

Notes and Comments

READY-TO-HALT'S DANCE AND THE PROMISES: A BUNYAN PUN

THE MERRY DANCE celebrating the killing of Giant Despair, the release of his prisoners, and the demolition of Doubting Castle in the Second Part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the occasion of one of the happiest of Bunyan's theological puns. When that bashful professor, Ready-to-halt, ventured in great glee to trip it manfully, he

took *Dispondencie's* Daughter, named *Much-afraid*, by the Hand, and to dancing they went in the Road. True, he could not Dance without one Crutch in his Hand, but I promise you, he footed it well; also the Girl was to be commended, for she answered the Musick handsomely.¹

Much amused by the notion of Ready-to-halt's going to it without his crutches, most commentators lightly dismiss the incident as an illustration of Bunyan's peculiarly naïve humour, which at worst, one of them suggests, constitutes an "unfortunate allegorical slip, since [the crutches] were 'the Promises.'"² Here, however, it is the critic alone who stumbles, for Ready-to-halt throws away not both, but only one of his props, and the action is symbolically most significant.

Although it does not seem to have been recorded hitherto, the simple parenthetical pun, *I promise you*, is really the religious artist's very precise comment on the situation. Bunyan clearly believes that when a man becomes attuned to the Infinite, he feels less need of the kind of spiritual support the promises provide, because his soul is already moving gracefully in predestinated harmony. No doubt as allegorist he agreed with Sir John Davies's claim in *Orchestra* (st. 23) that since

Time the measure of all mouing is;
And Dauncing is a mouing all in measure,

dancing is Time's twin and image, the pattern of Eternity that comprehends it; for just as the highway ball symbolizes the restoration to measured tread of feet long out of the rhythm of the pilgrim step, to Ready-to-halt's dancing is uniquely a promise, a joyous token of the celestial waltz to come in which the awkward mover will glide smoothly. Bunyan's little joke not only vivifies this aspect of the scene, but also discloses a self-awareness that argues the casting aside of the crutch as entirely meaningful. Thus even as the Puritan smiles, he presses towards his artistic mark. His aim is edification as well as delight, and this attitude embodied here in a pun sums up the blessed wholeness that is pledged in his conception of the Divine panacea.

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1. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. by J. B. Wharey, 2nd ed. rev. by Roger Sharrock (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 283.

2. Roger Sharrock, *John Bunyan* (London: Hutchinson, 1954), p. 152.