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David Wiles

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CHAPTER I

The Vice: from *Mankind* to *Merchant of Venice*

THE CLOWN'S ANCESTRY in the Tudor 'Vice' is a generally accepted fact of theatre history. The precise nature of the Tudor 'Vice' is less clear. An examination of the Vice tradition helps us to understand the centrality of the clown's role on the Elizabethan stage.

It seems appropriate to begin with one of the earliest professional English plays to have survived, *Mankind*. Theatre history tends to be Shakespeare-centric, and to present us with a crude medieval tradition evolving into the sophisticated late Elizabethan theatre. The *Quem Quaeritis* trope or the *psychomachia* can be enlisted as the convenient *fons et origo*. It is easy to paint such a picture because so much medieval drama was written for amateurs with a limited range of performance skills. The complexity of *Mankind* is an important corrective to the evolutionary perspective, and the play therefore requires examination.

The play was written in *c.* 1470 for a troupe of six East Anglian actors. It shows how Mischief and three subordinate rogues bring about the fall of Mankind, who can be saved only by the priestly Mercy. Mischief opens the play by interrupting Mercy's sermon. He presents himself as an itinerant *winter* corn-thresher, and seems to be riding a hobby-horse. His actions are governed at every stage by his statement in the opening scene:

I am come hither to make you game.

And he keeps inventing new games for his companions, and the audience, to play: a miraculous healing in the manner of a mumming play, a mock manorial law court, a reenactment of Christ's sending out of his disciples, and ceaseless parody of ecclesiastical speech. He is at once the villain, whom the audience learn to shun, and the

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welcome game-maker who makes the play possible. The idea that Mischief is a game-maker and master of ceremonies is central to the dramatist's conception. Modern editors seem to me to have overlooked an important element in the dramatist's strategy.

Half-way through the play, the audience are told that the devil will be called up. They will be shown 'a man with a head of great omnipotence' – but only on condition that they pay. Once the collection has been taken, the promised 'Titivillus' appears. 'Titivillus' extracts the takings from Mischief's three accomplices, and sends them off to steal horses from identified individuals known to the audience. Mischief has nothing to say in this scene, and his exit is unmarked. Editors have assumed, wrongly in my view, that the player of Mercy doubles as Titivillus. It is more appropriate if Mischief, the showman *par excellence*, doubles the part. He can slip behind the screens to deliver Titivillus's off-stage bellow: 'I come with my legs under me', and return as himself, before leaving again to don the devil's mask, the 'head of great omnipotence'. Stage directions in the manuscript – 'Loquitur ad New Guise' etc. – signal moments when Mischief drops the melodramatic role of Titivillus in order to bicker with his associates. Titivillus's exit line is equally an exit line for *Mischief*:

Farewell, everyone! for I have done my game;
For I have brought Mankind to mischief and to shame.¹

Mischief, in this reading of the text, does not 'double' Titivillus so much as play him in a play-within-a-play. Two important dramaturgical principles are at stake here. First, the Vice, the principal comedian, dominates the play whenever he is physically present. Secondly, the Vice has power to juggle layers of reality. He plays at one and the same time the devil, the allegorical person of Mischief, and a crooked actor organizing robberies from houses that are empty because everyone has come to see the play. At the same time, the player is himself, gathering real money to fund the itinerant troupe in which he is the principal. There is no fixed boundary between actor and role – for to perform a play is in a sense necessarily to create 'mischief'.

Bernard Spivack's argument that the Vice originates as a *radix malorum* finds no support in this play. Mischief's name indicates a dual function. Though Mischief is the personification of a particular sin, this sin is hardly the 'root' of all the evils represented. Mischief's function is equally to be a carnivalesque celebrant. Like a Lord of

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Misrule, a boy bishop, or a *prince des sots*, he inverts the established order. He offers, in Glynne Wickham's terms, 'life in play' rather than 'life in earnest'. The play-within-a-play device forces the audience to be aware of their own dual status as sinners (through being alive) and celebrants (through being at a play). When Spivack writes of morality drama that 'such a stage was fundamentally a pulpit and its audience fundamentally a congregation',² he ignores the fact that early interludes generally used an unbounded *platea* rather than a raised stage. There was no physical line of demarcation to set apart the fictive world of the play from the real world of the audience.

Mischief has a central and controlling function. The play's existence is contingent upon his. He can shift the boundaries of the action at will, physically implicating the spectators in Mankind's downfall – as for example when he makes them pay for the pleasure of meeting the devil. The audience's stance is always being renegotiated, for the audience is composed of 'Mankind', but it is also composed of 'Mischief'. Steered by the Vice, the principal game-maker, the audience is always on the move between the polar positions of observer and participant.

We can accept the views of scholars who trace an important part of the Vice's ancestry to the fool of folk festivals.³ In other early interludes written for professional troupes we find that the Vices are venial rather than deadly sins. They offer man a life of holiday pleasures. Pride is paired with Riot in *Youth*. Lust-and-liking and Folly in *Mundus et Infans* set up carnivalesque freedom as an alternative to ecclesiastical discipline. In *Hickscorner*, the fantastic illogicality of Hickscorner, Freewill and Imagination is not in any obvious sense the product of an allegorical imagination. As a last example: in that most elaborate of interludes, *Magnificence*, the part of Fancy, the most conspicuous of the Vices, is given to a dwarf. In the course of the play Fancy emerges in his true colours when he dons a fool's coat and proves brother to Folly. Fancy is simultaneously the key to the protagonist's ruin and the creator of entertainment at court.

An important convention seems to be initiated in *Magnificence*. The Vices enter the service of 'Magnificence', the protagonist, and become household servants. The Vices become servants again in such plays as *Mundus et Infans*, *Youth*, *Horestes*, *Cambises* and *Three Ladies of London*. The Vice/servant proved a useful figure when writers tried to weld the indigenous comic tradition onto

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neo-classical plots which gave a pivotal role to the comic slave. The Vice/servant in *Magnificence* is also a social climber, and social mobility was another theme which Elizabethan dramatists proved keen to explore. The linked motif of the Vice who is revealed as a fool also stood the test of time. Parolles is a striking Shakespearean example. The upstart Parolles incites his master to vice/sport, and his scarves are the emblem of his pride, pride being his master's cardinal fault. Once his master has been reformed, Parolles emerges at last in his true colours and becomes Lafeu's retained fool.

The word 'vice' is first used as a technical theatrical term by John Heywood in 1532. In his experimental courtly interludes *Love* and *Weather*, the characters of Neither-lover-nor-loved and Merryreport are labelled as the Vices of their respective plays. Spivack is clearly right in his etymology here.⁴ The characters are so labelled because the characters are no longer personifications of one particular vice, yet the actor fulfils the same dramatic function as Mischief, Fancy and the rest. Neither-lover-nor-loved is both comedian and deceiver, and in his disputation proves that the successful lover is no less a fool than himself. Merryreport is taken on as Jupiter's servant, despite the 'lightness' of his apparel, and he functions as a wisecracking compère and interviewer; he mediates between the god and his suitors, and by extension between actors and audience. Heywood has here taken the first step in detaching the stage clown from the morality tradition.

The word 'vice' is often used as a synonym for fool in the sixteenth century. We can trace, however, a fine distinction between the Vice who *acts* the fool's part and the born or natural fool. Thus in an Oxfordshire may-game we find the Whitsun lord being attended by 'the vices that played the fools'.⁵ In contrast to the Whitsun lord, a humble nobody elected to high office, the Vice of the may-game had to be something of a specialist. He was therefore paid a fee for his services: sixpence was normal, but five shillings was paid to the Vice in a Surrey may-game in 1611.⁶ The subtle distinction – or lack of it – between the artful Vice and the natural fool was the concern of moral interludes from *Magnificence* to William Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest The More Fool Thou Art*. It became, eventually, the obsession of the clown/fool Robert Armin.

When we look at the activities of the Tudor Vice, two features demand our attention. First was his skill in improvisation. Puttenham mentions that lascivious poems are often uttered by 'vices in

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plays', and in a pseudo-historical description of the classical world he describes how 'counterfeit vices' fill out the acts between plays, while the players are changing, by giving a ridiculous cross-construction of the action. A Vice provided 'pastime' before and after a miracle play at Bungay, and a fool accompanied the criers of the banns before a passion play at New Romney. We hear that it was the part of 'a Vice in a play to prate what is prompted or suggested to him'. Just as the fool in a morris dance broke formation and danced where he pleased, so the Vice swept aside the confines of a script.⁷ The Vice's costume justified his function as an improvisator. It is clear from the profusion of references that no useful distinction can be made between the costume of the 'vice' and the costume of the 'fool'. In Armada year, English Catholics in Rome dressed a Protestant traveller in 'a fool's coat . . . half blue, half yellow, and a cockscomb with three bells'. And in the court of Queen Mary we find a gown of yellow and blue fabric being chopped up to make 'two vices' coats for a play'.⁸ The Revels documents of Edward VI use the terms 'vice', 'fool' and 'dizard' interchangeably for a man who wears a suit of many colours and carried as his props a ladle with a bauble pendant and a dagger.⁹ A Tudor Vice/fool, therefore, would play a scripted part in an interlude as long as the script required, but he would wear his fool's coat and play the fool's part as long as the occasion required.

We must beware of imposing upon the Tudor world our own conceptual separation of a 'play' from a festival. The Vice who makes pastime within an interlude cannot be dissociated from the Vice who is given a function within the festival. The boundary between interlude and festival was never rigidly defined. A Lord of Misrule would often set up plays in the course of his carnivalesque reign: at Christ's College, Cambridge, for instance, a stage was set up in 1553 'when the Xmas lords came at Candlemas to the College with shows'. The summer lord of South Kyme in 1601 participated in a libellous 'stage play' on the village green.¹⁰ We must not forget also that Elizabethan professional players were normally called to court to play in the context of inversionary festivals. Until such time as the 'play' was isolated and redefined as a work of *art*, the Vice had the task of ensuring that no boundary emerged between the play and the playful context of its performance.

Inevitably the function of the Vice changed in the formal circumstances of performance before a public audience in London. Audience

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back the action from Persia to London, as he hurries off to catch a barge before he misses the tide. The Vice never allows the audience to forget that the play is a game which requires their active involvement. The actor's technique lies in his ambidexterous juggling with two worlds.

The Vice's language sets him apart from the rest of the play. His diction is that of the common man. The sentences twist about as they follow his thought. There are no boorish malapropisms or affected conceits. The heavy rhythm of the fourteener, characteristic of the play and parodied in Shakespeare's 'Pyramus and Thisbe', vanishes in Ambidexter's monologues. The pattern is an irregular four-beat line, broken in the middle and held in shape by the rhyme. For the improvisator, it would be an easy verse form to sustain. The illusion is set up that the Vice is inventing his part, and the play, as he proceeds. There is an obvious continuity forwards to the prose of Shakespeare's clowns and backwards to the earthy Anglo-Saxon diction of the vices in *Mankind*.

Like the vices in *Magnificence*, Ambidexter elevates himself to the position of retainer at court. He claims that 'the king doth me a gentleman allow', and forces his fellow servant to address him as 'your mastership'. Since other characters throughout tend to address him as 'Master Ambidexter', a fanciful and socially imprecise outfit seems appropriate. In practice and by law, a main function of Elizabethan costume was to signal publicly where people stood on the social scale. Clearly some kind of fool costume allows Ambidexter to sidestep the normal conventions of dress.

Ambidexter remains a Vice in the moral sense. He sets the peasants fighting for no reason, sends Smirdis to his death, hobnobs with the corrupt judge, kisses the whore at length, and bullies his way to the royal table. Yet within the framework of a historical/melodramatic/romantic narrative, the moral ambiguity of the audience's response cannot so easily be pointed up. The equilibrium once set up by Mischief and Mercy has vanished. The Vice is on the verge of becoming the Clown.

The Vice tradition left its imprint upon late Elizabethan theatre. *The Merchant of Venice* provides a good example of how Shakespeare continued to work within the Vice convention. The conventions governing the role of clown/Vice can be summed up under three headings as set out below.

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The personification of a moral Vice

'Launcelot Gobbo' is noted for his greed, laziness and lechery: he is a 'huge feeder' who 'sleeps by day' and gets the moorish with child. He creates mischief for the fun of it when he tries confusions with his father. It is appropriate that in his opening speech he presents himself as the servant of the devil.

Since the nature of a Vice was encapsulated in his name, it was common for a Vice to expound the meaning of his name.¹³ Shakespeare follows convention to the extent of using a name that is emblematic and contrasts with the Italian nomenclature of the other characters. Putting centuries of tradition aside, we return to the First Quarto and Folio to find – to our surprise – that the clown's correct name throughout is Launcelet Jobbe. The 'Gobbo' is borrowed from his father and from the unreliable Roberts Quarto. The father may be a 'gobbo' or hunchback, but the son is different. The *OED* tells us that a 'launcelet' is a small lance or lancet, and 'jobbe' is the regular Elizabethan spelling of our 'jab'. The name has phallic overtones, and links him to fellow clowns 'Launce' and 'Falstaff'. The clown's jest: 'Do I took like a cudgel or a hovel post, a staff or a prop?', though pointed up by a stick he or his father carries, turns upon the clown's name, so carefully enunciated in his first speech. The clown's later reference to his rib-cage comically belies the fact that his eating has rendered him fat. The name 'Launcelet Jobbe' therefore signifies both the lecher and the overeater. It suggests that he is a moral Vice who jabs those who toy with him. And it associates him with the physical instrument of Shylock's viciousness, the lancet that is to cut into Antonio's flesh. Dramatic tradition has accepted the name 'Gobbo' for so long because of a neo-classical desire for internal plausibility, for a realistic Italian context. In order to rediscover the Elizabethan clown buried in the text, we have to take a more medieval perspective.

Boundaries of the action

The clown establishes a rapport with the audience when he opens and closes his first scene with monologues. (Though his father is on stage for the second, the clown reads his own palm for the audience's benefit, not for his blind father.) The deceit of the father is set up for the audience's entertainment: Launcelet explains clearly to the audi-

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ence who his father is and what he intends to do to him. In his fooling at Belmont, Launcelet is again no servant of the plot but a self-conscious entertainer.

The linguistic demarcation of Launcelet's role is an important feature. The fact that the clown speaks in prose when most of the play is in verse creates the illusion of spontaneity, of an actor who is speaking to the audience *in propria persona*. Launcelet's jiggling rhyme:

There will come a Christian by
Will be worth a Jewes eye

has the clumsiness of an improvisation. The patterning of the monologues gives the supposed improvisator a framework for his performance.

Actor begins to separate out from role when the audience are forced to wonder whether stupidity or cleverness lies behind the clown's jests. When Launcelet tells Bassanio that 'the suit is impertinent to myself', laments that 'tears exhibit my tongue', or complains that his father 'may tell every finger I have with my ribs', he hides truth beneath a veneer of idiocy. There is no way of telling what Launcelet 'really' thinks and feels. No central locus of 'character' can be identified. Launcelet's language allows the audience to sense that the character is stupid but the actor is clever – clever enough to mock the character he plays. The dichotomy of actor and role is reinforced if the part of slender 'Launcelet' is given to an actor who is fat, if the part of a young apprentice is given to a middle-aged master actor.

Costume

The clown initially is in rags. Shylock complains of how he has managed to 'rend apparel out'. When the clown enters Bassanio's service, he is promised 'a livery more guarded than his fellows' – and there is no reason to doubt that this costume materializes. The stage direction which reclassifies Launcelet as Shylock's 'man that was the Clowne' points to the change. Lorenzo puns on the new livery coat after the clown's exit with the comment: 'how his words are suited' – and he adds that he knows 'many fools that stand in better place / Garnished like him'.¹⁴ There is an iconographic significance in the clown's change of costume. Vices such as Ignorance in *Wit and Science* and Moros in *The Longer Thou Livest The More*

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Fool Thou Art were given a fool's costume in the course of the interlude, and the same technique is used here.¹⁵ Bassanio's extravagance is plainly foolish, and he fritters away money dressing up the embodiment of folly. When he places his own livery badge upon the Vice, he identifies the Vice as one of his party, and himself as one of the Vice's party. At the same time, paradoxically, Bassanio is the hero, who plays the game of romantic love and wins. It is fitting that he saves the principal game-maker from destitution, and admits him to the Utopian world of Belmont, where all the values of Venice are inverted. Shakespeare thus successfully exploits the dual significance of the medieval Vice convention.

So much for continuities. There is also an obvious change. Launcelot is modelled on two observed social types: the country boy turned apprentice, faced with a moral dilemma over his indentures, and the threatened species of 'idle servingman', whose prosperity depends upon his master's economic suicide. In the longer term, social realism proved a limiting factor. The stage became a mirror of society, but only part of society was reflected in the mirror, only one angle of vision was possible. In the course of the seventeenth century the stage servant became a mere cipher, unable to make any impact upon the decisions and life-chances of the gentleman. When the carnivalesque model of the Vice/clown was finally obliterated, the clown/servant fell victim to decorum and verisimilitude.