

THE PLEY OF CONTROVERSIE

Presented by an Anonymous Contributor

In something of a departure from METH's usual editorial policy, we present here a puzzle that we hope the journal's readers may be able to assist in deciphering. An old friend of METH recently discovered a sixteenth-century letter that recounts the performance of a previously unknown morality play in a noble household. 'This missive came to light in the flyleaf of a volume that I purchased from a less than reputable antiquarian bookseller in Durham. While delighting in its naivety, I am at a loss as regards its authorship, dating or provenance. Can you help?' he writes. The book in which the letter was contained, a first edition of J. P. Collier's *The history of English dramatic poetry to the time of Shakespeare and Annals of the stage to the Restoration* (Murray, London, 1831), sadly offers no clues to its origins. By reproducing the text of the letter here, it is hoped that an erudite reader might be able to identify Lady J and the whereabouts of her household, or recognise the style of N, the letter's obsequious author. And who is the enigmatic Mrs T, supplier of gloves? Does anyone know of any other mentions of a morality of *The Pley of Controversie*? All suggestions should be sent to the usual METH editorial address, and the findings will be circulated at the next annual METH meeting.

My Lorde,

I recommaund me to youre lordship in my moste hartly wise, giving you to understond that I have receyved youre lettre, and accordaunt to youre commande have entermitted myselfe into the housholde of my Ladie J, where I am moste hospitablye entertayned, nay, helde for a particular frend. And I have sownded her Ladieship privilye on many matteres, as well secular as spiritual, as alsoe, indeede, the more sobre and discreet parte of her peple; and I finde that she is not whollie of our partye, as may appeare by a plaie or enterlude that was lately seene here, plaied by sundrie vagabonde plaiers out of the northe and I wot not where, whos arguement, being suche shrovetide stuffe as methoughte meer vanitie, was

suche that I thought me for the tyme rather to be in Laodicaea than in any Christian countrie. Yet was this plaie gladlie receyved of her Ladieship; nay, she hath bespoke a copie therof, to be circulated privilie among her frends, wherefro myghte arise greate harm to thys realme; and therfor I crave youre Lordshipp's pardon that I sende unto yow a bille or epitomie of thys plaie, and I wille endeavoure hereafter to procure a copie of it entire and to sende it unto yow.

Inprimis, first came in the Vyce, in the personage of Controversie, beinge parti-coloured in black and whit (to signifie that controversie seeth alle questions so), and letting the companye to wit that he came to sette one sowle ageyn another, thus to brynge them to perdition; and that he came hyther to seeke the soules of Sobre Austeritie and Sensuous Bewte, whos howses stode on eyther syde the place (the one as plaine, crow-stepped in the gable after the Duetsche or Scotsche manere, and havynge the inscription 'God is Luvē' over the doore; the other much decorate in the Spanye style, and bearyng above the entrie a niche wherin stode a graven ymage of Marye the Virgin). Ageyn these persons, indeede, dyd Controversie laye hys designes, fearing onlie lest his adversarye, Virtuous Love, myght prevent hym; and yet, by the helpe of hys two servaunts or adiutories, being Bigotrie (a scholemaister or pedante) and Yndulgence (a common strumpett), he hoped to thryve; these he instructed to impersonate Sobre Austeritie and Sensuous Bewte, eche to the othere.

Item, nexte appered Sobre Austeritie and Sensuous Bewte above in theyr severall windowes, and after a songe for the mornyng, did presente theyr characters. Wherof Sobre Austeritie desyred to worke, and Sensuous Bewte to prayse the bewties naturall to the daie — and yet dyd eche claym loyal subiection to Divyne Splendour, called the Kynge of Ryghtwisnesse. As the one presented hymself as laborious and selfe-denying, so was the other a bryngere of blisse to men; as one wolde do penance for syn, so the other wolde glorifie God; as one worshipped playnlie, in sobre praier and explication of Scripture, so wolde the other paie homage to the sacrament of Oure Lorde's Bodie, with grete solemnitie of robes, musick, incense, and ymages; and yette semed it that neyther he nor she were whollie contented.

But in the midst, as Sensuous Bewte spoke, came in a beggar, tellyng that he was named Vertewous Love, and was come to that wrecched state for that he was evere generous by kynde, and founde but fewe that wolde recompense hym ageyn. (And yet, my Lorde, under youre moste gracyous correction, methoughte it were more semely that suche a vagabonde be

named Baudrie and whypped home to his owne parysshe, rather than to be flattred under suche an appellation as Virtewous Love. But this plaie was stuff'd ful of suche idle thoughtes of superstitious auncientrie as now, blessed be God, be exil'd quite from the realme in thys happie tyme of the Gospell, savyng onlie in such barbarous regions as this is one.)

Item, Sensuous Bewte being muche affected by thys sadde historie of Vertewous Love, dyd seeke to lyghten his harte by gyvyng unto hym a cuppe of wyne and a faire chaplet of floures, whit and redde. To whom Vertewous Love curteysly replied that he wolde make hyr what returne he myghte, in helpyng hyr to a gode housbonde, one Sobre Austeritie, hyr neighebour. But at thys was the Ladie wrothe, saieyng that hyr house and hys hadde bene evere foes, and departyd to here masse.

Vertewous Love, solus, reflectyng that thogh wyne and floures make the harte mery, yet they doe but littel for the bellie, approched the hous of Sober Austeritie, and there made hys appele, beyng releved at ones wyth bare bred, and therto, a paire of bootes. 'That', saith Sobre Austeritie, 'wyll kepe thee lyvyng, and if thou desirest moore, goe, become a marchaunt, and dele for thyn owne profyt.' To whom Vertewous Love retourned that he myghte not do soe, for that love cannot selle any thyng, but onlie gyve, and therefore he wolde make but an ille marchaunt. 'And yett', saith he, 'I shal gyve the goode conseil, for thou wantest a wyfe to make thee glade, and in that can I helpe thee: loke nowe upon thy faire neighebour, Sensuous Bewte.' And the othere replied that she hadd longe semed faire to hym, but that he misdoubted of hyr vertue. 'As to that', saith Vertewous Love, 'trie for thyn owne selfe, for the prooffe of the podyng is ever in the etyng — and loe, heere she commeth.' (And yet by youre leve, my Lorde, it was not she, but another, Yndulgence attyred in a like spaniel veyle to that of Sensuous Bewte, so that Sobre Austeritie myght by no meane dystinguishe betwene then, ut patet infra.) Yet whanne thei dyd speke togyderes dyd Vertewous Love perceyve ryght sone that Sobre Austeritie was deceyved, and wente out hastilie to seeke hys ryghte ladie.

Item, Sobre Austeritie thenne callyng owt upon Sensuous Bewte, Yndulgence feyned that she was that same, and came hoom earlie fro the chirche, for that ones she had gazed hyr fille upon the pictures there, and upon the comelie forme of any yonge preste that lykyd hyr, she cared not to remayne lengere; and upon hys askyng hyr mode of religioun, replied that it was but to goe to confession and boaste of syns that she nevere performede, and to chirche that hyr finerie myghte be sene the bettere —

and ther dyd she shewe hyr pietie by kyssyng and touchynge the ymages of seyntes, havynge a specyall devotion to S. Sebastiane, for the sensuall bewte of hys bodie, and for that he was wounded and in bondage. To whome Austeritie replyed that thys were better be chaungyd, and that he wolde undertake it if she wolde accepte of hys love. Yndulgence receyvynge hym gladlye, offred hym al he myghte desyre, provydyd onely he wolde kepe hyr as befitteth a ladie, and he agreed. ‘And wol ye gyve me’, quod she, ‘a ryng?’ ‘Yea.’ ‘And fyne array?’ ‘Yea.’ ‘And a coronet?’ ‘Yea.’ ‘And a faire palfrey?’ ‘Yea.’ ‘And a fyne howse?’ ‘Yea.’ ‘And servaunts?’ ‘Yea.’ ‘And a faire yonge squyer to tende on me?’ And here he bythoughte hym a litel, and saide, ‘yea, if that thou wylt love me onely’. ‘Nay, that were bot waste and folie’, quod she, ‘for I have love enoughe bothe for thee and for twentie suche, yf so be that theye be riche ynoghe.’ At whiche Austeritie departyd to the chapel in muche indignation.

Item, nowe came in Controversie and Bigotrie, rejoicyng wyth Yndulgence, and Controversie related howe that he hadde mette wyth an olde beggar, and howe he hadde reprehended the beggar wyth many vyle wordes, callyng hym a sturdie vagabonde, and demaundyng whie that he was out of hys own parishe; and howe at the laste he hadde despoyled hym of hys cloke, his bootes, and of a garlande that he wore aboute hys hedde — and anon he gave the bootes to Bigotrie and the gerlande to Yndulgence, but the cloke he kepte for hymselfe. Then sente he Yndulgence oute for to make a maskynge or daunce, and wente hymselfe (as he sayde) to stirre uppe controversie at Oxforde, Canterbridge, and manye another place that sholde be of godlie lernynge, but are dennes of pride and hatred of oon for anothere. Bot Bigotrie wythdrewе hymselfe into a privie cornere for to spie upon Sensuous Bewte.

Item, nowe cam in Sensuous Bewte, hoom fro masse, and wenyng to hyrselfe that she were aloon, loked modestly upon the hous of Sober Austeritie, confessynge that the wordes of Vertuous Loue hadde perced her harte wyth a sharpe arrowe. And the hous of Austeritie semed faire to hyr, but that it wanted a gentle woman’s touche, and hyr thoghte she myghte fitlie dwelle in suche an howse, and wyth suche a lorde, were he not so grimme. And wyth this retourned Sober Austeritie, for that in hys wrathe he hadde forgot to take the Worde of Oure Sauour (being the Holie Bible) wyth hym to the chapel, and he cam nowe to fecche it from hys hous. But upon hyr offerynge hym hyr neigbourely loue, he reiected hyr (thogh courteously), for that hyr wordes came so lyk to those of

Yndulgence before (thogh that theyr trewe sense was indede quite othere), and she departyd into hyr hous disconsolate, and he to the chapelle.

Nexste dyd Bigotrie steppe forthe fro the place wherin he was hydden, and dysguysed styлле in the person of Sober Austeritie, dyd incite the companie agaynst Sensuous Bewte. 'For', quod he, 'she commytteth daylie the abhominatiouns of luste, and the flauntynge of lauishe and synful buttons; and that is worse, she is a bawdie wicche that inciteth otheres to the same; and that is worste of alle, she is an idolotresse that boweth the knee to Baal and to Dagon, to Gog and to Magog, to Moloch and to Mahound, and that wolde synke us alle in the foule pytte of helle, were noght the trewe lyghte of the Gospelle. And for hyr flauntynge, lat hyr be strypped naked, and for hyr luste and baudrie, lat hyr be wel whyped' ('nay', quod he, 'I wyl doe it myselve'), 'and for hyr wicchecrafte and idolatrie, lat hyr be borne to the fyre and burnt to colde coles and asshes, and hyr mawmetts wyth hyr.' Soe spak Bigotrie, in sothe, and he that dyd plaie hym dyd ape the maners of the sons of Godde, and hys berd was of youre owne color, my Lorde, whych was a scandalous and naughtie thyng to beholde.

Item, in the midst of Bigotrie's spekyng thus, there came in a dauncyng rout of wylde men and naked nymphes (beyng alle servauntes of hyr Ladieshippe's hous, decked wyth I knowe not what folies takyn oute of theyr May Games), wherof one nymphe dyd moste lewdely embrace wyth Bigotrie, and soe wente owt alle to fecche faggots for to burne Sensuous Bewte yn hyr hous, levying onlie Yndulgence. Then Sensuous Bewte apperyng at her wyndow and lamentyng wyth greate feare that Sobre Austeritie was bente on hyr dystruccion, and that he was soe gret an hypocryt, Yndulgence dyd crie out upon hyr, and calle hyr downe to hyr, wherupon she dyd counseil hyr to place hyrselfe in the mercie of Austeritie, and to wyn hym to hyr bedde. 'For it were betere', quod she, 'that ye synne bothe in the manere ye wot of that that thow be slayne and hys soule caste into the eternal fyre for the foule murdere of thee. And as to the synne therof, yt is but a litel thyng, as wytnes thys gerlande upon myn hedde, whych that I hadde of Vertewous Loue, for that I hadde layn wyth hym of my womanlye pitie, that he shulde nat dye for hys loue to me. And for to make the fayre, nowe shalt thow haue it' (and she gave unto Bewte hyr owene gerlande agayn, but Bewte was in suche feere and wepyng that she knewe not that yt was hyr owne). 'And heere', quod Yndulgence, 'is a loue draughte whych thow shalt gyue hym, that shal ensure hym unto thee, for I warante thee he shal neuere loue anothere woman than thee

after that he hath drunke it.' And soe they departyd bothe into the hows of Sensuous Bewte, there to adorne hyr.

Hereupon dyd Sobre Austeritie returne hoom fro the chapelle, wyth Vertewous Loue, whome he hadde mette upon the weye. And he was in gret perplexitie, for he loued Bewte wyth his hart and yet was muche dysmaied by hyr maneres. But byfore Vertewous Loue myghte answer hym came yn Bigotrie wyth a daggere, whych he profered to Austeritie, sayinge: 'Yf thyn eie offende the, etc. And synce that she hath offendyd in hyr hart, thow muste cutte owt Bewte's hart, that hyr immortal soule be not loste, else wyl she be burned bothe in thys worlde and the nexte.' And Austeritie loked on hym a litel, and then toke he the dagere, thogh it semed he were lothe to do yt.

Thenne cam yn Sensuous Bewte, and Yndulgence wyth hyr, and bysoghte mercie of Sober Austeritie, offeryng what he wolde dysyre, and to be rewled by hym henceforth if he wolde but spare hyr lyfe. 'Nay', quod Bigotrie, 'he shal sleye thee even heere.' 'And shal I haue no leyser to repente my synnes?' cryed she. 'Nay', quod Bigotrie, 'for he shal carve thyn harte even now, and I shal ete it yn the marketplace.'

'Abyd!' quod Austeritie, 'for ther shulde no human creature dye wythoute she be grauntyd a tyme for preyere and repentaunce. And whyl that she preyeth shalt thou telle me where thou camyst by those bootes thou werest.' 'In sothe', quod Bigotrie, 'therof is no gret matere, for I toke hem from a sturdie beggere, that he myght not straye forthe of hys owne parysshe, and I shal use hem to trample al foes of the Gospelle.' And he seysed the gerlande that was upon Bewte's hedde as she kneled yn preyere, and caste yt to the grounde, and dyd stampe and jumpe upon yt. And Vertewous Loue loked ryghte sorweful, but yet sayd nothings.

And when Bigotrie was wery wyth so doinge, Austeritie lokyd on hym agayne, and sayd, 'Nay — for those botes are myne, and thou hadst them of Vertewous Loue. And for that thou art an oppressour of the poore and the nedy shal I neuere truste to thee, and thou stealest the Gospelle also, for oure blessyd Sauour toke neuere fro the poore, but gaue them to ete; and the woman that was taken yn avouterie dyd he pitie and forgyue. And therfore shal no man do hurte to Sensuous Bewte whyl that I lyue.' And he drewe hys sworde, and Bigotrie fledde.

'That ys wel', sayth Yndulgence, 'and now shal Bewte gyue yow a louyng cuppe, and ye shal drynke therof bothe.' 'Nay, that shal they not', quod Vertewous Loue, 'for in that cuppe is deathlie poyson.' 'Thow lyst', quod Yndulgence. 'Nay, neuere a del', sayth Vertewous Loue, 'and now

for a prooffe let thow and I taste the cuppe firste; and if ther cometh no harme to us, then shal Austeritie and Bewte drynke therof.' And at thys was Yndulgence gretly affered and wolde haue fledde, but that she was attached by Sobre Austeritie. And here maye yt appeare, my lorde, under youre gracyous correctioun, that euen yn these vyle toyces can a Christian man fynde som nutte (as yt were) of trewth, for indede yt were an impossible that Vertewous Loue and Yndulgence coulede euere drynke a louynge cuppe togyther.

Item, nexte came in Devyne Splendoure, arraied as a kynge, and appeled Sensuous Bewte and Sobre Austeritie eche of beyng a partye and instrumente to seke the dethe of the othere, to the destruccion of hys most noble pece and the soore hurte of thys realme. And thei, fallyng on theyr knees, dyd confesse theyr faulte, thogh eche meyntaynyng yt was agayn thyr wille; and eche of hem dyd hartilye desyre dethe by howsoeuer cruele menes the Kynge wolde deuyse and appoynt, provydyd onely that the othere myght be pardoned. Then dyd Vertewous Loue stand advocate in theyr defens — 'for it bycommeth wel a kynge to be merciable, and louyngely to forgyue hys subiectes that seke mercie of hym, euen as he wolde that Oure Lorde forgyue hym at the grete dome, that louyngely dyed for the synnes of hys peple'. And Dyuyne Splendour hartilye forgave them, commaundyng that thei be joyned in Christian mariage wythyn the trewe rytes and ceremonyes of the Church of thys realme of Ynglond, wherat bothe dyd reioyce gretely, and gladlye swore obedience to the Kynge and Church of the sayd realme.

Wherevpon quod Austeritie 'And for that the wintre is overe and goon, and the voyce of the turtle is herde, and for the ioye and loue that I bere to my dere spowse Bewte, henceforth shal I no moore be callyd Austeritie, but Sober Sensualitie, in token that a man must haue some tyme recreation in thys worlde, and ioye of hys wyfe, and that they ben both oon flesh togythere under the governance of Almyghty God.' And Bewte replied 'Thou rejoycest myn harte, and for that we be here consentid togyder, and in signe that I place my selfe and fortune under youre goode governance to be my lorde and spowse, nowe wyl I be called Austere Bewte, for that a wyf shal rejoyce her husbende and kepe herselfe onlie unto hym in modestie and godlie lyfe, and share hys name and all else that perteyneth unto hym, and soe am I resolved, God beyng my helpere.'

Nexte dyd Deuyne Splendour uncouer the vyle practyces of Yndulgence and Bigotrie, exylyng them for euere from forth of alle hys dominions; but as to Controversie, he placed hym in subiection under

Vertewous Loue and hys faythful wyf Trewth, and he enfeoffed hem wyth the beste manor in hys kyngdome, appoyntyng Controversie theyr fole, to make hem sporte or to be silent as thei sholde requyre of hym.

Last came yn Controversie agayn, lettyng the compaignie to wyt that thogh he was heere in subiection, yet wolde he haue hys libertie in many another place. 'And I haue yette the cloke of Vertewous Loue aboute me', quod he, 'and wyth that shal I blere the eie of many a man that thynketh hymselfe wyser than a fole. And even heere shal be many a gawde, and many a priuie texte wherin I shal sette hem by the eres, to be reuenged upon the hool packe of them.' Wherupon came in the weddyng rout and bade the companye joyne in a general dance, wherin al joyned saue Controversie; whych endured som two houres, wherein hyr Ladieshuppe daunced as fetely as any woman I haue sene.

Suche, my Lorde, ar the nyce and devilyssh toyes that are daylie used heere in thys Inglyssh Babyloyn. I byseche yow, my kynde Lorde, sende myn expensis (vt patent per billam) by thys present poste, for my costes are grete, and Maister H growth dayly moore importunate. Telle Mrs. T that I lacke gloues. Commendynge me, my noble and gracyous Lorde, to youre euere effulgent instruction and protection, and assuryng yow of my dayly preyeres for youre Lordship.

Your Lordshippe's moste obsequious servaunt and privie watchere, N.