

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Trial of Vices in Puritan Fiction.

DR. ADAM CLARKE, the distinguished Methodist scholar of the early nineteenth century, was a Bunyan enthusiast, and he says in one of his letters :

A thought strikes me : John Bunyan seems to have borrowed his *Pilgrim's Progress* from Bernard's *Isle of Man* : Bernard his *Isle of Man* from Fletcher's *Purple Island* : Fletcher took his plan from Spenser's *Faerie Queen* : Spenser his *Faerie Queen* from Gavin Douglas's *King Hart*, and Douglas, his plan from the old *Mysteries and Moralities*, which prevailed in, and before his time.¹

This may appear on the surface to be one of those attempts at the detection of precise sources for Bunyan's allegories which his loyal Victorian editor, George Offor,² dismissed after lengthy discussion, and which have more lately been rejected by Professor J. B. Wharey.³ But there is a difference ; by suggesting continuity and by his inclusion of "the old *Mysteries and Moralities*," Dr. Clarke seems to be groping towards the notion of a common stock of traditional material, over and above any conscious borrowing of incident or plot. And he is in advance of his time in stressing Spenser's debt to morality tradition, to the Seven Deadly Sins and the Castle of the Soul, in contrast to the learned and gorgeous Renaissance element in his poetry. Modern Bunyan criticism has taken a view similar to Dr. Clarke's.⁴ Where there is a correspondence between Bunyan and something in another allegory, Deguileville, say, or Spenser, it can generally be accounted for by half-conscious patterns of thought, a way of dwelling on certain images which he had absorbed from dozens of sermons heard in his youth and from the talk of the "ancient godly people" in Bedford.⁵ So in drawing attention here to one of these correspondences and relating an incident in the trial scene in *The Holy War* to similar incidents in other works, I do not intend to establish a chain of conscious borrowing. But it can be shown : (a) that the trick of morality technique by which the vices disguise themselves as the corresponding virtues was adopted in trial scenes by seventeenth century Puritan allegorists

¹ *An Account of the Religious and Literary Life of Dr. Adam Clarke. By a Member of his Family.* 1833. Vol. 2, p. 290. cf. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, January, 1844, p. 32.

² *Works of John Bunyan, 1860-1862*, Vol. 3 Introduction, pp. 29-55.

³ *The Sources of Bunyan's Allegories*, Baltimore, 1904.

⁴ Cf. for instance the admirable discussion of Bunyan and the popular tradition in C. H. Firth's *Essays Historical and Literary* (Oxford, 1938). Professor Firth has noted the general resemblance of Bunyan's and Bernard's trial scenes.

⁵ See the important chapter on sermon allegory in G. R. Owst, *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England*, Cambridge, 1933.

and pamphleteers: thus the vices, as prisoners, could plead that they were wrongfully accused, since they were not the persons named in the indictment. (b) that Bunyan and Richard Bernard develop this trick with a high degree of legal realism, which in the case of the former may be traced to his acquaintance with courts from the inside, and the concern of himself and his wife at the beginning of his first imprisonment to find a means of quashing the indictment and obtaining release.

The occurrence of personified virtues and vices in sermons and popular homiletic literature is, of course, very early. The Seven Deadly Sins are sufficiently well developed to make their confessions to Repentance in *Piers Plowman* before ever they had appeared in the flesh on the morality stage. As the preacher embroidered on this dramatization of his moral teaching, he would naturally insist on the power of sin to come unawares upon the soul, bearing a specious likeness to some duty, or at least to some harmless pastime. In modern jargon he would be concerned with the mind's ability to "rationalize" a sinful desire into something quite innocuous. Greed masquerades as prudent self-interest, gaiety degenerates into wantonness, and so on. What more natural than that the preacher should illustrate this principle of moral theology by showing the personifications he already had in his repertory assuming disguises, wheedling their way into man's service as faithful retainers, and only coming out in their true colours when it was too late? This idea of disguise is not so much a literary adaptation of allegory as a reflection of popular belief about human nature, like the conception of each sin as a personal force struggling to possess the soul which starts off the whole tradition of the *Psychomachia*. The Devil himself accomplished the Fall of Man by disguise; so his followers set about tempting human beings in the same way. Dr. Owst has brought to our notice the following extract from a fourteenth century sermon manuscript on Sin, the Devil's daughter:

And for by cawse that the fende wolde marry hyr to the pepull of the worlde, he hath seth on hyr a gay name and now sche is callyd "Honestye". . . Be well ware that ye marry nat with the dowyetter of the devil!⁶

This conception of a marriage with one of the Devil's daughters who is decked out with a plausible appearance of good behaviour finds a place in literature in Langland's *Lady Meed* who tries to marry Conscience. But we must turn now to the moralities.

Although the Seven Deadly Sins and other combinations

⁶ M. S. Gloucester Cath. Libr. Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Trinity. Quoted in Owst, *op. cit.* p. 96.

of vices were a prominent feature of morality plays from *The Castell of Perseverance* onwards, the disguise-motive does not appear till we reach the decadence of this drama in the sixteenth century. The plot of Skelton's *Magnyfycence*⁷ depends on disguise. Clokyd Colusyon goes by the name of Sober Sadnesse, Crafty Conveyance becomes Sure Surveyance, Counterfeit Countenance is turned into Good Demeynance, Courtly Abusyon into Lusty Pleasure, Fansy into Largesse. These supplant Magnificence's good counsellors and obtain the management of his affairs. Under their rule he soon falls from his high estate and is visited by Adversity, Poverty and Despair. Finally a fresh group of virtues restore his fortunes. It is a dull play and justly forgotten except for the scene where Adversity and Poverty visit the once great man, now "spoyld from all his goodys and rayment." The figure of Poverty, ragged and hobbling, is drawn with a crude realism, and his advice to his victim has the grim levelling quality of mediaeval exhortations to the highly-placed to remember that flesh is dust:

Ye, syr, now must ye lerne to lye harde,
That was wont to lye on fetherbeddes of down;
Now must your fete lye hyer than your crowne.

But perhaps the most effective dramatic moment is the point when the catastrophe is reached, and after a single bitter gibe from Folly, Magnificence knows his evil counsellors for what they are. The tension of this recognition scene is unfortunately considerably reduced by the long and unnecessary dialogues between the different vices which are scattered too frequently around it. Yet the pathos of that precise moment when the masks are stripped off and the hero is left alone to await his dreadful visitants is poignantly conveyed in one simple line:

Why, who wolde have thought in you suche gyle!

Such a scene is well adapted to the stage: one of the oldest pleasures of the theatre is to witness people who are pretending to be other people, and even convincing some of their fellow-characters of this; for it is the dramatic illusion carried to a higher power. The play within the play is always attractive. And so this stratagem of the disguised vice, originating in the homiletic system of the mediaeval sermon, found a ready way into moral plays and interludes and was adopted by a professional man of letters like Skelton. It is possible that Skelton was influenced by the change of names in an interlude written ten or twenty years earlier, Henry Medwall's *Nature*.⁸ This must belong to

⁷ *Magnyfycence*, ed. R. L. Ramsay, E.E.T.S., 1908.

⁸ *A goodly interlude of Nature*. John Rastell, 1525? Ed. John Farmer, Tudor and Stuart Library, 1908.

a date not much later than 1500, if we accept Dr. Boas's conjecture that Medwall did not long survive his patron Archbishop Morton.⁹ In this play it is the original vices of the old morality form, the Seven Deadly Sins, who change their names in order to tempt the central character: however the change is not so important for the plot of the play as in *Magnyfycence*. Covetise becomes Worldly Affection, Pride is Worship, Lechery is Lust. Sloth is Ease, Gluttony is Good Fellowship, Wrath is Manhood, and Envy is Disdain.

In a much later post-Reformation interlude, *New Custom*,¹⁰ we find the device taking its place for the first time in the literature of militant Protestantism. New Custom is representative of the Reformed religion, and the personifications of Romish wickedness plan to expose him to the populace; Perverse Doctrine explains his scheme thus to Ignorance:

For the better accomplishing our subtlety pretended,
It were expedient that both our names were amended;
Ignorance shall be Simplicity, for that comes very nigh;
And for Perverse Doctrine I will be called Sound Doctrine, I.¹¹

New Custom enters and soliloquises on the decay of virtue: grave offences are minimized into trivialities. His preacher's rhetoric provides the key to the change of names among the vicious characters by taking us back to the source of the convention—the culprit's instinctive casuistry when he sets about justifying his behaviour:

Adultery, no vice, it is a thing so rife,
A stale jest now to lie with another man's wife!
For what is that but dalliance! Covetousness they call
Good husbandry, when one man would fain have all . . .
Whoso will be so drunken that he scarcely knoweth his way,
O, he is a good fellow, so now-a-days they say.
Gluttony is hospitality, while they meat and drink spill,
Which would relieve divers whom famine doth kill.¹²

The plot develops not without rude humour, amid the tedious speeches of the hero. There is a piece of punning which recalls Langland's Avaritia who misheard or ignorantly misunderstood his confessor, and said that the only "restitution" he had made was when he rifled the packs of certain pedlars¹³:

⁹ *Fulgens and Lucrez*, ed. F. S. Boas and A. W. Reed, 1926, Introduction, xvii.

¹⁰ *A new enterlude no less wittie then pleasant, entituled New Custome* W. Haw for A. Veale, 1573. I have used the text given in Dodsley's *Old Plays*, ed. W. C. Hazlitt, Vol. 3. There is also an edition by J. S. Farmer in the Tudor Facsimile Texts (1908).

¹¹ *New Custom*, p. 13.

¹² *New Custom*, p. 16.

¹³ *Piers Plowman*. B-text, passus v. pp. 232-7.

PERVERSE DOCTRINE: What is thy name, then? I pray thee make declaration.

NEW CUSTOM: In faith, my name is Primitive Constitution.

PERV. DOC.: Who? who, *Præva Constitutio*? even so I thought, /I wist that it was some such thing of nought.¹⁴

Subsequently Perverse Doctrine urges Cruelty and Avarice, who are to be his helpers, to adopt counterfeit names like himself:

CRUELTY: What then shall I, Cruelty, be called in your judgment?

PERV. DOC.: Marry, Justice with Severity, a virtue most excellent.

AVARICE: And what will you term Avarice, I pray you let me hear?

PERV. DOC.: Even Frugality, for to that virtue it cometh most near.¹⁵

Indeed, the slender borderline between good management and the sin of covetousness provided the most successful satire of all these transformations. The new economic problems raised by usury and the enclosure of common lands made commercial greed, masquerading as the new Puritan virtue of thrift, an absorbing subject for the social satirist; and there were always writers within the Puritan ranks ready to point out this tendency.

New Custom has the inevitable happy ending. Perverse Doctrine is converted by Light of the Gospel who says that henceforth he shall be called Sincere Doctrine. We turn now from sixteenth century interludes to the Puritan prose allegory of a century later. There were brave men before Agamemnon, and before Bunyan's *Holy War* Richard Bernard had given an account of the troubles of Mansoul on a more parochial scale in *The Isle of Man*.¹⁶ Instead of Bunyan's epic of wars and revolutions, his book reduces the activity of sin to a dry little police-court case. The chief merit of Bernard's work is the ingenuity with which he works out his allegorical trial "according to the Lawes of England." The apparatus of a trial, like the idea of temptation, is possessed of an intrinsic dramatic interest. How many dull plays and films have been redeemed for popular

¹⁴ *New Custom*, p. 22.

¹⁵ *New Custom*, p. 40.

¹⁶ *The Isle of Man or, The Legall Proceeding in Man-shire against Sinne. Wherein by way of a continued Allegorie, the chiefe Malefactours disturbing both Church and Common-Wealth, are Detected and Attacked; with their Arraignement and Judiciall triall, according to the Lawes of England* . . . by R. B., Rector of Batcomb, in Somers. References are to the ninth edition. London, printed by G. M. for Edward Blackmore, 1634. The first edition was published in 1627.

tastes by the clash of wits in a trial scene? Once again the interludes had anticipated the idea of putting the vices on trial (one might go back further and find a suggestion of the thing in Langland's *Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins*). In *Liberality and Prodigality* at the end of the play, Prodigality, the villain, is seized by the Tipstaves and brought before the Judge. The Clerk reads out his indictment as follows:—

Prodigality, hold up thy hand.
 Thou art indited here by the name of Prodigality,
 For that thou, the fourth day of February,
 In the three and fortie yeare of the properous raigne
 Of Elizabeth, our dread Sovereaigne,
 By the grace of God, of England, France, and Ireland Queene,
 Defender of the faith, &c.
 Together with the other malefactors yet unknowne,
 At Highgate, in the County of Middlesex, aforesaid,
 Didst feloniously take from one Tenacity,
 Of the parish of Pancridge, yeoman, in the said County,
 One thousand pounds of gold and silver starling.
 And also, how thyself, the said Prodigalitie,
 With a sword, price twenty shillings, then and there cruelly
 Didst give the saide Tenacitie upon the head
 One mortal wound, wherof hee is now dead,
 Contrary to the Queene's peace, her Crowne, and dignitie.¹⁷

Prodigality is condemned to be hanged, but pleads for mercy and repents of his wicked life. The Judge decrees that his punishment may "in some part be qualified."

Bernard's trial in the Second Part of his book is more realistically detailed than this; it also has a number of features which reappear at the trial of the Diabolonians in *The Holy War*, one of them being the convention of the disguised vice. Some vicious prisoners plead that they are accused under wrong names. And here the convention finds a firm basis "according to the Lawes of England"; for in English criminal law extreme precision was required in the wording of the indictment. A misnomer—inaccurate naming or entitling of the prisoner—could enable the defence to plead that the whole indictment was invalid, and the case could not go forward until a new bill had been drawn up:

Indictments must have a precise and sufficient certainty. By statute 1 Henry V. c. 5 all indictments must set forth the christian name, surname and addition of the state and degree, mystery, town, or place, and the county of the offender: and all this to identify his person.¹⁸

¹⁷ *A pleasant comedie showing the contention betwene Liberalitie and Prodigalitie*, 1602. (Malone Society Reprint, 1913, F.3.)

¹⁸ Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 1766-69, iv. Chap. 23, p. 301. Cf. Holdsworth, *History of English Law*, iv., p. 531 (1924).

A plea in *abatement* is principally for a misnomer, a wrong name, or a false addition to the prisoner. . . . And, if either fact is found by a jury, then the indictment shall be abated; as writs or declaration may be in civil actions . . . but in the end there is little advantage accruing to the prisoner by means of these dilatory pleas, because, if the exception be allowed, a new bill of indictment may be framed.¹⁹

So far Blackstone, writing over a century later, when a statute of William and Mary had done something to cut away the cluster of impediments which hung around the drawing up of a satisfactory indictment. But according to Sir William Holdsworth, dilatory pleas, such as quibbling over the names in the indictment, were an important loop-hole for offenders in the seventeenth century.²⁰ And we have the testimony of a great Restoration judge, Sir Matthew Hale, that "More offenders escape by the over-easy ear given to indictments than by any other means" (he is referring to the slackness of grand juries in approving without proper scrutiny a private accusation presented in the name of the King and finding it *billa vera*—a just indictment). And Hale, when as one of the justices at the Bedford Assizes he was approached by Bunyan's wife about her husband's imprisonment, advised her to obtain a writ of error. Bunyan, before the Quarter Sessions, had been convicted on his own evidence under the old Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593.

Then said Judge *Hales*, I am sorry, woman, that I can do thee no good; thou must do one of those three things aforesaid; namely, either to apply thyself to the King, or sue out his pardon, or get a writ of error; but a writ of error will be cheapest.²¹

In Bernard, when his villains Old Man, Mistress Heart etc. who have caused disorder in Manshire, are brought to trial, great care is given to the preliminary "finding a true bill" by the grand jury. "The Judge is a Judge of *Oyer* and *Terminer* in the Circuit where he is appointed to sit."²² We are told that "*Quick-sightednesse* (the King's Attorney) will soon espie an error in pleading, and *Divine Reason* will inforce a just conclusion, and so move the Judge to give sentence according to equity and right."²³ The indictment is framed by Repentance, the Complainant, and laid before a Grand Jury composed of "the

¹⁹ Blackstone, *Commentaries*. iv., Chap. 23, pp. 328, 111.

²⁰ Holdsworth, *History*, iii, pp. 614-631 (1923); ix, pp. 268-269.

²¹ *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*. "A discourse between my Wife and the Judges."

²² *Isle of Man*, pp. 93-4.

²³ *Isle of Man*, p. 100.

Holy Men of God, whose writings are the Holy Scriptures." ²⁴ the finding of a true bill is followed by the arraignment, and "the Prisoners are brought forth chained together, and set to the Barre before the Judge." ²⁵ They begin their delaying tactics by challenging the jury, another accepted right of the accused which was often employed to spin out a case. ²⁶ When Old Man is charged, he pleads not guilty, and is sentenced to be crucified. Mistress Heart is condemned to perpetual imprisonment under Master New-Man the keeper. And Wilful Will is bound to his good behaviour and ordered to be kept in the custody of the same gaoler. So far all the pleas have been of not guilty, and when Covetousness is brought to the bar he offers the same plea. But at the end of his long trial he denies the indictment and says his real name is Thrift :

My Lord, I am indited by a wrong name, my name (My Lord) is Thrift, and not Covetousnesse, as all this while my Adversaries have borne your Lordship in hand.²⁷

The Judge finds from his clerk, Experience, that Covetousness was the name the prisoner gave at his first examination and thus exposes the stratagem. But the proper place for such a dilatory plea would have been immediately after the indictment had been read over to the prisoner. There is a slight flaw in the otherwise consistent realism of procedure. Bunyan in *The Holy War* has captured even more admirably than Bernard the atmosphere of legal proceedings, and also twice employs the plea of a misnomer in the proper place. No doubt three appearances in court on a criminal charge, and endless discussions with his wife and others about a means of ending his first imprisonment, had made him acquainted with the mystery of pleading, and specially knowledgeable about those errors in the indictment which were often the salvation of seventeenth century prisoners.

In *The Holy War* the trial follows the defeat of the Diabolonians and the liberation of the city by Emanuel. The prisoners are brought in "pinioned and chained together as the custom of the *Town of Mansoul* was." It was also the English custom in treason cases,²⁸ and Bernard had observed it in *Man-shire* as we have seen. The pleas are of not guilty until False-Peace is sent to the bar :

Mr. *False-Peace*, Thou art here indicted by the name of *False Peace*, an intruder upon the *Town of Mansoul*, for

²⁴ *Isle of Man*, 103.

²⁵ *Isle of Man*, p. 106.

²⁶ *Isle of Man*, pp. 113-14.

²⁷ *Isle of Man*, p. 202.

²⁸ Blackstone, *Commentaries*, iv, p. 317.

that thou didst most wickedly and satanically bring, hold, and keep the Town of Mansoul, both in her Apostasy and in her hellish rebellion, in a false, groundless, and dangerous peace, and damnable security. . . . What sayest thou? Art thou guilty of this Indictment or not?

Then said Mr. False-Peace, Gentlemen, and you, now appointed to be my Judges, I acknowledge that my name is Mr. Peace, but that my name is False-Peace I utterly deny. If your honours will please to send for any that do intimately know me, or for the midwife that laid my mother of me, or for the gossips that were at my christning, they will any, or all of them prove that my name is not False-Peace but Peace. Wherefore, I cannot plead to this Inditement, forasmuch as my name is not inserted therein. And as is my true name, so also are my conditions. I was always a man that loved to live at quiet, and what I loved myself, that I thought others might love also. Wherefore, when I saw any of my neighbours to labour under a disquieted mind, I endeavoured to help them what I could, and instances of this good temper of mine many I could give.²⁹

He does, and a delightful legal pantomime ensues. The clerk bids the crier make a proclamation :

O yes, forasmuch as the prisoner at the bar hath denied his name to be that which is mentioned in the Inditement, the court requireth, that if there be any in this place that can give information to the court of the original and right name of the prisoner, they would come forth and give in their evidence, for the prisoner stands upon his own innocency.³⁰

Then Search-truth and Vouch-truth come into the court and say that they know the prisoner. Search-truth declares :

My Lord, I know, and have known, this man from a child, and can attest that his name is *False-Peace*. I knew his father, his name was *Mr. Flatter*, and his mother before she was married was called by the name of *Mrs. Soothsayer*. . . . I was his playfellow only I was somewhat older than he; and when his mother did use to call him home from his play, she used to say, *False-Peace, False-Peace, come home quick or I'll fetch you*. . . . I can remember that when his mother did use to sit at the door with him, or did play with him in her arms, she would call him twenty times together, *My little False-Peace, my pretty False-Peace*. . . . O my little bird *False-Peace*; and how I do love my child. The gossips also

²⁹ *The Holy War*, ed. John Brown, Cambridge, 1905, p. 307.

³⁰ *The Holy War*, p. 308.

know it is thus, though he has had the face to deny it in open court.³¹

The evidence is too damning and False-Peace is condemned. A little later Pitiless pleads "Not guilty of pitilessness; all I did was to cheer-up according to my name, for my name is not Pitiless, but Cheer-up; and I could not abide to see Mansoul incline to melancholy." However Knowledge explains to the court that "these Diabolonians love to counterfeit their names; *Mr. Covetousness* covers himself with the name of *Good-husbandry*, or the like: *Mr. Pride* can, when need is, call himself *Mr. Neat*, *Mr. Handsome* or the like, and so of all the rest of them."

After the trial, in the episode of the hiring fair, when certain Diabolonians try to obtain employment in reformed Mansoul, *Covetousness* does indeed change his name to *Prudent Thrifty*. With him on market-day appear the *Lord Lasciviousness* and the *Lord Anger*, giving themselves out to be respectively *Harmless-mirth* and *Good-zeal*: "three lusty fellows they were to look on and they were clothed in sheep's russet." *Mr. Mind* hires *Prudent Thrifty*, *Mr. Godly-fear* takes on *Good-zeal*, and the *Lord Wilbewill* makes *Harmless-mirth* his lackey, "because *Lent* was almost out."³²

Between Bernard's and Bunyan's allegories, in the *Civil War*, Richard Overton the Leveller made use of legal misnomer in a trial scene very similar to those in the other Puritan allegorists. His pamphlet *The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution*.³³ (1645) is a shot in the war waged by the left-wing sectaries and others against the powers of press censorship assumed by the Assembly of Divines—the war in which Milton's *Areopagitica* struck the most famous blow. *Mr. Persecution* is arrested and put to his trial; at first he tries to make out that in reality he is *Present Reformation*.³⁴ But there is none of the rich detail which gives permanence to Bunyan's far more artistic use of the same morality convention. He found the trick already developed along the lines of legal realism by Bernard, and polished it up even more, giving it a much stronger verisimilitude by working in the change of name as a plea of abatement by the prisoners on the grounds of misnomer.³⁵

(Continued on p. 48.)

³¹ *The Holy War*, pp. 308-9. Cf. the later trial of *Evil-questioning* (pp. 419-420) where the procedure is repeated.

³² *The Holy War*, pp. 348-50.

³³ Facs. text in Haller, *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution*, New York, 1933. Vol. 3.

³⁴ *The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution*, p. 34.

³⁵ *The Isle of Man*, pp. 151-2.