

‘YDOLATRICALL SODOMETRYE’ John Bale’s Allegory¹

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Sometime in the late 1530s, Sodomy first walked the English stage. The occasion was John Bale’s *A Comedy concernynge thre lawes, of Nature, Moses, and Christ, corrupted by the Sodomites, Pharisees & papyses most wycked*, as it was published in 1548.² Anyone familiar with Bale’s polemical non-dramatic work of the 1540s and 1550s will not be surprised that he felt compelled to invent a character named Sodomy — indeed, the shock is that this is the only instance of such a character in the five plays that form Bale’s extant drama. For Bale’s prolix prose — most of it unpublished since the mid-sixteenth century — is saturated with references to sodomy and other alleged unspeakable practices of the Roman Church which Bale himself had deserted only a few years earlier, as he converted to the Reformed Church, and to marriage (to the faithful Dorothy), after being brought up from the age of twelve in the Carmelite order. In particular, the activities of the ‘celibate’ English votaries and the Roman Popes gave Bale meaty subject matter.³ Twentieth-century Bale scholars have tended to avoid these aspects of his oeuvre: Jesse W. Harris refers to ‘nauseous narratives’ concerning monasteries and popes, and declines to expand further;⁴ Honor McCusker writes that ‘On the more indecent portions of the satire it is unnecessary to comment’;⁵ Thora Balslev Blatt asserts that ‘His bad reputation is caused mainly by his stories of sexual misconduct in the Curia and in monasteries. They are frequently boring ...’ and goes on to explain Bale’s virulence by recourse to some amateur psychology:

It is the ferocity of his onslaught that calls for attention. It can only be understood when we consider the fervour with which Bale, a member of a monastic organisation from the age of twelve, participated in its life and studied its history when he was very young; it is his zeal in his formative years which causes the violence of his reaction once he comes to the conclusion that he was misguided.⁶

This theme is picked up by Bale’s most recent editor, Peter Happé, whose two-volume edition of the *Complete Plays* appeared in 1985—1986:

Possibly Bale suffered a sexual shock when he entered the order. Though no direct evidence is available, his persistent indignation about the dangers of enforced celibacy seems indicative of long lasting anxiety, or even neurosis.⁷

This pathologising of Bale's literary output as an expression of personal neurosis has been met recently with his resurrection as an unlikely but potent icon of the emergent field of Gay Studies, with a new generation of critics interrogating and celebrating the texts for what they might tell us about early modern attitudes to sodomy — Donald N. Mager points out that we are indebted to Bale for two uses of 'sodomitical', as well as the coining of 'sodometrous' and 'sodometry'.⁸

Both these reactions, whatever their motivation, deny Bale's work any active role in the construction of those attitudes. It is my aim, in this brief paper, to argue that *Thre Lawes* is a play not of a disturbed obsessive, but in many ways a play 'of its time' which draws on ideas and images that are part of a coherent anti-monastic campaign. More importantly, however, it transcends this historically specific context to attempt a radically new consideration of what sodomy might mean, making productive use of allegory to draw on connections made in Paul's first Letter to the Romans.

Recent research has deepened our knowledge of the extent of Bale's contribution to a campaign orchestrated by Thomas Cromwell to put across the doctrinal messages of the Reformation through theatre. In January 1536/7, Cromwell extracted Bale from Greenwich prison, and put him to work producing plays. It is now generally agreed that 'Bale led a troupe of players patronised by Cromwell, identified as Bale and his fellows' or 'the Lord Cromwell's men', which toured the country between 1537 and 1540. Performances have been traced at Cambridge, Shrewsbury, Leicester, Thetford, Oxford, Barnstaple, Maldon, and at Thomas Cranmer's house. The five plays still extant — *King Johan*, *Thre Lawes*, *God's Promises*, *Johan Baptystes Preachynge*, and *The Temptation of Our Lord* — form only a fraction of the more than two dozen plays Bale reckoned to have written between 1533 and 1538.⁹ The connection between Bale and Cromwell was, however, closer than merely the protection of his name. Plays appear to have been custom-written, or at least custom-performed for specific occasions; more importantly for our purposes, the plays were closely connected with Cromwell's campaign surrounding the suppression of the monasteries. Seymour Baker House has argued that the itinerary of Bale's troupe corresponds closely to a plan of suppression of local religious houses, suggesting that Bale was sent to try to win support or at least

understanding for the imminent closure of the houses.¹⁰ *Thre Lawes* is, as I shall show, intricately linked with the propaganda materials produced by Cromwell, and in some cases published through his associate Thomas Berthelet: it is a key part of the Reformation campaign.

The first Dissolution Act of April 1536 contained a lengthy preamble which states that small monastic institutions (housing fewer than twelve) 'had been long and notoriously guilty of vicious and abominable Living, and did much consume and waste their Churches, Lands, and other things belonging to them'. Accordingly, all houses worth less than £200 per annum were to be suppressed.¹¹ A later account expands more luridly on how this 'vicious and abominable Living' was made public:

[Cromwell] caused visitacions to be made of all the reeligious houses touching their conversations, whereupon was retourned the booke called the Blacke Booke, expressing of everie suche house the vile lives and abhominable factes, in murders of their bretherne, in sodomyes, in whordomes, in destroying of children, in forging of deedes, and other infinite horrors of life, in so muche as deviding of all the religious persons in England into three partes two of theise partes at least were sodomites: and this appeared in writting, with the names of the parties and their factes. This was shewed in parliament, and the villanies made knownen and abhorred.¹²

In fact, according to Hugh Latimer, 'When theyr enormities were fyrste read in y^e parliment house, they were so greate and abhominable that there was nothyng but downe with them'.¹³

So what was this visitation and what do the reports contain? This is not as easy a question to answer as it might appear. Much of the report is lost, and we now have only the manuscripts from the North and East of England. Visitations were an established routine, occurring usually at three-year intervals, and carried out by a bishop or official accompanied by legal advisers such as the archdeacon, an official of the consistory court, the commissary general and a public notary: there was an emphasis on their processional aspect. The votaries were interviewed separately, but probably at some speed, on the financial state of the house, any disobedience, failures to observe religion, tension between senior and junior monks, and any internecine squabbling.¹⁴ Never before had it been employed by a secular authority.¹⁵ Cromwell had employed teams of carefully chosen 'visitors' to tour the monasteries and priories interviewing the residents. Whereas the Church's usual visitations could include hundreds of questions to each

resident, this Cromwellian intrusion was brief and to the point. It appears from the results¹⁶ that the visitors were furnished with an extremely explicit brief of the subjects on which to interrogate the residents: in his analysis of the reports, G.W.O. Woodward identifies only five categories of information which appear in an ‘almost tabular’ format, and always in the same order:

[F]irst, the names of those monks or nuns declared guilty of certain offences against the vow of chastity; secondly, the names of those who want to be released from their vows and to leave the cloister; thirdly, what the visitors call the ‘superstition’ of the house, that is to say the relic or relics held in especial esteem there; fourthly, the name of the ‘founder’ of the house, that is to say the living heir of the first benefactor who was regarded as having a hereditary and particular interest in the affairs of the convent; and lastly, in round figures, the income of the house, and, where applicable, its debts.¹⁷

The partial extant records of the visitation, covering only 153 houses in the North and East of England, register 239 confessions of incontinence with women, 161 of ‘voluntary pollution’ (masturbation), and 60 of possessing relics. Many nuns confessed to having been or being pregnant; several even allegedly admitted to abetting in the killing of their children. Most shockingly, as far as Parliament was concerned, there were 105 accounts of sodomy that could not be explained as ‘voluntary pollution’.¹⁸

That Bale was familiar with the visitation reports is in no doubt. In the autobiographical *Vocacyon of Johan Bale*, he writes, ‘I haue the registre of y^e visitacions of y^e cloysters of Englande / & therfor I knowe it to their confusion’,¹⁹ he returns to this theme in his *Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytannicae ... Catalogus*, claiming that

In my possession at the moment are facts and findings of the visitations of a hundred monastic establishments of both sexes, and of the priests of eighty colleges, by the King’s Commissioners ... In which so numerous are those reported as Sodomites and incontinent ... The book is called the *Breuiarium compertorum in monasterijs, conuentibus, collegijs, etc.*²⁰

So, with these reports whipping the parliament house into a moral frenzy, John Bale’s Sodomy leaps onto the stage. *Thre Lawes* is a five-act play using what have been described as morality concepts and structures, concerning the attempts of God to establish control, through the three Laws, of Nature, Moses, and Christ, over Man who is threatened by

Infidelity (the Church of Rome). Infidelity has at his disposal six vices, in three pairs to combat each Law: the Law of Moses is pitted against Avarice and Ambition, the Law of Christ against Hypocrisy and False Doctrine, and the Law of Nature against Idolatry and — for the first and possibly last time on the English stage — Sodomy. The play's second act, which is given the running title of *Nature lex corrupta* ('the Law of Nature corrupted') shows how Infidelity 'cause[s] ydolatrye, / And most vyle sodomye' to 'Corrupt ... with ydolles, and stynkyng Sodometry' the Law of Nature, a country bumpkin hopelessly outwitted by this double-pronged assault on 'hys flesh' by Sodomy and 'hys sowle' by Idolatry.²¹ The act's plot is summarised neatly by the Law of Nature himself:

I wrought in hys [man's] hart, as God bad ernestlye,
 Hym oft provokynge to loue God ouer all
 With the inner powers. But that false Idolatrye
 Hath hym perverted, by slayghtes dyabolycall,
 And so hath Sodomye through hys abuses carnall,
 That he is now lost, offendyng without measure,
 And I corrupted, to my most hygh dyspleasure.

759—65

Sodomy's self-representation, in the form of lists of his multifarious iniquities, owes much to classic anti-clerical works such as Robert Barnes' *Vitae romanorum pontificum* (Basle, 1535) and particularly to Joannes Ravisius Textor's encyclopaedic *Officina* (Paris, 1520), traces of which are readily apparent in the lists of cross-dressers, sodomites, and abusers of animals quoted to characterise Sodomy and his associate Idolatry.²² Infidelity describes Sodomy's power locus thus:

Within the bownes of Sodomye
 Doth dwell the spirytuall clergye,
 Pope, cardinall, and pryst,
 Nonne, chanon, monke and fryre,
 With so many els as do desyre
 To reigne undre Antichrist.

 Detestynge matrymonyne,
 They lyve abhomynablye,
 And burne in carnall lust.
 Shall I tell ye farther newes?
 At Rome for prelates are stewes,
 Of both kyndes: thys is just.

728—39

We could see this as mere elaboration on a well-known and much-loved medieval *topos*: the vaguely lecherous and particularly sodomitical clergy — as Geoffrey Elton puts it, ‘a whole folklore of the disreputable cleric testifying] to a common opinion whose significance is quite independent of its accuracy’.²³ Pederastic prelates had for centuries been a staple of anticlerical abuse and satire. Even outside the Holy Roman Empire, the monk’s predilection for a pretty boy was proverbial: there is recorded a tenth-century Arabic phrase to the effect that one cannot be more devoted to *liwat* (active homosexual intercourse) than a *luti* (Christian monk) is; the importance of the institutional aspect of monasticism is conveyed in a euphemism for penetration — ‘you took my boy away ... and deprived my monk of his monastery’.²⁴ John Boswell has documented the considerable body of evidence suggesting that sodomy was especially associated with the clergy, pointing to comments on ‘sodomy’ among the clergy emanating even from admirers of clerical learning such as Charlemagne and the church’s constant attempts to curtail sexual activity between clerics.²⁵ Thus, as John Guy notes, although ‘the “anticlerical” debate was theoretical and eristic’, it ‘created reservoirs that Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell could tap’.²⁶

Bale’s insistence on the sodomitical nature of the monasteries has inevitably been seen, even by his champions, as obsessive, but he is by no means alone in his concern. In his *Lamentation in whiche is shewed what Ruyne and destruction of seditious rebellyon*, a piece published by Cromwell’s close associate Thomas Berthelet, Richard Morison characterises ‘the puttinge downe of abbeyes’ as ‘the puttinge awaye of maynteyned lecherie, buggery, and hypocrisie’, and appeals to Romans 1 to invoke the crimes discovered by the visitations ‘that I lacke boldnes to wryte’.²⁷

I wolde scarce beleue, that men coude teche nature a newe waye, excepte it hadde ben proued to their teethe, and vttered by theyr owne selfes. They that be lerned, knowe what I meane, and what they are. Paule layd the same faut to the Romayns. They that be vnlerned wyl moche meruayle, except they haue ben brought vppe with monkes and friers, howe yonge nouyces maye stand in stede of yong wyues. I haue sayd ynough. It stynketh to sore, to [b]e sturred to moche.²⁸

Morison was in turn attacked for his words about the monks. ‘Some wer angry w^t me’, he wrote, ‘but I truste none but such as few owght to estymē ther anger. They sayd, I shold haue left owght the nouices. I thowght, &

so did other[s] at whose commandment I wrote it, in such a tyme, trowthe myght haue ben spoken'.²⁹

That the debate around chastity and marriage was a key issue can be seen in the act of dedication of Richard Taverner's translation of Erasmus's tract, *A ryght frutefull Epystle ... in laude and prayse of matrymony* to Thomas Cromwell in 1532.³⁰ An exhortation to a young nobleman to marry and continue his stock, rather than remaining celibate, the *Epystle* treats sacerdotal celibacy in a rather double-handed manner. At one point, the speaker (attempting to persuade his cousin to marry) asserts:

Lette thapostolycall men folowe thapostles, whyche (because there offyce is to teche & instructe the people) can nat both satisfye theyr flock & theyr wyfes, if they shuld haue any. How be it that thappostles also had wyues, it is euidently clere. Let vs graunt bachelarshyp to y^e bishops ... It is lycenced them to be without wyues, to the entent they may the better attend to begette the more chylderne to Christ. Let this be y^e pryuilege of prestes & relygyous men, whych (as it appere) haue succeeded the Essenes forme of lyuyng whych damned holy matrymony.³¹

The slightly contemptuous tone — ‘can nat ... satisfye’, ‘Let us graunt bachelarshyp...’, ‘It is lycenced them ...’ ‘forme of lyuyng whych damned holy matrymony’ — is a hint of the attack that is to follow:

And wold god they were trewly chaste, so many as cloke theyr vyses vnder the gloryous tytle of chastite and castratyon, whyche vnder the shadowe of chastyte doo more fowly rage in fylthy and bestely abhomynation. For I am ashamed, so helpe me god, here to reken vp, in to what shamefull abhominatyons they ofte tymes falle, whyche doo thus repugne agaynst nature.³²

Both Taverner and Morison were clearly connected to Cromwell's campaign: in the context of their writings, Bale's emphasis on the sodomitical nature of monastic celibacy seems commonplace in content, if not in style.

Let us turn to Sodomy's associate in the joint attack on the Law of Nature: Idolatry. When Infidelity asks, ‘Is not thy name ydolatrye?’ it is Sodomy who answers, and sums her up: ‘Yes, an wholsom woman verelye, / And wele seane in phylosophye’ (409–10). According to Bale's stage directions, Idolatry is a ‘Necromantic’ (*sd* at 399) — a magician concerned with conjuring the dead — and he makes clear that Idolatry is ‘decked lyke an olde wytche’.³³ Idolatry can tell men’s fortunes, cure toothache, fever,

and pox, milk cows and hunt foxes, recover lost objects, fetch the Devil from Hell, and perform miracles ‘Without the helpe of the holye Ghost’, merely by saying the Catholic ‘Aue Marye’ (410–24). The character is defiantly female, ‘ych am a she / And a good mydwyfe per de’ (426–7), locating her status and power as a woman in her knowledge and efficacy in the traditional female space of midwifery. Bale’s presentation of the witch-midwife achieves a skilful redeployment of a traditional threat to (Roman) Church power by merging that threat with the Church itself. He draws on an anxiety about the midwife’s privileged access to the sexually — and spiritually — charged space of childbirth. In addition to their practical function, female midwives ‘occupied a significant symbolic role, since it was they who ascertained virginity, diagnosed pregnancy, certified a child’s legitimacy, and, as witnesses, ensured that one child was not substituted for another, that still-born children were properly baptised and disposed of, and could testify that if a child died it had perished of natural causes’.³⁴ The classic text on witchcraft, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, declared that ‘No one does more harm to the Catholic faith than the midwives’, representing the midwife as a witch with control over sexual intercourse, conception, abortion, birth, and killing newborn children to offer to the devil,³⁵ and from 1512 midwives had been licensed by the Church. In another reflection of what was to become official policy, Bale manipulates this threat to the power of the (male) Church by wedding it to the Roman Church itself; similarly, in 1542, the Witchcraft Act prohibited the activities of the good witch because she practised midwifery without a licence.³⁶

Thus far my discussion of the play has analysed Sodomy and Idolatry as ‘allegories’ in the *OED* sense of the term: ‘Description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance’. Thus the institutionalised monastic practice of sodomy is presented by a monk; the superstitious, potentially demonic, and female-centred idolatry of the Roman Church is presented by a witch/midwife. But Bale’s use of these two characters goes beyond the dictionary definition of *allegory*, and might be seen as an attempt to redefine the concept. Sodomy’s self-proclaimed power locus — the celibate monastic orders — is figured directly in his apparel — Bale’s stage directions state that he should be ‘decked ... lyke a monk of all sectes’.³⁷ And this instruction — ‘lyke a monk of all sectes’ — alerts us to the impossibility of this character. Sodomy is dressed in a patchwork costume created by sewing together bits of the habits of various orders. Infidelity alludes to the costume:

The fellawe is wel decked,
Dysgysed and wele necked,
Both knavebalde and pyepecked,
He lacketh nothyng but bels ...

623—6

in other words, Sodomy is wearing the motley costume of the stage fool. To conceive of Sodomy as a discrete character in the modern sense is to ignore this costuming, and to ignore the constant reiteration of his relationship — although the word is too loose for the connexion — with Idolatry. Indeed, Sodomy cannot even appear on stge alone: Infidelity has to conjure him together with Idolatry not only by uttering the Tetragrammaton, but also by use of the Latin word *ambo* ('both'),³⁸ thus locating their association within the Latin discourse of the Roman Church, stressing the 'bothness' of Sodomy and Idolatry, or to follow the Latin *ambo*, the 'ambiguity' of their joint self. In his autobiographical *Vocacyon of Johan Bale* (1553), Bale writes that of necessity 'the impenytent ydolatour must therwith be also a fylthie adulterer or most detestable sodomite. It is his iust plague. Rom. I. We can not stoppe it'.³⁹ Indeed, in a brief account of a Christmas 1551 performance of *Thre Lawes* in his parish at Bishopstoke, Hampshire, Bale summarises the plot:

Therin is it largely declared, how ye faythelesse Antichrist of Rome with his clergye, hath bene a blemysher, darkener, confounder, and poysener, of all wholsom lawes. And that wyth ydolatricall Sodometrie he hath defyled nature, by ambytyouse Auarice he hath made Gods commaundements of non effecte, and with hypocrytical doctryne peruerted Christes moste hollye Gospell.⁴⁰

'Ydolatricall Sodometrie': Idolatry becomes an adjective to describe Sodomy; Sodomy becomes the result of Idolatry. All the vices are described as 'the frutes of Infidelity'. From the point when Sodomy cannot make his entrance alone, when he does not exist as a stage-entity without Idolatry (and vice versa), there is constant slippage in his speech between the singular and plural first person. He describes himself as 'soche a vyce trulye / As God ... / Ded ponnysh most terrybylye, / In Sodome and in Gomorre'; having dwelt among 'the Sodomites, / The Beniamytes, and Madyantes', and with Noah's son Cham scorning his father, with Onan spilling his seed, with Joseph's brothers accusing their sibling, he is now embraced by 'the popysh hypocrytes' and 'become all spyrytuall, / For the clergye at Rome and ouer all / For want of wyues to me doth fall' (555—78).

ALAN STEWART

Throughout this supposed self-presentation, the first person singular slips inevitably to the plural:

We two togyther beganne
To sprynge and to growe in manne,
As Thomas of Aquyne scanne,
In the fort boke of hys sentence ... 567—70

Dauid ones warned all men of vs two,
'Do not as mules and horses wyll do;
Confounded be they that to ymages go,
Those are the wayes to hell'.

Both Esaye and Ezechiel,
Both Hieremy and Daniel,
Of vs the abhomynacyons tell,
With the prophetes euerychon,
For us two God strake with fyre and watter,
With battayle, with plages and fearfull matter,
With paynefull exyle, than at the latter,
Into Egyp特 and Babylon. 591—602

The association is intensified in their final speeches, where Sodomy pledges to

corrupt Gods Image
With most unlawfull usage,
And brynge hym into dottage,
Of all concupiscence 683—6

thus apparently assuming Idolatry's role of worshipping false images and entwining that role with the role of 'concupiscence' which he embodies. Throughout his work, Bale returns to Paul's first Letter to the Romans as the key text for the understanding of sodomy and idolatry:

As Paule to the Romanes testyfye,
The gentyles after Idolatrye
Fell to soch bestyall Sodomye
That God ded them forsake.
Who foloweth us as he confesse
The kyngedom of God shall neuer possesse ... 603—8

This passage links the failure to recognise the manifestation of God's truth with idolatry ('They changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts,

and creeping things') and, notoriously, with sodomy ('God gave them up to vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, turned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet'). In this way, then, Bale makes explicit the common premise of idolatry, sodomy, and Roman Catholic doctrine — they are all part of an error in scriptural exegesis, a failure to read God's true message.

As we have seen, Bale conventionally collapses Catholicism and its image-worship with superstition, witchcraft, and with women in general, in the body of Idolatry, but only after establishing the ambiguity of Idolatry and Sodomy. Idolatry is the play's only female character: however, the demands of a touring production mean that the part must be doubled with the roles of the Law of Moses and Hypocrisy, both of which require an adult male actor.⁴¹ Instead of ignoring the implications of this cross-dressing, Bale plays on the ambiguity in the dialogue: Infidelity exclaims, 'What, sumtyme thu wert an he' to which Idolatry replies, 'Yea, but now ych am a she' (425—6). Sodomy is here figured as inextricably idolatrous as well as problematically not-quite-male through the association with Idolatry. Furthermore, if these two 'characters' are a single concept, then this has implications for the rest of the play. It explains for example why Sodomy is dressed as 'a monk of all sectes'.⁴² Sodomy is implicit in all the monastic characters of the play. Located already within the bounds of the Roman Church, Bale is able to attack the sodomitical potential of some of Rome's central tenets, notably the confessional, without directly invoking Sodomy. In the context of the Reformation, the confession had taken on a dangerously political character, as conservative priests were accused of exploiting the sanctity of the confession to attack innovative ideas.⁴³ More generally, it was seen as an indecently close situation for a man and a woman to be in, and accusations against confessors of sexual behaviour or sexually-loaded speech were not unknown.⁴⁴ The confessional is explicitly linked with Sodomy by the Law of Nature at the end of Act 2:

I abhorre to tell the abusyons bestyall
That they daylye use whych boast their chastyte;
Some at the auarter to incontynency fall,
In confessyon some full beastly occupied be.

766—9

When Infidelity gives his instructions to Sodomy in his fight against the Law of Nature, it is through confession (*Benedicite*) that he is encouraged to attack:

Set thu fourth sacramentals,
Saye dyrge, and syng for trentals,
Stodye the popes Decretals,
And mixt them with buggerage.

Here is a stoole for the
A ghostlye father to be
To heare Benedicite,
A boxe of creame and oyle.

671—8

Bale plays on the traditional sexual reputation of the confessional, both in its physical space and as a source of sexual information for the confessor, and then uses the two synonymously.⁴⁵ The opening blessing — *benedicite* — becomes sexual foreplay, confession becomes one of Sodomy's religious duties, which are inextricably 'mixt ... with buggerage'; the 'boxe of creame and oyle' become lubricants for his ghostly/sexual acts.

Thus far Sodomy's impact has been felt only when the character is on stage, but through this sexualisation of the confessional, its sodomitical potential is exploited in Act 4 in an extraordinary exchange between Infidelity and the enemies of the Law of Christ, Hypocrisy ('a graye fryre') and False Doctrine ('a popysh doctour'). As Sodomy is clearly designated as a non-specific 'monk of all sectes'⁴⁶ — in contrast to the other monastic figures who are assigned to definite and recognisable orders — these two specifically characterised votaries are already imbued with sodomy:

- H. What, brother Snyp Snap, how go the wor[ll]de with the?
- I. What, fryre Flyp Flap, how saye ye to Benedicite?
- H. Marry, nothynge but well, for I crye now advaantage.
- I. At her purse or arse, tell me good fryre Succage.
- H. By the messe, at both, for I am a great penytensar,
And syt at the pardon. Tush, I am the Popes owne vycar;
If thu lackest a pece, I knowe where thu mayst be sped.
With c[h]oyse of a score, and brought euen to thy bed. 1434—41

That gendered possessive pronoun, 'At *her* purse or arse', suggests that the object of Hypocrisy's lust is female, and the subsequent lines might confirm that assumption:

Pope, cardynall, byshop, monke, chanon, prest, and fryre,
Not one of ye all but a woman wyll desyre. 1444—5

But given that the relationship between two monks has already been rendered potentially sodomitical in this space on this stage, through the associative nature of Sodomy, we could read this exchange in a more ambiguous way. The only characters onstage are Infidelity, Hypocrisy, and False Doctrine — therefore the *Benedicite*, the ‘bit of confession’ referred to (by Infidelity) becomes False Doctrine himself. Infidelity’s reference to Hypocrisy as ‘good fryre succage [suckage]’, the possibility of penetration ‘At her arse’, and Hypocrisy’s custom of kneeling take on a sodomitical resonance. So, we are presented with Infidelity pimping for False Doctrine,⁴⁷ a sodomitical procuring which is further confused by the slippage of gendered terms (‘her purse’) and its unquestioned linking to the clergy’s lust for women.

However outrageous such scenes may be, Sodomy’s influence is still ‘within the bounds’: it is the monastic orders and Catholic rituals which are rendered sodomitical in this satire. Until, that is, the end of Act 2, when the Law of Nature comes back onstage in a sorry state:

I thynke ye marvele to se soch alteracyon,
At thys tyme in me, whom God left here so pure.
Of me it cometh not, but of mannys operacyon,
Whome dayly the devyll to great synne doth allure,
And hys nature is full bryttle and unsure.
By hym haue I gote thys fowle dysease of bodye,
And as ye se here, am now throwne in a leprye. 752—8

‘Leprye’ suggests leprosy, the mark of sin in the Bible, and in the writings of Wyclif and Lambert⁴⁸ — but the Law of Nature claims he has not actively sinned himself: his affliction is caused by ‘mannys operacyon’. ‘Leprye’ here conveys not only leprosy in our modern understanding of the disease, but also the *morbus gallicus*, the epidemic syphilis which swept Europe for nearly a century from 1494.⁴⁹ There are striking resemblances between Bale’s use of the disease, and a contemporary popular translation of a 1519 treatise by Ulrich von Hutten on *guaicum* (*De guaici medicina et morbo Gallico liber unus*), which was published by the King’s printer (and Cromwell’s colleague), Thomas Berthelet, in 1533, with new editions in 1536 and 1540.⁵⁰ In the preface, translator Thomas Paynell, canon of Merton Abbey, and one of Berthelet’s regular writers, notes that ‘almoste into euerye parte of this realme, this mooste foule and peyneful disease is crepte,

and manye soore infected therwith⁵¹ and that ‘They that be taken with pockes, often times becom lepres’.⁵² Various explanations have been proffered for this, but convincingly ‘the diuines did interpretate this to be the wrath of god, and to be his punyshement for our euylle lyuyng’.⁵³ Paynell continues that:

It is thoughte this kynde nowe adayes to growe in no person, but throughe infection by deflynge of hym selfe, which thing especially happeneth by copulation. ... And the more that man is gyuen to wantonnesse, the sooner he is infected.⁵⁴

In Bale’s play, Nature goes on to lament:

With Man haue I bene whych hath me thus defyled,
With Idolatrye and uncleane Sodomye,
And worthye I am from God to be exyled.

780—1

The sentence ‘With Man have I bene whych hath me thus defyled’ suggests a sexual encounter which is by its implication sodomitical, given the male-gendering of both Nature and Man. Nature is therefore truly ‘worthye ... from God to be exyled’ (782), even though ‘of me it cometh not, but of mannys operacyon’ (754); the ‘fowle dysease of bodye’ (757) emblematises his corruption by Idolatrical Sodomy.

Bale’s *Thre Lawes*, for all its apparently ‘sensational’ elements, can thus be seen as not out of step with a consolidated propaganda campaign, characterised from the start by that peculiarly English version of Erasmian Christian Humanism that emanated from the patronage of Thomas Cromwell and the printing press of Thomas Berthelet. Bale’s own contribution to this effort was a theatrical technique which refused to allow the notion of ‘sodomy’ to reside in a single character, but rather in the interaction of men within the monastic institutions, symbolised by the motley costume, and as part of the misrecognition (incorrect scriptural interpretation) played on by Paul in Romans 1 that leads to the wrong sexual object choice (Sodomy) and idolatrous worship (Idolatry). The effects of this sodomy/idolatry are vividly staged in the leprous, syphilitic Law of Nature — the effects of these allegorised vices extending far beyond the discrete bodies of the players. And yet, because of our modern investment in ‘character’, we still try to respond to these allegories as individual personalities, and that modern investment is betrayed in the critical evaluation of Bale’s depiction of sodomy. Sodomy is nothing to do with *us*: ironically, what Bale created as an allegory of a society that tolerated Roman doctrine, has in that criticism been turned on Bale

himself as a slur against him as obsessive — a final and ironic denial of Bale's productive use of allegory.

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NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at the *Medieval English Theatre* meeting in Liverpool, June 1994: I am grateful to the participants for all the comments and encouragement given then, and to the British Academy for funding its research and revision. This article is part of a wider project on sodomy in relationship to humanistic learning and Reformation policy in sixteenth century England, entitled *The Bounds of Sodomy: textual relations in Early Modern England* (University of London, Ph.D dissertation, 1993), forthcoming in a revised form from Princeton University Press.
2. John Bale *A Comedy concernyng thre lawes, of Nature, Moses, and Christ, corrupted by the Sodomites, Pharisees & papystes most wycked* (Nicolae Bamburgensis, Wesel, 1548). Unless otherwise stated, all references in the text are to John Bale *The Complete Plays of John Bale* edited Peter Happé, 2 vols (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1985–6).
3. See for example Bale *The Actes of Englysh votaryes, comprehendyng their vnchast practyses and examples by all ages* (S. Mierdman, Wesel [i.e. Antwerp], 1546); *Acta Romanorum Pontificum* (Ioannis Opornus, Basle, 1558).
4. Jesse W. Harris *John Bale: a Study in the Minor Literature of the Reformation* (Illinois UP, Urbana, 1940) 12.
5. Honor McCusker *John Bale, Dramatist and Antiquary* (Thesis, Bryn Mawr, 1942) 80.
6. Thora Balslev Blatt *The Plays of John Bale: A Study of Ideas, Technique and Style* (G.E.C. Gad, Copenhagen, 1968) 53.
7. Happé 'Introduction' to his edited *Complete Plays 1: 2–3*.
8. See Donald N. Mager 'John Bale and Early Tudor Sodomy Discourse' in *Queering the Renaissance* edited Jonathan Goldberg (Duke UP, Durham and London, 1994) 141–61.
9. David Bevington *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass., 1968) 97–8; Seymour Baker House 'Cromwell's Message to the Regulars: The Biblical Trilogy of John Bale, 1537' *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 26 (1991) 123–38; Paul Whitfield White *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge UP, 1993) 12–41.
10. House 'Cromwell's Message', *passim*.

ALAN STEWART

11. Gilbert Burnet *History of the Reformation of the Church of England, The First Part* (London, 1679) 193; see also *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries* edited Thomas Wright (Camden Society, London 1843) 107.
12. Wright *Three Chapters* 114.
13. Hugh Latimer *The seconde Sermone of Master Hughe Latemer* (John Daye, London, 1549) sigs Diiij-Diiij^v. For a critique of Latimer's comments see Geoffrey Baskerville *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1937) 141–2.
14. Baskerville *English Monks* 74–95.
15. See Geoffrey Elton *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge UP, 1972) 217.
16. See *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* edited J.S. Brewer *et al* (HMSO, London, 1862–1932) [hereafter LP] 10 364 (137–144) for abstracts of the state papers.
17. G.W.O. Woodward *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (Blandford Press, London, 1966) 33.
18. These figures are from G.C. Coulton *Five Centuries of Religion* 4 vols (Cambridge UP, 1923–50) 4 697; alternative interpretations can be found in J.Thomas Kelly *Thorns on the Tudor Rose* (Mississippi UP, Jackson, Miss., 1977) 8, and Dom David Knowles *The Religious Orders in England* 3 vols (Cambridge UP, 1948–59) 3 297. The North reports contain 181 entries of sodomy, the East reports only four. Knowles has interpreted this discrepancy as indicating that the North visitors included 'solitary vice' (by which he means masturbation) in their sodomy statistics. If the reports are interpreted in this way, there are only twelve 'clear instances' of sodomy — as Knowles himself writes, a 'total ... indeed so low as almost to be surprising': Knowles *Religious Orders* 3 297.
19. Bale *The vocacyon of Johan Bale to the bishoprick of Ossorie in Irelande* (J. Lambrecht? for H. Singleton, Wesel?, 1553) sig. Bvi^v. See edition by Peter Happé and John N. King (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 70; Renaissance English Text Society Series 7, 14: Binghamton, New York, 1990 for 1989)
20. 'Apud me ad præsens sunt uisitationes centum monasteriorum utriusque sexus, et octadecim collegiorum, per commissarios regios Richardum Layton legum doctorem, Thomam Bedill archidiaconum Cornubiensem, & Thomam Bertheletum notarium factæ & collectæ. In quibus, tanto numero reperti sunt Sodomitæ & incontinentes ut in unoquaque eorum credideris nouam adfuisse Gomorram. Liber uocatur Breuiarium compertorum in monasterijs, conuentibus, collegijs, etc.': from Bale *Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytannicae ... Catalogus* (Ioannis Oporinus, Basle, 1557) 665.

21. *Thre Lawes* (1548) sigs Bii, Aii^V, Bvii. For Nature's characterisation as a country bumpkin see Thomas P. Hennings 'The Anglican Doctrine of the Affectionate Marriage in *The Comedy of Errors*' *Modern Language Quarterly* 47 (1986) 91–107, at 102.
22. Robert Barnes *Vitae Romanorum pontificum, quos Papas uocamus, quos diligentia ac fide collectae* (Basle, 1535); Ioannes Ravisius *Textor Ioan. Ravisii Textoris nivernensis Officina* (Antonius Aussurdus & Reginaldus Chalderinus, Paris, 1520): see especially *Molles, effoeminati / & Elegantes* (sigs r iiiij^{r-v}), *Viri muliebrem habitum mentiti* (sigs r i^{r-v}), *Mulieres habitum virilem mentitae* (sigs r v^V – r vi^r), and *Alij Libidinosi / & Lasciuui* (sigs f v^V – f viij^V).
23. G.R. Elton 'The Reformation in England' in *The New Cambridge Modern History Volume 2: The Reformation 1520–1559* edited G.R. Elton (Cambridge UP, 2nd edition 1990) 262.
24. Everett K. Rowson 'The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists' in *Body Guards: the Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* edited Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (Routledge, London and New York, 1991) 50–79 at 60, 76 note 27, 56, 75 note 11.
25. John Boswell *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago UP, Chicago and London, 1980) 187.
26. John Guy *Tudor England* (Oxford UP, 1988) 123.
27. Richard Morison *A Lamentation in whiche is shewed what Ruyne and destruction cometh of seditious rebellyon* (Thomas Berthelet, London, 1536) sigs Biiij^V, Bii^V.
28. Morison *Lamentation* sig. Biiij^r.
29. Quoted in W. Gordon Zeeveld *Foundations of Tudor Policy* (Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass., 1948) 179, note 64. See also LP 11 1409 (1), (2).
30. Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam *A ryght frutefull Epystle ... in laude and prayse of matrymony* translated Richard Taverner (Robert Redman, London, 1532).
31. Erasmus *Epystle* sigs Bviii^V – Ci^r.
32. Erasmus *Epystle* sig. Cii^r.
33. Bale *Thre Lawes* (1548) sig. Gi^V.
34. Elizabeth D. Harvey *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (Routledge, London and New York, 1992) 81.
35. Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger *Malleus Maleficarum* translated Montague Summers (1928; reprinted Dover, New York, 1971) 66 and *passim*.
36. Jean Towler and Joan Brammall *Midwives in History and Society* (Croom Helm, London, 1986) 38 and *passim*; see also Thomas R. Forbes 'Midwifery and Witchcraft' *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 17 (1962) 264–83. For an important re-evaluation of how witchcraft accusations relate to anxieties about childbirth, see Lyndal Roper *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft,*

- Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, London and New York, 1994) 25, 201, 212, 213.
37. Bale *Thre Lawes* (1538) sig. Gi^V.
 38. Sodomismus: ‘Ambo is a name full cleane, / Knowe ye not what I meane, / And are so good a clarke?’ (lines 89–91).
 39. Bale *Vocacyon* sig. Cv^r.
 40. Bale *An Expostulation or complaynte agaynst the blasphemyes of a frantickie papyst of Hamshyre* (Jhon Day, London, 1552) sig. Ciii^r. See Happé’s edition, Introduction, 6. It is not clear whether the performance went forward.
 41. See Bale’s division of rôles: *Thre Lawes* (1548) sig. Gi^V.
 42. Bale *Thre Lawes* (1548) sig. Gi^V.
 43. See Elton *Policy and Police* 27; for the use of the *agent provocateur* in the confessional, see 27–30.
 44. For example, see Robert Guy’s accusations against Richard Lawson, in Elton *Policy and Police* 91.
 45. See also Bale *Vocacyon* sigs Fijj^r–v: ‘A wele papped Pygion of Paules / is wholsome (they saye) for a tippedgentilman of the popes spialte / in a darke eueninge / to coole the contagioushe heates of a coltish confessour’.
 46. Bale *Thre Lawes* (1548) sig. Gi^V.
 47. See Happé *Complete Plays* 2 174.
 48. See Blatt *Plays of John Bale* 137–8.
 49. The link with syphilis is also made by Thomas Hennings: see ‘Anglican Doctrine’ 102. For leprosy, see Geoffrey Eatough ‘Introduction’ to his edition *Fracastoro’s ‘Syphilis’: Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes* (Francis Cairns, Liverpool, 1984) especially 10–28; and Claude Quétel *History of Syphilis* translated Judith Braddock and Brian Pike (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990).
 50. Ulrich von Hutten *Of the wood called gvaiacvm, that healeth the French pockes, and also helpeth the goute in the feete, the stoone, the palsey, lepree, dropsy, fallynge eyll, and other dyseases* translated Thomas Paynell (Thomas Berthelet, London, 1536).
 51. Hutten *Wood called gvaiacvm* preface, first unnumbered sig.^v.
 52. Hutten *Wood called gvaiacvm* sig. Av^V.
 53. Hutten *Wood called gvaiacvm* sig. Aii^r.
 54. Hutten *Wood called gvaiacvm* sig. Aiii^r.