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Haphazardly Ambidextrous

Interpretations of the Vice in 16th-Century English Drama

The paper examines the Vice character of English drama from non-cycle interludes – both interpretations of the character as well as Vices from specific plays, such as *The Play of the Weather*, *Cambises*, *Appius and Virginia* and others, and it argues for a complex view of the character, where his typical villainy, his humour and mockery and his histrionic skills form a unique merger, which is essential in understanding the figure. According to the argument the Vice may but does not have to sustain the moral message of the play, and examples are given for showing that his characteristic comedy is misunderstood as mere buffoonery or condemnable evil. Instead of trying to separate the dark and vicious Vice from the buffoonish evil who is not harmful, it is suggested that we take into account the strong connections between the Vice and the popular fool, and see the Vice as the specimen of the trickster-archetype.

Merry Report. Well than, as wyse as ye seme to be,
Yet can ye se no wisdome in me. (119–20)

In this paper I intend to examine a unique and problematic character, or rather, a character-type of 16th century English drama, the Vice. The character, a tempter, a mischievous, humorous villain is a real crux: he appears first of all in morality plays, but not necessarily there, sometimes the term “Vice” is used for him in the cast list, but not necessarily; sometimes, however, the term “Vice” is used for figures who to some extent seem to be not typical Vices. There are several unanswered questions about him. One crucial question is whether we can call a figure “Vice” if this title is not given to him in the play, but in his function he seems to comply with those that are. For example, the character called Mischief in a 15th century morality *Mankind*, is frequently discussed as “Vice” in literature, although the first instance that we know of that explicitly describes a character as “Vice” in a play is from 1523. Also, the question arises whether all existing Vices are indeed manifestations of the same type.

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I cannot exclude the possibility that from a perspective different from mine there may be significant differences between these figures, differences that require that the figures are treated respectively. But although individual Vices in individual plays taken as a group display a colourful spectrum, there are certain characteristics – such as their metadramatic behaviour, their improvisational attitude, their characteristic comedy – that I find convincing enough for seeing them as having a certain function within the play and thus being the manifestations of one type, no matter how complex that type is. With this present project I wish to support such a vision of the type, and I propose to map some crucial elements of its complexity.

No matter whether we take the perspective of 16th century audiences or 20th century critics, a basic problem with the Vice has always been the sense of comedy that makes him, although evil, appealing. His comedy has long worried critics, because of its obvious moral implications, and those critics dealing with the Vice frequently felt the need to downplay the strongly appealing nature of the character, or even if they admitted its appeal, they fought to fit it within a larger pattern where it will necessarily appear as condemnable. Somerset, for example, gives an insightful account of the Vice's comedy, but still maintains that the audience sees him as evil.¹ Happé refers to examples where the Vice is not punished but escapes in the end – an idea that makes difficult the application of the workings of Justice – but points out that the final joke is still on the Vice, suggesting that in the end the audience laughs not *with* the Vice but *at* him.² Dessen gives a detailed overview of the entertainment function of the Vice comedian and his relatedness to the jester and the fool, and still, finds the “diabolic associations” so significant as to dismiss this comedy in the end by simply saying that it has a distinct edge.³

I would like to suggest, and this is partly what I will try to demonstrate in my account of morality Vices, that perhaps we should accept that even if a play has a clear moral doctrine, the Vice, by being outside of it (as he frequently is, indeed), *does not* need to contribute to this doctrine, quite the contrary. Also, since he is *not* necessarily evil, he does not necessarily have to be punished – again supporting the idea that

1. J. A. B. Somerset, “‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’: Vice-Comedy’s Development and Theatrical Effects,” in *The Elizabethan Theatre V*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 1975) 54–75.

2. Peter Happé, “‘The Vice’ and the Popular Theatre, 1547–80,” in *Poetry and Drama 1570–1700*, ed. Anthony Coleman (London and New York: Methuen 1981) 13–31, p.28.

3. Alan Dessen, *Shakespeare and the Late Moral Play* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 22.

he may have nothing to do with the moral doctrine of the play.⁴ I would like to have a look at actual plays containing a Vice in order to show the colourful palette of his appearance, to support my argument that he is perhaps not best understood as contributing to a structure of a clear moral message. My choices of plays are purposely diverse. I will discuss in relative detail the vice of a play that is called a comedy, another vice that appears in a combination of history play and morality, an exemplum, and I will draw on examples taken from other texts as well, such as moralities illustrating proverbs – in order to show that no matter how different the genres are (and probably the aims of the several authors as well), there are significant similarities in Vices even in plays as different as the ones I examine.

Merry Report

The first instance of the description “the Vice” among characters of a play appears in two comedies by John Heywood, *The play of Love* (from the 1520s or early 1530s) and *The Play of the Weather* (1527–33). Heywood’s Vices are considered atypical by many interpreters because they lack a supposedly essential characteristic: they hardly seem to be evil at all.⁵ This is why, for example, Bernard Spivack delivers a carefully structured argument in which he explains why these “Vices” are not representative vices in the first place, and also, why it is erroneous to draw consequences about the genus vice based on these instances. Spivack refers chiefly to Chambers when he disagrees with earlier commentary on the Vice, and presents his own view on Heywood’s vices in the above mentioned plays: “Both roles, superficially examined, seem to present nonallegorical comedians, provoking at least one scholar to

4. The issue is further problematised when the character who has the last word and who gives the final interpretation of the events is not a virtuous character, such as, say, the one called Remedy, as in *Wealth and Health*, but a Vice. If he is both involved in evil schemes and is a director-entertainer Vice, the origin and prime mover of the whole play, the worst thing we can say about him is that he presents himself paradoxically in his own play in a morally condemnable way, in order to make the moral message complete.

5. Interestingly, however, these comedic figures may be linked to a stage device with demonic connections, as in *The Play of Love* the figure called No-lover nor-loved, who is referred to as “vice” in the cast runs among the audience crying “water, water, fire, fire,” while his head is full of squibs, implying that his hair caught fire while off-stage. The connection is made by the use of “squibs,” fire-crackers: these were used by earlier stage devils, and thus Heywood’s Vice could at this point probably be associated with them by the audience. For this remark I am indebted to Kent Cartwright.

argue that the Vice is essentially a dramatic outgrowth of the medieval clown or jester, extraneous to the morality drama and brought into it merely to create its comedy.”⁶

Spivack even explains how such a Vice appeared on stage. He claims that the vice who distinguished himself from his allegorical cohorts and developed into a theatrical personality (I take it that he means the master-of-ceremonies-type vice who is surrounded by similar minor and less potent vices, such as Mischief and his three companions in *Mankind*) subsequently “could be lifted out of his allegorical and homiletic context and cultivated in comedy of the type Heywood was writing.”⁷ Such an explanation eliminates any other ideas about vices that would not fit into Spivack’s main idea about the Vice as *radix malorum*, the origin of all evil, an explanation that in my view leaves out a crucial attribute of this figure.

Heywood’s Vice in *The Play of the Weather*⁸ is indeed not evil, but I would not like to exclude him from a discussion of the Vices exactly because he has much in common with the allegedly “all-evil” Vices. Also, he is impudent enough to mock the chief god, Jupiter, already at his entrance on the stage. As Merry Report enters, Jupiter asks him who he is: “Why, what arte thou that approachyst so ny?” (l 101), to which the Vice answers:

Mery Report. Forsothe, and please your lordshyppe it is I.

Jupiter. All that we knowe very well, but what I?

Mery Report. What I? Some saye I am perse I.

But what maner I, so ever be I,

I assure your good lordshyp I am I.

(102–6)

As he himself gives an explanation of his name, it is Merry Report because he will report even the sad news merrily: “And for my name, reporting alwaye trewly / What hurte to reporte a sad mater merely?” (136–7).

I find it interesting how Merry Report seems to imply that until the report is true, there might be nothing wrong with its indecorously merry delivery. Another characteristic of his is that he has no prejudice, no attachment to anything. All weather is the same for him, therefore he is able to report on people’s opinions without bias:

6. Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 136.

7. Spivack, p. 136.

8. Richard Axton and Peter Happé eds., *The Plays of John Heywood* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991).

For all wethers I am so indifferent,
 Wythout affeeccyon standynge so up right --
 Son lyght, mone lyght. . .
 Temperate or dystemperate – what ever yt be,
 I promiyse your lordshyp all is one to me. (154–60)

He employs the characteristic tool of audience-involvement of Vices and addresses the audience after Jupiter sends him away to his job:

Now good my lorde god, Our Lady be with ye!
 Thynke ye I may stand thrustyng amonge you there?
 Nay by God, I muste thrust about other gere. (175–8)

Also, he says,

Now syrs, take hede for here cometh goddess servaunt.
 Avaunte, carterly keytyfs, avaunt!
 Why, ye drunken horesons, wyll yt not be?
 By fayth, have ye no ther cap nor kne? (186–9)

On the one hand, he is humiliating members of the audience (“drunken horesons”); on the other, he is stressing his own importance as being “goddess servaunt.” Although Merry Report has mocked Jupiter at the beginning with his entrance by not giving due respect to the main God, in the end he indeed makes a good and faithful servant considering how he carries out his job. He does give a truthful account of the different opinions of people, representatives of different social types about what sort of weather they would like to have. He boasts about his position of being god’s servant, but establishes a questionable reputation when saying that being the devil’s servant could be more fun: “I thynke goddess servauntes may lyve holyly / But the devils servauntes lyve more meryly” (988–9).

Still, no matter what he says, he seems rather merry even as Jupiter’s servant. He is not cruel or mean, apart from his longing to be the devil’s servant instead. The only thing that makes him potentially condemnable is when after having presented their wishes the suitors leave him, he pretends not to care for them. But again in the end he does not betray either of them, and indeed he is indifferent in presenting their various wishes to Jupiter. He does not have to escape or be punished either in the end.

In the introduction to *The Plays of John Heywood*, the editors describe Heywood’s Vices the following way:

They are playmakers and go-betweeners, not fixed in any social ‘estate,’ but able to mimic any. They relate as easily to the audience as to other players, taking liberties with both. Their capers and apparent improvisations add movement, dance perhaps, and song-like antics often reminiscent of children’s games. But the Vice figures are the least innocent of Heywood’s roles: knowing, verbally clever, and irrepressibly bawdy.⁹

Based on this view another opinion can be formed that opposes Spivack’s ideas. The comedy of this Vice is not entirely benign, but there are other things that are much more important: the fact that his behaviour is not consequent or logical (he does not behave according to his opinion expressed in his side remarks), that he relates to the other characters and the audience in the same mockingly disrespectful manner, he does not belong to a social position but, as was pointed out in the quotation above, he can mimic any such position.

Ambidexter

Similarly to Merry Report who was reluctant to reveal his name to Jupiter, Ambidexter from *Cambises* (1558–69)¹⁰ is creating suspense too by delaying disclosure of who he is, what name he is called by. He pretends to have forgotten his name, but once he remembers, he gives an explanation of its meaning.¹¹

Ha, my name, my name would you so fain knowe?
Yea, iwis shall ye, and that with all speed:
I have forgot it therefore I cannot showe,
A, A, now I have it, I have it in deed.
My name is Ambidexter, I signifie one,
That with bothe hands finely can play. . . (146–51)

This half morality, half history play, a transition towards the chronicles, similarly to the previous play, features a Vice who is capable of behaving as people be-

9. Axton and Happé, p. 13.

10. Robert Carl Johnson ed., *A Critical Edition of Thomas Preston’s Cambises* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975).

11. “The earliest sense in English (1532) was restricted to law: ‘one who takes bribes from both sides.’ In 1555 the word is used by Bishop Ridley with the sense of a ‘double-dealer,’ but these are the only two recorded usages prior to our play. The sense of double-dealing or playing on both sides is germane to our character” (Johnson, explanatory notes, 170).

longing to different social level; he very skilfully plays his different parts. After Ambidexter has fought with the ruffians and taken part in the lewd and comic conversation with Meretrix in scene 2, at the beginning of scene 3 he prepares to meet Sisamnes and says he will behave like a gentleman: “Beholde where he cometh, I wil him meet: / And like a gentleman I meane him to greet” (305–6).

As it turns out, however, in this particular scene his “gentleman-like” behaviour is restricted to showing some respect to Sisamenes in acting as benevolent advisor and suggesting that he “play with bothe hands and turn with the winde” (321).

Ambidexter proves to be a forerunner of Iago when he very skilfully makes the King suspicious of his brother, no matter how ungrounded this suspicion is. The Vice is withholding the truth: he pretends to be reluctant to utter a lie, intensifying the tension when suggesting to King Cambises that his brother is looking for his death. His method is to reveal, while acting as if he were denying what he reveals.

King. How sayst thou? speake the trueth, was it so or no?

Ambidexter. I think so if it please your grace, but I cannot tel. (685–6)

Ambidexter is capable of displaying histrionic skills in a spectacular way on stage. The way he pretends to be sorry for the dead queen is highly ironic, since the audience has just noticed the sad event of the Queen’s song, an improvised, psalm-like farewell before she leaves the stage to be executed.

A, A, A, A, I cannot chuse but weep for the Queene:

Nothing but mourning now at the Court there is seen.

Oh, oh, my heart, my heart, Oh my bum wil break:

Very greef so torments me that scarce I can speake.

Who could but weep for the losse of such a lady?

That can not I doo, I swear by mine honesty. (1127–32)

Funnily in the last line, when he swears he is true and honest, he indeed cannot identify with crying from heart – although we have seen him cry ironically in the previous lines. But actually there is nothing he will identify with, since he is constantly playing. His laughter is no more true than his weeping, as he himself points it out in another example; laughter is just the other side of his ambidextrous quality. Ambidexter’s pretence of weeping and being sorry after another execution, the one of Lord Smirdis, displaces the audience’s genuine sorrow after they saw the tragic circumstances of his death. Ambidexter first pretends to weep and then ironically bursts out in laughter: “Ha, ha, weep, nay, laugh, with both hands to play” (744).

As these two examples show, Ambidexter comes very close to being the epitome of actors, whose tears and laughter are not more real than his. But he is indeed the explicator of the moral message: before the king enters dying at the end of the play, he foreshadows the fate that the king deserves: “He hath shed so much blood that his wil be shed: / If it come so to passe, in faith then he is sped” (1151–2). And the moral message is reinforced by the dying King as well: “A just reward for my misdeeds, my death dooth plain declare” (1166).

At the end of the play Ambidexter is not punished for anything; he just leaves the stage: “Farewel my maisters, I wil go take barge. / I meane to be packing, now is the tide” (1178–9).

Johnson in his critical introduction to the play stresses several times how the play does not necessarily need Ambidexter’s character to go on. He sees the employment of this character as evidence of his popularity and as a problem of historical structure (the tradition, the historical function of the Vice) vs. artistic motivation.¹² After showing how Ambidexter’s presence was not essential for any of the main events, he summarises the Vice’s function in the following way: “Ambidexter’s role is reduced to that of expositor; he is the link between scenes, the reporter of off-stage events, the prophet of future events, the philosopher, the knave. He exists to entertain and elucidate.”¹³ The two comic scenes are Ambidexter’s, and although they counteract the serious tone of the main plot, as Johnson points out, they also “suggest a secondary theme: men play with both hands and turn with the wind at all levels of society.” In this function the Vice is the one to reveal how corrupt people are, rather than corrupting them himself. It is clear also that the only character in the play he ostensibly “corrupts,” namely Sisamnes, has been corrupt already, even before he met Ambidexter.

To sum up Ambidexter’s role in *Cambises* I would like to draw attention to his presence in the play rather as an idea of playing and entertainment than as a powerful and vicious character. If we accept Johnson’s view of the subplot supplementing the main one and showing how people are the same in all layers of society, then the corrupting schemes of the Vice depend rather on revealing the corruptedness of society on its several layers than actual, “original” corruption. Outside his element, the comic scenes, as Johnson reminds us, Ambidexter is quite ineffective, an ineffective courtier of some sort.

12. Johnson, p. 18.

13. Johnson, p. 22.

Haphazard

The prologue of *A New Tragical Comedy of Appius and Virginia* (1559–67)¹⁴ makes clear that the play is an exemplum. In the prologue we read that both married women and virgins are to follow the way Virginia remained pure and chaste, even if the only way of preserving her chastity was to ask for her own death. The Vice of the play is called Haphazard. At the Vice's first entry, before he reveals his name, he asks the audience who they think he is. Although they may probably guess that he is a Vice-like character from his reference to the devil ("Who dips with the devil, he had need have a long spoon. . ."), the Vice enters into a long but, in its heterogeneity, quite funny and intriguing monologue enumerating a whole colourful spectrum of real and metaphoric occupations and characteristics, ranging from lawyer through "sower of lies" to mackerel.

Yet, a proper gentleman I am, of truth:
 Yea, that may ye see by my long side-gown:
 Yea, but what am I?
 A scholar, or a school-master, or else some youth:
 A lawyer, a student, or else a country clown?
 A broom-man, a basket maker, or a baker of pies,
 A flesh or a fishmonger, or a sower of lies?
 A louse or a louser, a leek or a lark,
 A dreamer, a drumble, a fire or a spark?
 A caitiff, a cut-throat, a creeper in corners,
 A hairbrain, a hangman, or a grafter of horners?
 By the gods, I know not how best to devise,
 My name or my property best to disguise.
 A merchant, a may-pole, a man or a mackerel,
 A crab or a crevis, a crane or a cockerel?

And at this point, although he has not yet completed his list, which goes on for another dozen lines in a similar fashion, Haphazard gives an answer to the questions he posed before: "Most of all these my nature doth enjoy; / Sometime I advance them, sometime I destroy."

14. John S. Farmer ed., *Five Anonymous Plays* (London: Early English Drama Society, 1908), pp. 10–11.

Thus, the answer to which one of all these should be accepted as his identity is that he can be anything, quite freely, just the way he fancies to advance or destroy his nature, or in other words, his “identity.” The other possible explanation of these lines is intriguing as well: it is according to his fancy that he will destroy or advance the enumerated occupations, or their representatives. I would like to stress again the actor-like playfulness in his juggling with his self, and his “identity” that is exactly inconstancy, a non-identity, a function that is a possibility of anything.

The haphazardness of the Vice is not a distressing or a threatening one. It fits in well with the topsy-turvy tradition of the comic, as is clear from his monologue describing the world turned upside-down haphazardly, where wives wear the cod-piece, and maids are the masters:

Hap may so hazard, the moon may so change,
That men may be masters, and wives will not range:
But in hazard it is, in many a grange,
Lest wives wear the cod-piece, and maidens coy strange.
As peacocks sit perking by chance in the plum-tree,
So maids would be masters by the guise of this country.

The effect of such topsy-turvydom is entirely comic in its fiction of infinite possibilities where even a gentleman may have to go begging, where anything that does not comply with the existing order may happen. The effect of the comic is intensified by the twist that Haphazard makes in the lines quoted above: it is now the existing order that may happen by hazard, namely, that the men be masters if the moon changes so. But no matter what happens (and the Vice is playing with “hap” meaning both his name and things that happen), even events that should signify the end of the world, everything is comic in the end, even if the sky falls on the earth: “If hap the sky fall, we hap may have larks.” The speech is ended elegantly by Haphazard urging the audience to pay: “Well, fare you well now, for better or worse: / Put hands to your pockets, have mind to your purse.”¹⁵

As for his corrupting force, Haphazard is not very strong in that, since Appius is already prone to lust even before Haphazard arrives, and positive allegorical characters, Justice and Conscience, try to counteract the Vice’s influence in vain. Funnily, Haphazard does not promise the judge he corrupts that he will surely get Virginia; this is just a suggestion, a mere tip:

15. Farmer, p. 17.

There is no more ways, but hap or hap not,
 Either hap or else hapless, to knit up the knot:
 And if you will hazard to venture what falls,
 Perhaps that Haphazard will end all your thralls.¹⁶

Still, Haphazard knows beforehand that the Judge has no chance, and in this he reinforces the audience's expectations of rightfulness. Although it may seem from his explanations that there might be some haphazard chance for anyone and it is worth giving it a try, the play shows that he is not trustworthy: the events demonstrate that following his advice leads to destruction. The speech in which Haphazard reveals this to the audience contains humorously nonsensical elements:

When gain is no gain, sir,
 And gauds nought set by,
 Nor puddings nor pie-meat
 Poor knaves will come nigh,
 Then hap and Haphazard
 Shall have a new coat.
 And so it may happen
 To cut covetousness' throat.
 Yea, then shall Judge Appius
 Virginia obtain;
 And geese shall crack mussels
 Perhaps in the rain.¹⁷

The nonsensical elements reveal a partly comic and fictive, partly deadly time, a quasi-future, which on the one hand makes Appius ridiculous because he has no chance to have Virginia (have her when geese crack mussels), and on the other hand makes clear that he will be punished for his sin and will die. So it is not only that the Vice will reinforce the audience's ideas about sinful behaviour and its punishment, but also he actually seems to be the one to punish the sinner. As he puts it, it may happen that Haphazard may cut Covetousness's throat.

When Appius is just about to meet his death, Haphazard comes and has a confusing speech of seven lines, which are hardly intelligible because he speaks half-nonsense, half a riddle, as if it meant something. And actually Appius does pick up the important idea that foreshadows his doom:

16. Farmer, p. 20.

17. Farmer, pp. 22–3.

Haphazard. I came from Caleco even the same hour,
And hap was hired to hackney in hempstrid:
In hazard he was of riding on beamstrid.
Then, crow crop on tree-top, hoist up the sail,
Then groaned their necks by the weight of their tail:
Then did carnifex put these together,
Paid them their passport for clust'ring thither.
Appius. Why, how now, Haphazard, of
What dost thou speak?
Methinks in mad sort thy talk thou dost break.
Those three words, chopt all in one
Is carnifex: that signifieth hangman.
Peace! no such words before me utter.¹⁸

At the end of the play, Haphazard turns to Reward to get reimbursed for his services of keeping Appius informed, following the logic that he advised Appius earlier, namely that the worst thing that can happen is a no. However, Reward informs him that his reward is a rope. Haphazard attempts an escape first, but he is held back, after which he pleads for his life in a manner that suggests that even before being hanged he is still in his comic element rather than desperate: "Must I needs hang? By the gods! It doth spite me / To think how crabbedly this silk lace will bite me."¹⁹

His humour, however, does not save him. He is given no mercy, and exits the stage while urging his cousin Cutpurse to follow him, in fact to "follow the livery." Haphazard's example is such that in the end the final joke is on him, and the idea he stood for has proven unwise to follow. Thus he reinforces morally correct behaviour, including in the scene where he was explicitly critical of the covetousness of the judge.

Punisher or punished?

Another example of a play in which the Vice receives his final punishment is *Horestes* (1567),²⁰ where he appears as a beggar in the end of the play. Still, I would like to draw attention to the fact that no matter how sad the end of the Vice may look (sad

18. Farmer, pp. 38–9.

19. Farmer, p. 44.

20. Marie Axton ed., *Tree Tudor Classical Interludes* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982).

from his point of view), his opinion may be different about it. We have seen above how the final joke is indeed on Haphazard, but still he is capable of commenting mockingly on the sad end of his career. The instance of *Horestes' Vice* is even less clear-cut. It seems that although he (who called himself Revenge in the same monologue) does advertise his poor and lamentable condition of becoming a beggar at first, he does not identify with this condition in the long run. First he perceives it as punishment for his “labor,” and feels miserable:

I woulde I were ded and layde in my grave.
 Oundes of me, I am trymley promouted.
 Ah, ah, oh! Well, now for my labor these trynketes I have. (1038–40)

But he soon changes his mind about it, and finds the bright side even of being a beggar:

But peace! Who better then beggars doth fare –
 For all they be beggares and have no great port –
 Who is maryer then the pooryste sort? (1049–51)

I am not considering here how inconstant the Vice is even in this second and more cheerful opinion, namely, that after having found the merry side of being a beggar he decides rather to be a servant, and offers his service to members of the audience. What are the moral implications of the fact that the Vice became a beggar? Can this demotion be seen as a final punishment for his schemes? Once the Vice has found the merry side of being a beggar, the punishment does not seem to be severe because it has no bad effect on him, at least in his interpretation: he was simply able to reinvent the negative context he was put in.

It is not only the final punishment of some Vices that is not clear-cut, but their evil nature is unreliable as well. In the next example, the Vice is much less a corrupting force than an agent who plays in order to punish the corrupt. In *Like Will to Like* (1562–8),²¹ Nichol Newfangle the Vice offers Tom Tossplot and Rafe Roister lands of St. Thomas-a-Watering and Tyburn Hill – both places of execution:

But thou shalt have it, if thou prove thyself the Verier knave;
 A piece of ground it is, that of Beggars' manor do[th] hold,
 And whoso deserves it, shall have it, ye may be bold –
 Call'd Saint Thomas-a-Waterings or else Tyburn Hill. . .²²

21. W. Carew Hazlitt ed., *Old English Plays* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1874), vol. III.

22. Hazlitt, vol. III, p. 324.

By doing this as part of the joke he is playing on them, Nichol Newfangle acts out justice, and the audience will laugh together with the Vice at the stupidity of the ruffians. Laughing with the Vice is quite essential in my argument, because we see here an instance where the audience's merriment regarding the Vice's schemes is connected to the audience's complete approval of the same deeds. Similarly, when he hands over his former companions Cutpurse and Pickpurse to Severity the judge and helps him to tie them up, Nichol Newfangle has a double function: he betrays his friends, thus appearing clearly untrustworthy, but at the same time he is an agent that helps the workings of justice be realised – no matter that he admitted at his entry that Lucifer is his godfather, and it is the devil who taught him “all kinds of sciences.”

Two explanations are possible for the fact that the Vice may be working in line with justice. One is that he is indeed part of the moral scheme: he is engaged partly in corruption and partly in punishing of the corrupt – the way it is expected from him in a given situation, so that in the end he contributes to the overall working of justice. We see that Lucifer fits well in the moral structure, too, and he makes it clear that he is proud and arrogant and cannot stand seeing vicious people in the company of virtuous ones. Here Lucifer, the embodiment of evil, openly acknowledges its corruption and thus fits himself into the system. The other explanation for why it is sometimes *with* and sometime *at* the Vice that the audience laughs is that the Vice is indeed an outsider, not an intrinsic element of the moral world, a character with exemption who is quite inconsistent in his malevolent behaviour and whose schemes are not clearly predictable.

At the end of the same play, Nichol Newfangle is carried out on the Devil's back, and he bids merry farewell to the audience, and speaks of his return: “Farewell, my masters, till I come again, / For now I must make a journey into Spain.”²³ The beauty of these lines I see as the way the Vice makes the play open-ended and at the same time presents himself as somebody who transcends the confines of a single play. Another example of how it is not necessarily always categorical deception that the Vice is up to is a scene from the play *The Tide Tarrieth no Man* (1576). If we compare the chief vice and his three minions in the drama, we see that the Vice does not necessarily hide his evil identity behind an appealing and cheerful façade with which he is trying to mislead people, but that he is rather ambiguous. When the evil characters decide to go about the business of corrupting humans (Courage informs the audience about this in his entry), the Vice's three minions all change their real names to other

23. Hazlitt, vol. III, p. 353.

names by dropping the negative and revealing adjective, so that Hurtful Help, Painted Profit and Feigned Furtherance become Help, Profit and Furtherance. Courage, however, clearly can remain “himself” with his original name. He even gives a nonsensical explanation of what they are about to do and why. Actually it is a whole nonsensical story, constantly involving breaches of logic, like dead men first being buried some miles away from December, and later running away, or lines such as the following: “And after they louved like brother and brother / For very louve, they did kyll one another.” If we are looking for his consequent malevolent behaviour and we want to perceive him as the root of all evil, the fact that the others had to change their names but he did not makes about as much sense as his nonsensical tale. The idea of the Vice as not exclusively malevolent is stressed by Darryl Grantley in connection with a Vice called Common Conditions, a name that is identical with the title of the play in which he appears: “The Vice is an interesting hybrid of the narrative specimen and the scheming servant of classical comedy, and though he often plots evil, his actions are far from consistently malevolent. He also repeatedly draws attention to his cowardice. At times, especially in the pirate episode, he appears to be used as a general-purpose character to animate the narrative.”²⁴

The question remains still, how are we to interpret the power of the Vice, how temporary and transitional is its validity? Dessen quotes a transitional play *Wealth and Health* (1554) where in the end of the play the deeds of the two vice-like figures, Ill Will and Shrewed Wit, are restored by Remedy, who says that the vices may “reign a while, wrongfully and unjust / Yet truth will appear and their misdeeds blame” (931–32). Dessen says, “The power of these Vices (and later the Vice) is temporary, for the short term only, a formulation that lasts throughout the period and indeed becomes basic to the dramatic career of the Vice.”²⁵ Dessen’s opinion may well stand; however, the message of a Vice leaving the stage while joking is not as clear as it would be if the Vice were entirely humiliated. It seems that the Vice does not subject his view to the moral one, he does not act according to a logic where he, as evil, has to be the loser. Still, even if here we may account for the Vice’s comic and unrepentant exit as part of the Vice’s comic tradition, and remember that finally the audience laughed at him, the same device will still maintain a perspective (that of the unrepentant Vice) that is not contained within the moral one, and will be much more disturbing when the same behaviour appears in later drama, for example at the clos-

24. Darril Grantley, *English Dramatic Interludes 1300–1580* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), p. 61.

25. Dessen, pp. 23–24.

ing scene of the *Revenger's Tragedy*, where Vindice, after being sentenced to death by the representative of the newly established order, Antonio, exists to be executed, but feels that all is perfectly well: "I' faith we're well – our mother turned, our sister true, / We die after a nest of dukes! Adieu" (5.3.125–6).²⁶

An opposite of this exit would be plays where the Vice is spectacularly punished and humiliated on stage, and is shown as a coward – despicable for the audience. I have no knowledge of such Vices, and it seems to be a characteristic of the Vice to face whatever punishment may come in a cheerful mood when he exits the stage.²⁷ I claim that this tradition is much more than simply making the Vice a butt of laughter due to his alleged ignorance of his "real" situation, and it is very problematic to interpret it within the moral message of the play.

In conclusion, I am suggesting that we accept the Vice, a recurring character of non-cycle interludes, as a game-maker who is quite unreliable in his malevolence, whose schemes may work in order to sustain moral order, who may be but does not have to be punished after misdeeds, and who has affinity for nonsense and playing – in other words, a character who enjoys and displays a sense of liberty within the drama.

Still, I do not insist that the Vice always and necessarily enjoys the exemption and can get away unpunished, although I do insist that he sometimes does. In a morality such as *Like will to Like*, written in the tradition of Protestant interludes, it is quite probable that the seemingly inconsistent actions of the vice (corruption as well as punishing corruption) were consistently contributing to the didactic point of the play – just as in a sermon. However, once the didactic message of the sermon is not controlled by a single narrative voice and the narrative is scattered among characters, let alone when it is exactly the Vice who is delivering the moral message, when we have a Vice who is the "controlling narrative voice," interpretations may arise that

26. Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: A & C Black, 1989).

27. It is typical of Vices not to care about the punishment that awaits them, if there is punishment to come at all. The closest a Vice comes to humiliation is his being rather desperate, although defiant and aggressive at the end of *Nice Wanton* (ll. 420–30 and 434). Leonard Tennenhouse, ed. *The Tudor Interludes: Nice Wanton and Impatient Poverty* (New York: Garland, 1984). Another example shows the Vice badly punished; however, he is not punished by the representatives of virtue for his evil deeds, but by the Devil for not carrying out his task properly. See Thomas Garter, *The Most Virtuous and Godly Susanna*, 1578, ed. W.W. Greg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), ll. 1392–1403. For the references I am indebted to Kent Cartwright.

would perhaps be impossible if the “message” were delivered in a non-dramatic form. The dramatic form itself already contributes to the possibility that some voices within it may have an effect that is not consistent with the intended moral message.

The Fool in the Vice

Examining the relatedness of the Vice to the popular fool offers much more liberal interpretations as to the position of the figure within a moral pattern. The vice depicted by Mares does not fall readily into the morality pattern, because he embodies a sense of freedom, something that makes him an outsider in the play not only because he is an entertainer, a link between the play and the audience, but also because he enjoys exemption from the strict moral rules of the allegory.²⁸ Compared to later interpretations, I find it highly significant that Mares stresses the freedom of the Vice from the allegorical-moral framework of the play. He seems to imply that it is the popular origin of the figure in the fool that makes him difficult to fit in the morality pattern. Late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century dictionary entries and passages from translated works quoted by Alan Dessen show how the terms “jester,” “fool,” and “vice” are used as either synonyms or closely related terms. For example, he says, “In his translation of Pliny, Philemon Holland expands the Latin *mima* into ‘a common vice in a play’ and, a sentence later, describes ‘such another vice that played the fool and made sport between whiles in enterludes.’” Dessen also shows examples of how the traditional attribute of the Vice, his dagger of lath, would be accompanied with furred hood, a fool’s coat or coxcombs — actually attributes of the fool.²⁹

Bernard Spivack uses the morality *Like Will to Like* in support of his argument that the Vice is misunderstood if taken as a fool or buffoon. He stresses the miseries Nichol Newfangle has brought on the characters of the play in order to remove him from the merely jovial side of his role. In my view, however, the example makes the complexity of the Vice explicit: in cases where the Vice’s actions, his comedy, are morally justified because his comedy clearly serves the punishment of evil characters, then from the audience’s perspective the character “Vice” appears here as one whom they can embrace with no reservation as both comic and supporting the accepted system of values. If this were true, there would be no debate about the place of the character in the moral setup. Part of a quotation from Stubbes’s *Anatomy of Abuses*

28. Frances Hugh Mares, “The Origin of the Figure Called ‘the Vice’ in Tudor Drama,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 12 (1958–1959) 11–23.

29. Dessen, p. 18–9.

in which “playing the vice” appears among highly condemnable activities, is inserted by Spivack in his argument in order to support “a very much darker picture of the Vice” that he wants to argue for as opposed to a farcical characterization. However, the quotations actually do not support his interpretation, because if the Vice did have a “homiletic substance,”³⁰ people like Stubbes would not have been so outraged about him and the plays in which he appeared to the audiences delight.

Spivack, in order to provide background for his view of the Vice as a figure whose humour is wrongly stressed, quotes a passage from a poem of the eighties against Martin Marpelate, which “shows that even in the final period of the moralities he [the Vice] was not regarded only as jester”: “Now Tarleton’s dead, the consort lackes a vice; / For knaue and foole thou maist beare pricke and price.”³¹

Spivack seems to acknowledge that the jester indeed is an important component of the Vice. Still, he does not allow another interpretation of the figure than the moral one. The problem, however, is not in regarding the Vice *only* as jester, as the quotation would imply, but rather in regarding the Vice only as knave, a devilish intriguer, whose function within the play is ultimately to be condemned. By regarding the clown or fool or jester element in the Vice as significant, the potential moral interpretation does not disappear; rather, it becomes more complex and ambiguous.

Spivack insists on the Vice whose farcical aspect “is only a dramatic glitter of his role, not its homiletic substance,”³² and sees a subsequent “comic degeneration of the role,” which is not possible to discover “so long as he performs in a context of allegory, where his characteristic intrigue is never without its sharp edge of homiletic significance and his effect without grave consequences.”³³ However, the passage Spivack refers to in my view supports exactly the intrinsic connection between the Vice and the Fool, the fact that the Fool is underestimated as a mere jester, and the fact that the fool and the Vice have never really separated, from the time the Vice appeared on stage, to the moment when he went out of fashion.

Looking at all the contemporary examples that Dessen and Spivack enumerate, from the close relation of Vice and fool that becomes clearly evident, I find it indeed noteworthy that the scholars adduce all the illustrations merely to confute in the end the idea that the Vice in a number of cases is justly understood as fool, and they in-

30. Spivack, p. 200.

31. “A Whop for and Ape: Or Martin Marpelate Displaied” (1589) in *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, ed. R.W. Bond (Oxford, 1902) III, p. 417.

32. Spivack, p. 200.

33. Spivack, p. 202.

sist that in the end the Vice is defined by his “homiletic substance,” while if he is taken as identical with a fool, then he is not a real and representative Vice.

A critic with whom I agree on this matter is Enid Welsford who, although merely in passing, deals with the Vice of the Interludes, and mentions two examples where “the Vice is unmistakably a court-jester.”³⁴ David Wiles too deals in a few sentences with the matter of distinction between fools and Vices, partly drawing on Welsford’s examples given on the costume of Vices and fools, and points out the close connection between the fool and the Vice.³⁵ It seems evident that once we are ready to understand the Vice not so much as a devil but rather an entertainer, his characteristic comedy as well as his moral evaluation are put in a different light.

As I tried to make clear in my argument on the Vice, quite a substantial effort of critics was spent on *separating* the dark and vicious Vice from the buffoonish agent who is comic but not harmful. I see that such a separation can be made only at the expense of his force, underestimating the Vice’s comedy and its effect. If the Vice is seen either as supporting a homiletic structure or as mere buffoonery, we are missing the point. Instead of separating the comic and destructive elements in the Vice, we should rather see them inseparable: a unique merger that is intrinsic to the character, and that gives him the unfathomable energy and power he possesses.

As already mentioned and illustrated with the examples, a crucial function of the Vice is to mediate between play and audience, involving the audience in the performance. In Weimann’s words, the Vice is both a *conférencier* and chorus, acting as a link between locus and platea, where locus means a place of an illusionary character, the setting of the playworld, while platea is “an entirely unlocalised and unrepresentational setting . . . the broad and general acting area in which the communal festivities were conducted.”³⁶

This mediatory function of the Vice gains an additional essential function in Knapp’s view, which sees the Vice not merely as a go-between, but as the character who makes the point, who formulates the gist, or the “message,” of the play.³⁷ The

34. Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 285.

35. David Wiles, *Shakespeare’s Clown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 2-3.

36. Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in Theater* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 78.

37. “Serving as the analogue or companionable *raisonneur* for those persons who are the titular heroes or villains of the action, the Tudor Vice gives us a merry report of what the action is about, abstracting a narrative context into a thematic statement, helping us to formu-

irony inherent in this setup is, of course, that a character who is morally at least dubious, if not the embodiment or drive of moral corruptions, is the one to usher the audience to the message of the morality.

The character is most compelling, however, because in addition to being the agent of involvement, the play's chorus and commentator, he frequently seems to be the very prerequisite or source of the play itself. A very clear example where the Vice suggests that it is the play itself that is identical with temptation, and the audience identical with sinners, can be found at the beginning of *Like Will to Like*. The Vice, Nichol Newfangle, enters with a knave of clubs in his hand, and, according to the stage directions, he passes it over to a member of the audience: "he offereth to one of the men or boys standing by." His irony in uttering the title of the play in his first line immediately puts the audience in a position of meeting the Vice by the very logic of the proverbial title and makes them accomplices. Nichol makes the most out of the fact that the audience now has the opportunity to meet him. He reminds them of himself, whom they may have forgotten. The whole scene is alluring, where Nichol is directly addressing the audience and is evidently trying hard to win their sympathy.

Once we see that the Vice (as master of ceremonies, as engine of the plot, and as source of temptation) can be equated with the play, the question of whether to accept or refute the Vice gains a wider perspective. This is why in some cases it seems that condemning the Vice was identical with condemning the whole institution. I have mentioned above Spivack's reference to a passage of a harsh critic of theatre, Philip Stubbes. Stubbes in his *Anatomy of Abuses* describes everything bad that can be learned from playing and acting:

If you will learn falshood; if you will learn cozenage; if you will learn to decive; if you will learn to play the hypocrite, to cog, to lie, and falsify; if you will learn to jest, laugh and fleer, to grin, to nod, and mow; if you will learn to play the vice, to swear, tear, and blaspheme both heaven and earth . . . and commit all kind of sin and mischief, you need to go to no other school, for all these good examples may you see painted before your eyes in interludes and plays.³⁸

late the rhetorical point of the play. . ." (Robert S. Knapp, *Shakespeare: The Theater and the Book* [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989], pp. 99–100).

38. Tanya Pollard ed., *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 121–2.

The Vice in Stubbes's text most probably indeed refers to the character in theatre, because he uses the phrase "learn to play the. . ." three times in the long (and in the above-quoted version cut) passage, and in all these cases he continues the phrase with mentioning stock characters on stage, like the hypocrite, the vice, the glutton. There is no question about whether the Vice is condemnable or not in this context, actually he can even be understood as the epitome of all the immoral falsities of theatre, since he features most of the elements of the sinful behaviour described so minutely by Stubbes: he not only lies and falsifies by profession, but laughs, jests and fleers, as well as murders, steals and robs. The Vice may be seen as a character who embodies all the attributes of an actor in theatre, and perhaps it is no accident that Stubbes himself uses the word "ambidexter" as a synonym for actors. "Beware, therefore, you masking players, you painted sepulchres, you double dealing ambidexters. . ." ³⁹ A parallel passage that sees the Vice as the epitome of theatre can be found in a later antitheatrical treatise, William Prynne's *Histrionmastix*. Prynne is grieving over the unfortunate fact that "witty, comely youths" devote themselves to the stage, "where they are trained in the School of Vice, the play-house. . ." ⁴⁰ However, not only Vices can turn out to epitomise actors but fools as well. Welsford notes that "supposed early references to fools prove to be references to 'histriones,' 'buffoni,' 'joculatores' and other vague terms for actors and entertainers." ⁴¹

The figure, together with the fool, was a relic of an earlier drama already on the Shakespearean stage. He certainly left his traits on a number of Shakespeare's characters, and appeared as transformed, perhaps frequently as a psychologically more complex character, but always as someone who preserved his unique sense of play and game. Not surprisingly, it is usually the Machiavellian villains who are regarded as his successors, those who are dangerously alluring and wicked or even devil-like, such as Gloucester, Edmund, Aaron or Iago. But we should be aware that not only "tamed" villains, like Falstaff, or almost benign ones or simple mischiefs, such as Puck or Feste show a remarkable dramatic indebtedness to the Vice, but also that all successors of the Vice are simplified in our interpretation if we necessarily wish to see them as having no genuine appeal – at least if we agree that theatre is or may be appealing.

39. Pollard, p. 118.

40. Pollard, p. 291

41. Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 114.

However, the Vice appears in the 17th century as well, not only as transformed into a psychologically complex villain or the clown of the performance, but “in person,” in a customary ambiguous context, familiar from the moralities, in Jonson’s *The Devil is an Ass*. Here the Vice carries off Pug, the devil on his back – just the opposite way as in moralities, where the Vices were carried away by the devil. The Vice explains the unusual situation the following way: “The Devil was wont to carry away the evil; / But, now, the Evil out-carries the Devil” (5.6.76–7).

I would like to draw attention to the fact that the Vice here seems to have more power than in his earlier appearances, leaving the stage on the Devil’s back, as in Fulwell’s *Like Will to Like* from 1568. The inverted tradition in Jonson’s play could stress his evil and deceptive nature, but there is another possibility as well, and it is the playful and comic quality of the scene, featuring a Vice who misbehaves from the point of view of the devil and deviates from the pattern applied in some morality plays, but who behaves according to the “haphazard” and comically subversive convention, namely disregards all authority and all prescribed modes of behaviour. If we do not stick to the idea that the foolish Vice is either unrepresentative or a degeneration of the homiletic original, we can see Jonson as continuing the original tradition, which did allow such liberties to the Vice. In other words: the Vice is leaving the stage at the early 17th century, in a no less unpredictable or ambiguous manner as when he enters it a century earlier.