins. These changes simultaneously have the effect of distancing God and also of reflecting an internal relationship between humans and God based entirely on faith.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Alley, William. *Aegio. Ptochomuseion* [in Greek letters]. *The poore mans librarie, etc.* London: John Day, 1565. Sig. 2F4^{r}-5^{v}. STC 374.

[*The Bible* (Bishops')]. *The Holie Bible*. London: Richard Jugg, 1568. STC 2105

[*The Bible* (Great)]. *The Byble in Englyshe, etc.* London: Edward Whitchurch, 1541. STC 2075

The Book of Common Prayer: The texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662. Ed. Brian Cummings. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Certain sermons or homilies: Appointed to be read in churches in the time of Queen Elizabeth of famous memory (1562). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1851.

Fulwell, Ulpian. *Like Will to Like Quoth the Devill to the Collier. Tudor Interludes.* Ed. Peter Happé. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972. 319-64.

New Custom. Anonymous Plays. 3rd series, comprising: *Jack Juggler; King Darius*; *Gammer Gurton's Needle*; *New Custom*; *Trial of Treasure*; Note-book and word-list. Ed. John S. Farmer. Early English Dramatists. London: Early English Drama Society, 1906. 157-202.

The Norwich Grocers' Play ("B text"). *Non-cycle Plays and Fragments*. Ed. Norman Davis. Early English Text Society, SS 1. London: Oxford University Press for the E.E.T.S., 1970. 11-18.

Nowell, Alexander. *A catechism written in Latin. . .together with the same catechism translated into English, etc.* Trans. Thomas Norton. Ed. G. E. Corrie. The Parker Society, 53. Cambridge: The University Press, 1853.

Perkins, William. *The foundation of Christian religion, gathered into sixe principles, etc.* London: Thomas Orwin for John Porter, 1590. STC 19709.

Processus Satanae. Ed. W. W. Greg. Malone Society Collections. Vol. II, part 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Malone Society, 1931. 239-50.

Wager, William. *Enough Is as Good as a Feast. The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art and Enough Is as Good as a Feast.* Regents Renaissance Drama Series. Ed. R. Mark Benbow. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967. 79-146.

___. *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art*. *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art and Enough Is as Good as a Feast.* Regents Renaissance Drama Series. Ed. R. Mark Benbow. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967. 1-78.

___. *The Trial of Treasure.* Ed. Peter Happé. Malone Society Reprints. Manchester: Manchester University Press for the Malone Society, 2010.

Woodes, Nathaniel. *The Conflict of Conscience, etc.* Ed. Herbert Davis and F. P. Wilson. Malone Society Reprints. London: Oxford University Press for the Malone Society, 1952.

Secondary Sources

Bertolet, Anna Riehl. "The 'Blindnesse of the Flesh' in Nathaniel Woodes' *The Conflict of Conscience*". *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama.* Ed. Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 144-60.

Braun, Harald E., and Edward Vallence, eds. Introduction. *Contexts of Conscience and Early Modern Europe*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. x-xviii.

Craik, T. W. *The Tudor Interlude: Stage, Costume and Acting*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1962.

Happé, Peter. "Wager, William (1537/8?-1591)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004, online edition: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10245>. (Accessed 12 October 2016.)

Kathman, David. "Fulwell, Ulpian (1545/6-1584)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004, online edition: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28395>. (Accessed 12 October 2016.)

Walsham, Alexandra. "Ordeals of Conscience: Casuistry, Conformity and Confessional Identity in Post-reformation England". *Contexts of Conscience and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Harald E. Braun and Edward Vallence. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 32-48.

Wilks, John S. *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Wiggins, Martin, with Catherine Richardson. *British Drama: A Catalogue, 1533 – 1642*. 8 vols to date. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012-.