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“Ye seem to have that ye have not”:

Religious Belief and Doubt in John Heywood's *The Four PP*

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John Heywood's *The Four PP* is in many ways his most initially enigmatic interlude. Although it seems at first glance surprisingly straightforward, it nonetheless invites a number of questions concerning its sources, date of composition, auspices, and religious and political implications. Its title, meaning merely “the four Ps”, alludes to the fact that the names of its four characters, the Palmer (pilgrim),¹ the Pardoner, the Potycary (apothecary) and the Pedlar, all start with that letter. So even its title page, unlike those of his later plays (*Love, Gentleness and Nobility*, *The Play of the Weather*, *The Pardoner and the Friar*, and even *Witty and Witless*) initially gives little away about the matters that will preoccupy it—a fitting beginning, perhaps, for a play that itself seems to resist the imposition of a single coherent theme that would make sense of its various parts.

As we shall see, the issue broached at the outset, and to which *The Four PP* returns at the end, is which of two traditional religious practices, pilgrimage or the receipt of pardons and indulgences, offers the readier route to salvation. But this question seems to disappear once the third “P”, the Potycary, enters and describes the lethal properties of his own medicines, arguing roguishly that they can send a soul to heaven more swiftly than any religious practice, however sincerely pursued. Following the Potycary's distracting intervention, and the arrival of a second huckster, the Pedlar, the debate gives way to a series of recognisable comic set-pieces: the Pardoner displays and describes his fraudulent relics; the Potycary and the Pedlar exchange misogynistic comic banter prompted by the goods the latter offers for sale; and finally the Potycary, Palmer and Pardoner engage in a storytelling contest, judged by the Pedlar, in which

1 Palmers were so called because pilgrims returning from the Holy Land, and especially Jerusalem, often carried a palm frond as a token of their completion of the journey.

each must attempt to tell the greatest lie. Only after the conclusion of this competition does the play return directly to the question of religious practices, and then only to conclude that pilgrimage and indulgences are equally valid, as are a range of other orthodox good works, if practiced honestly, with due contrition, faith and charity, and following the time-honoured teachings of the Church.

What should we make of this apparent profusion of modes and material? As what follows will argue, the interlude begins to appear more coherent if we consider it in light of the contemporary discussion of questions of faith and practice in the works of Erasmus and Thomas More. For the interlude seems to be, in part at least, Heywood's considered reaction to the humanist critique of popular religion to be found in Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* and *Familiar Colloquies*, and needs to be read alongside those texts, and, most obviously (as Axton and Happé have suggested²), alongside More's own *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), if the full impact intended is to be appreciated. Its studied defence of pilgrimage and indulgences (offered in the context of a clear, broadly comic acknowledgement of the abuses and naiveties to which they sometimes give rise), coupled with its final assertion of the need to trust the authority and wisdom of the established Church in matters where the truth is not obvious, are central here. They amount to an attempt to draw a clear line between the kinds of orthodox scepticism about the excesses and abuses of popular piety that animate Erasmian satire, and the more radical and destructive criticisms of those practices themselves voiced by Luther (and evangelical reformers closer to home) in a period when the two were becoming increasingly difficult to tell apart. In this, Heywood sets out a position for himself that is somewhere between the cautious even-handedness of Erasmus (who remained reluctant to condemn Luther outright, and saw some merit in his spirited assault upon the abuses of popular practices and the contemporary church hierarchy) and the increasing severity of More, who was unwilling to grant the evangelicals any concessions or acknowledge any good intentions on their part. Heywood's position asserts the need for a tolerant accommodation of differences of emphasis, capacity and vocation among the orthodox, while defending the limits of orthodoxy itself against the more radical views of the evangelicals. In this it is in keeping with More's *Dialogue*. But *The Four PP* is also distinct in a number of its emphases. It is ultimately more affirmative in its conclusions about the value of traditional religious practices than either Heywood's own later interlude, *The Pardoner and the Friar*, or the work of Erasmus. Why this might be is a question to which we will return towards the end of this essay.

² Axton and Happé, eds, p. 45. All quotations from Heywood's plays are taken from this edition, with spelling and punctuation modernised.

The play commences, in familiar Heywood fashion, with a character entering the place to “make his boast”. Here it is neither a conniving Friar (as is the case in *The Pardoner and the Friar*) nor a lamenting lover (as in *Love*), but a humble pilgrim, who has seemingly entered the hall in search of shelter, not knowing quite where he is. His tone seems to mark him out as a broadly virtuous figure. And, in contrast with *The Pardoner and the Friar* or *Gentleness and Nobility* (in which characters are introduced in ways that arouse conventional expectations only for them subsequently to be disappointed), this time the early cue does not prove misleading. A little naive he may be, but the Palmer will prove to be exactly what he suggests, when, bound by courtesy, he feels obliged to declare his vocation and life-story:

I am a palmer, as ye see,
Which of my life much part hath spent
In many a fair and far country,
As pilgrims do of good intent. (Heywood, *Four PP*, ll. 9-12)

And yet a degree of ambivalence nonetheless attaches to this role and character. In the speech that follows, he offers a list of over thirty shrines, holy sites, and cities that he claims to have visited in a life of pious peregrination. Such lists of places (religious or secular) or things are a stock element of late medieval and early Tudor interlude drama.³ Sometimes serious, sometimes satirical or nonsensical, sometimes a mixture of all three, such speeches can be found in a number of surviving plays. Merry Report offers a prime example in Heywood's *The Play of the Weather*, when he names the forty towns and regions that he claims to have visited in the gap between lines 178 and 186 of that play, ranging from “Louvain, London, and Lombardy” (l. 198) to “Gravelines, Gravesend, and Glastonbury” (l. 210), the list ending with an allusion to the manor near Chelmsford where Heywood's eldest brother, William, held lands: “Ynge Gyngiang Jayberd, the parish of Butsbury” (l. 211). The exuberance of the recital, the growing implausibility of the claim, and Merry Report's mixing of the exotic with the parochial all invite a kind of tolerant, knowing laughter from spectators here.⁴ But the Palmer's list resists such ready definition and response. Does it cue cynicism or respect, scorn or sympathy? Its tone is deftly poised, as is the catalogue of shrines it contains.

The Palmer's speech is also less intrusively crafted than Merry Report's insistently alliterating lines, and mixes the seemingly numinous with the ribald less artfully. His

3 See McGavin, pp. 45–62.

4 See Reed, p. 31.

commitment to his vocation is manifest, as is the pride in his achievements evident in statements such as this about his journey to “Josophat and Olivet” (*Four PP*, l. 17):

On foot, God wot, I went right bare.
 Many a salt tear did I sweat
 Before this carcass could come there. (ll. 18-20)

Yet the sites that he goes on to describe range from the impeccable—“Christ’s blessed sepulchre” (l. 14) and “the Mount of Calvary” (l. 15)—to shrines of scurrilous saints such as “Uncumber” (Wilgefortis) and “Tronion” (Ronion) (l. 31), familiar from satirical accounts of the excesses of popular devotion from Chaucer through Erasmus to More himself.⁵ As he speaks, the very length of the list seems to invite laughter, yet the Palmer’s evident commitment to its content works to hold that laughter at least partially in check. The audience is thereby denied a clear cue to the kind of ready scornful amusement prompted by texts such as Erasmus’s colloquy, “A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake”, in which the author’s contempt for the credulousness of the pilgrims and the greed of the clerics who exploit it is clear. And, as we shall see, such suspension of judgement in the face of conflicting signals about the authenticity of what is being claimed proves to be the key to the Palmer’s role in the play, and to a central concern of the interlude more generally.

In Heywood’s other debate plays, it is when a character moves from inviting sympathy and understanding for his or her lot to claiming exclusivity for their own virtue or misfortune that the debate is joined, and *The Four PP* is no different. For what draws the appearance of the next character, the Pardoner, is the Palmer’s observation that

Who seeketh saints for Christ’s sake—
 And namely such as pain do take
 On foot to punish [their] frail body—
 Shall thereby merit more highly
 Than by anything done by man. (ll. 59-63)

This the Pardoner roundly mocks with the quip:

And when ye have gone as far as ye can,

5 See, e.g., Erasmus, “Pilgrimage”, *passim*. As Axton and Happé, eds, note (p. 249, nn. to ll. 29, 30, 31; p. 251, nn. to ll. 48, 49), a number of the shrines and saints listed by Heywood’s Palmer (“the Rhodes”, “Amyas”, “St Uncumber” [properly Wilgefortis], Willesden, and “St Roke”) also feature in More’s *Dialogue of Heresies* (1529). As More observes of Wilgefortis, “women hath . . . changed her name, and instead of St Wilgefort call her St Uncumber, because they reckon that for a peck of oats, she will not fail to uncumber them of their husbands” (p. 227).

For all your labour and ghostly [*spiritual*] intent,
Yet welcome home as wise as ye went! (ll. 64-66)

The challenge hints at criticism of pilgrimages that spans a spectrum from Erasmian satire of abuses to fundamental evangelical rejection of the practices themselves. In both “Rash Vows” and “The Old Men’s Chat”, for example, Erasmus has pilgrims admit that they have returned from Jerusalem no wiser or holier than they left. Indeed, in the latter, the returning traveller, Pampirus (“Jack of All Trades”), concedes that he is now “considerably worse than I had been before I went” (“Old Men’s Chat”, p. 458).⁶ And when he came to revisit and defend the *Colloquies*, and “Rash Vows” in particular, in “On the Usefulness of the *Colloquies*”, published in 1526, Erasmus was still more outspoken on the subject. The aim of “Rash Vows”, he noted, was to curb “the superstitious and shameful fancy of some folk who think the essence of holiness is to have visited Jerusalem” (“Usefulness”, p. 1098), whereas, in fact—here he cites St Jerome—“To have been in Jerusalem is not of great importance, but to have lived righteously *is* important” (p. 1099).

Heywood, by contrast, avoids such contentious language. He is careful to ensure that his debate does not focus on principle or doctrine. The Pardoner does not criticise pilgrimage *per se*. When asked directly, “Why, sir, despise ye pilgrimage?” (l. 67), he swiftly responds,

Nay, for God, sir, then did I rage. [*I’d be mad if I did*]
I think ye right well occupied
To seek these saints on every side.
Also, your pain I not dispraise it,
But yet I discommend your wit. (ll. 68-72)

His point is thus not theological but rather more pragmatic and personal: while virtuous, the Palmer’s vocation is not as rational or effective as his own. And, moreover, it takes up far too much time and effort, as he proposes to demonstrate. The Palmer, he implies, is just not thinking things through rationally enough, for the same objective, the saving of his soul, could have been achieved without journeying at all:

For at your door myself doth dwell,
Who could have saved your soul as well
As all your wide wandering shall do,
Though ye went thrice to Jericho. (ll. 97-100).

6 Cf. Erasmus, “Rash Vows”, p. 37.

As their dispute develops, it becomes clearer that what is primarily at stake beyond the particularities of the two men's experience is a desire for certainty and reliability in the matter of religious belief. When it is his turn to criticise the Pardoner, the Palmer, like his opponent, does not deny the value of pardons outright. He simply knows from experience that not all pardoners can be trusted to have authentic pardons to offer. Thus, when *this* Pardoner tells him, "Truly I am a pardoner" (l. 106), the Palmer is wryly sceptical. And his response, quibbling on different senses of "truly" and "true", focuses on the apparently greater certainty of salvation offered by praying to saints oneself than by trusting to the bona fides of third parties with a questionable general reputation:

Truly a pardoner, that may be true,
 But a true pardoner doth not ensue [*necessarily follow*].
 Right seld [*seldom*] is it seen, or never,
 That truth and pardoners dwell together.
 For, be your pardons never so great,
 Yet to enlarge [*exaggerate*] ye will not let [*never stop*]
 With such lies that oftentimes, Christ wot [*knows*],
 Ye seem to have that ye have not.
 Wherefore I went myself to the self [*same*] thing.
 In every place and without feigning
 Had as much pardon there, assuredly,
 As ye can promise me here doubtfully. (ll. 107-18)

It is that contrast between what can be "assured" by his own agency and what can only be promised "doubtfully" by others that troubles the Palmer, and by extension the interlude as a whole. In this respect, it is very much a product of the early years of the English Reformation, before confessional allegiances had been drawn and legislation had established the limits of what Henry VIII wanted his subjects to believe about religious practice and doctrine. In that environment, traditional criticisms of abuses mingled with evangelical assaults on doctrine, as claim and counterclaim echoed through polemical tracts, sermons and satirical texts, leaving many well-meaning Christians, like the Palmer, uneasy about what was acceptable practice, what was abuse, and what was outright fraud.⁷ In such situations, individuals might well be more inclined to trust their own instincts and agency over the uncertain assertions of others—or at least it might be feared that they would do so. This is the anxiety that runs through the text that most closely echoes and informs *The Four PP*, Thomas More's first lengthy engagement with the evangel-

7 See Betteridge, pp. 104-6.

icals, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, on which he must have been working through autumn 1528 and the first part of 1529.

More's *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*

Written, initially at least, in response to the trial and abjuration (on 8 December 1527) of a young evangelical scholar, Thomas Bilney, the *Dialogue* represents an encounter between More himself and a young visitor, referred to only as “the Messenger”, who has been sent by a friend in the hope that More can resolve his doubts about the current religious situation. The younger man has been unsettled by the claims of Luther and the evangelicals to the point where he is now unsure of the value and efficacy of a number of traditional pious practices, primarily pilgrimage, prayer to saints and the veneration of images and relics. He is also alarmed by the church courts’ severe treatment of contemporary preachers who, despite appearing to do no more than criticise the abuse of such practices, have been accused and convicted of heresy. This has brought the Messenger to the point where he has begun to doubt whether it is not the convicted preachers who are the true Christians, and the ecclesiastical authorities the persecutors (More, *Dialogue*, pp. 31-32).

Over the four books of the *Dialogue*, More painstakingly addresses and seeks to refute each of the evangelical claims that his interlocutor claims he has heard his friends and acquaintances advance, deploying a combination of “natural reason”, Scripture, and the teachings of the Church Fathers to demonstrate that the heretics’ assertions are false, the intentions and authority of the Church impeccable, and the devotional practices that the evangelicals deride laudable and necessary for salvation, however susceptible to abuse they may be. But alongside the relentless logic of More’s step-by-step scholarly refutation runs an equally insistent refrain of doubt and desire for certainty voiced by the Messenger in variations of the phrases, “whereby shall I know?” (p. 182), and, “How can I . . . be sure thereof?” (p. 217). Part intellectual query, part lament for lost clarity, the demand voices the concerns of the well-meaning, intelligent layman suddenly plunged into a world of contested religious truths and ambivalent claims to virtue in which many matters previously held “very certain and out of doubt” were suddenly “ne[ver]theless of late by lewd people put in question” (p. 21). In such circumstances folk might, like the Messenger, reach the point where they become “so circumspect that [they] . . . will nothing believe without good sufficient proof” (p. 83) for fear of otherwise falling for the false claims of deceivers and charlatans.⁸

That More should write so much in response to the abjuration of a single scholar demonstrates just how dangerous he thought the precedent set by Bilney’s case. For the

⁸ For the cultural environment of these years, see Betteridge, pp. 104-6.

outcome of his trial and submission had not been the resolution of the issues it raised but the casting of almost every aspect of the case into doubt, and in the full glare of public scrutiny.⁹ What exactly had Bilney preached? Had he condemned pilgrimage and the veneration of saints, their images and relics, as unnecessary? He denied it. But credible witnesses claimed that he had, or that they had understood him to have done so. Were such views heretical? He readily accepted that they were, but managed to leave his hearers uncertain if he meant it. Was he a critic of the Church, an evangelical? He denied this too, and a number of observers took him for an honest, devout scholar, “little Bilney”, who had fallen unwittingly into the clutches of a vindictive Church determined to convict him regardless of his innocence or guilt. As a result, his case had become a *cause célèbre* among those unsympathetic to the processes and privileges of the church courts, as well as those with a more obviously evangelical agenda. So when Heywood’s Palmer asks his interlocutor, “Why, sir, despise ye pilgrimage?”, he is asking a question that would have had an immediate local resonance in the England of 1528–29. Hence, perhaps, the rapidity and firmness with which the Pardoner denies it: “Nay, for God, sir, then did I rage”.

Most dangerous of all, perhaps, from More’s perspective, was the fact that, when it was demanded of him if he had been influenced by Luther and his allies, Bilney had told one of his judges, More’s friend Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London, that his inspiration had come rather from reading Erasmus’s translation of the New Testament, and by implication the *Paraclesis*, the text which acted as its preface and which set out the Erasmian vision of the *Imitatio Christi*.¹⁰ Here was seemingly material proof that imperfectly explained humanist criticism, and encouragement to engage personally with Scriptural mysteries unguided, could lead to heretical conclusions, that the kind of idealistic mockery of clerical abuses that Erasmus and More himself had delighted in during the first two decades of the century had led, not to healthy self-scrutiny and moral reform of the Church from within, but to doubt, rancour, division and heresy—heresy, moreover, so cunning that it seemed to the unsophisticated indistinguishable from simple Christianity. Thus, while studiously refusing to add to his notoriety by naming him, More devoted over half of the *Dialogue* to Bilney and a defence of the practices which he seemed to have called into question, only in the final book turning his ire consistently on the more obvious threats to orthodoxy posed by Luther’s writings and William Tyndale’s English translation of the New Testament, which were highlighted on the book’s title page.¹¹

⁹ For an analysis of Bilney’s trial, see Walker, “Saint or Schemer?”, pp. 219–38.

¹⁰ A similar claim was made by the Augustinian friar, Thomas Topley. When describing and abjuring his own fall into error before Tunstall, he cited “Erasmus’ fables”—perhaps, as Duffy suggests (p. 204), the *Colloquies*—as the crucial influence.

¹¹ The first edition, printed by John Rastell “at London at the Sign of the Mermaid at Paul’s gate next to Cheapside, in the month of June, the year of Our Lord, MVC XXIX, *cum privilegio Regali*”.

The Four PP, Doubts, Lies and Pardons

“Whereby shall I know?” and “How can I . . . be sure thereof?” are questions that also hover tantalisingly over *The Four PP*, as each character advances claims about his own vocation and experience that range from the questionable to the utterly preposterous, offering no verifiable evidence on which others can judge them. It is thus in keeping with the mood of the play that, when the Pardoner responds to the Palmer’s scepticism about pardons, he does so, not by offering proof or assurance of his own honesty, or of the merits of the practice, but by casting doubt in turn on the Palmer’s own credibility. Since he has been travelling for so long, and so far beyond all official scrutiny and control, how can anyone know where he has really been? Has he actually visited all the shrines that he mentions? Is he really a humble penitent? How can it be proved? Since no one travelled with him, he “may lie by authority” (l. 134). Again, a character finds himself doubting the claims of another about a fundamental matter of religious faith and practice, based on an absence of definitive personal knowledge. If the Pardoner has not seen proof of the Palmer’s journeys with his own eyes, he will not believe them. And lying itself becomes the focus of the play once the Pedlar proposes that the other three resolve their dispute by each trying to tell the biggest lie.

The ensuing contest pitches a Rabelaisian tale from the Potycary of a woman who, when administered a “glistler” (l. 731) or suppository, expelled it with such force that it flew for ten miles, only stopping when it struck and demolished “a fair castle of lime and stone” (l. 744), against the Pardoner’s story of how he once travelled to hell to release the soul of an old friend, one Margery Coorson. Each narrative contains details which give it more of a local habitation and name. The Potycary mentions the Tudor ship, the *Regent*, which had been sunk off Brest in combat against the French in August 1512.¹² The Pardoner, the more loquacious of the two, mentions meeting a devil who was an old acquaintance of his, as “oft in the play of Corpus Christi, / He hath played the devil at Coventry” (ll. 831-32). Given that the Rastells, More and Heywood himself all had connections with Coventry, and perhaps with its cycle play, the joke presumably had additional, private resonances that only they would appreciate. And as Axton and Happé have suggested (pp. 44-45), there is also a good deal of topical, and potentially mischievous, detail in the Pardoner’s description of his visit to the devil’s court in hell, at the centre

was titled, *A Dialogue of Sir Thomas More, Knight, one of the Council of our Sovereign Lord the King, Chancellor of his Duchy of Lancaster, wherein be treated diverse matters, as of the veneration and worship of images and relics, praying to saints, and going on pilgrimage, with many other things touching the pestilent sect of Luther and Tyndale, by the t'one begun in Saxony and by the t'other to be brought into England* (STC 18084).

¹² See Walker, *Plays of Persuasion*, pp. 46-47, 56-57, for an allusion to the *Regent* in another Tudor interlude, the anonymous *Hick Scorner*.

of which he discovers a laughing Lucifer sitting in his jacket watching his devil-courtiers playing a game of tennis with firebrands for rackets. From the wry subscription of the safe-conduct granted to the Pardoner for the duration of his visit (“Given at the furnace of our palace, / In our high court of Matters of Malice, / Such a day and year of our reign” [ll. 865-67]), to the manly bonhomie of Lucifer himself, all seems suspiciously redolent of the court of King Henry, its pastimes and protocols.

Rather than draw any more pointed conclusions about the similarities between the Tudor and infernal courts, however, the Pardoner’s narrative soon turns in a jocularly misogynist direction. For, rather than seeking to keep Margery Coorson in hell with them, Lucifer and the devils are only too willing to let her go. Indeed, they instruct the Pardoner to be more ambitious and “[a]pply thy pardons to women so / That unto us there come no mo [*more*]” (ll. 941-42). For Lucifer claims that “all we devils within this den / Have more to do with two women / Than with all the charge we have beside” (ll. 937-39). Was the number two merely symbolic (any two women cause more trouble than any number of men . . .)? Or is the allusion, perhaps, as Axton and Happé suggest (p. 260, n. to l. 38), to the mutual hostility of the two rival “queens”, Henry’s legitimate wife, Katherine of Aragon, and the would-be queen, Anne Boleyn? Is Heywood suggesting that the debate over the king’s Great Matter currently convulsing the court could be boiled down to the rivalry between two wilful, factious women? Rather than spell out the joke, however, or even give spectators the chance to do more than notice it in passing, the anecdote rushes to its conclusion, and the Palmer caps it off with the incredulous observation that he finds the devils’ attitude incomprehensible, for,

in all the places where I have been,
Of all the women that I have seen,
I never saw nor knew, to my conscience,
Any one woman out of patience. (ll. 1000-3)

At this remark, the other characters spontaneously declare they have never heard a greater lie, thereby unwittingly declaring the Palmer the winner of the contest. True to the terms initially set out by himself (the best lie should be “in the fewest words thou can” [l. 654]), the Palmer has naively triumphed with what seems to be a lie far more succinct than the lengthy tales told by his rivals.

When the Pardoner and Potycary lament their fate in consequently being bound to wait upon the Palmer in perpetuity, however, the latter (with a little prompting from the Pedlar) decides graciously to release them from their servitude, and the interlude begins pointedly to change in tone one last time, shifting from ribald comedy to something more serious and politically inflected. The Palmer tells the Pedlar,

Sir, I am not on them [*the Pardoner and Palmer*] so fond
 To compel them to keep their bond.
 And, since ye list not to wait on me,
 I clearly of waiting discharge thee. (ll. 1131-34)

And this, abruptly, he does. So, in a way that will become characteristic of his later work, Heywood chooses to end an interlude with matters restored roughly to where they seemed to be at the outset. As the Pedlar observes, “Now be ye all even, as ye began; / No man hath lost nor no man hath won” (ll. 1137-38). But, as in *Weather*, where a similar circular trajectory is traced, this apparent return to the *status quo ante* conceals a subtle but distinct change to both the mood and the substance of the group concerned. Here, too, the journey travelled in search of dominance has itself brought about a new appreciation of the virtues of the existing order—here of freedom from the sovereignty of another and (in the Palmer’s case) from responsibility *for* others. Thus the Pedlar follows the claim cited above with a lengthy homily concerning the virtues of both the Palmer and the Pardoner’s vocations, and the need to recognise both in the interests of all:

Yet in the debate wherewith ye began,
 By way of advice I will speak as I can.
 I do perceive that pilgrimage
 Is the chief thing that ye [*Palmer*] have in usage,
 Whereto in effect for love of Christ
 Ye have, or should have been enticed,
 And whoso doth with such intent
 Doth well declare his time well spent.
 And so do ye [*Pardoner*] in your pretence,
 If ye procure thus indulgence
 Unto your neighbours charitably,
 For love of them in God only.
 All this may be right well applied
 To show you both well occupied.
 For though ye walk not both one way,
 Yet, walking thus, this dare I say:
 That both your walks come to one end. (ll. 1139-55)

Again, the claim picks up on a Christian commonplace that was given added weight and social force in the work of Erasmus. In the *Enchiridion* for the aspirant Christian soldier, first published in 1503, and printed in English translations in 1524 and November 1533 (Schoeck, p. 34), the scholar had stressed Christ’s emphasis on virtue enacted communally through charitable awareness of and concern for one’s neighbours. And this unity was, as Erasmus stressed throughout his writings, the accommodatingly broad Church

Only the cynical Potycary opts out of the reconciliation of the virtuous offered by the Pedlar, declaring boldly that “I thank God I use no virtue at all” (ll. 1188). But this claim prompts only further moralising from the Pedlar, who, unwilling to allow his point to be lost in flippancy, concludes that to use no virtue at all “is of all the very worst way” (l. 1189), even if the Potycary is “well beloved of all this sort [i.e., *the audience*] / By your railing here openly / At pardons and relics so lewdly” (ll. 1198-200). The Potycary’s retort that his railing is the product of his knowledge of the fraudulent nature of the Pardoner’s stock in trade (“For all that he hath I know counterfeit” [l. 1202]), leads to the clearest statement yet of the necessity for careful and humble reflection by the faithful before they rush to judgement in an uncertain world:

For his [*the Pardoner’s*] and all other that ye know feigned,
 Ye be neither counselled nor constrained
 To any such thing in any such case
 To give any reverence in any such place.
 But where ye doubt, the truth not knowing,
 Believing the best, good may be growing.
 In judging the best, no harm at the least,
 In judging the worst, no good at the best.
 But best in these things it seemeth to me,
 To make no judgement upon ye.
 But as the Church doth judge or take them,
 So do ye receive or forsake them,
 As be sure ye cannot err,
 But may be a fruitful follower. (ll. 1203-16)

The Pedlar readily concedes the reality of abuses here. There may well be forged pardons around, as well as fraudulent relics, and some false claims are also, no doubt, made about relics and shrines that may themselves be genuine. But this does not invalidate the practices of pilgrimage, pardons and indulgences as a whole, and does not preclude the existence of genuinely miraculous interventions in human affairs in response to prayers.

More makes the same point repeatedly in the *Dialogue*. Preposterous claims are made for the efficacy of some religious practices, he concedes (although he carefully cites as his principal evidence an example taken from France, rather than anything nearer to home).¹³

13 More has fun giving the Messenger a lengthy account of the Abbey of St Valéry in Picardy, where pilgrims of both sexes seek the saint’s aid against kidney stones by hanging wax effigies of their genitalia along the walls, and the men place their penises through one of two silver rings (“one much larger than the other”, he pointedly observes) placed “at the altar’s end”, where a monk ties a silver thread around each one while intoning prayers (*Dialogue*, pp. 227-28).

But one cannot and should not argue from this that, because something is open to abuse, the practice itself must be invalid. Should we “find a fault in every man’s prayer?” he asks, just because thieves pray for success in their robberies (More, *Dialogue*, p. 257). In matters of faith, being too sceptical—“over-hard of belief of things that by reason and nature seem and appear impossible”—can bring as much peril of error as being “too light of credence” (p. 70). The truly Christian response is thus for More, as it is for Heywood’s Pedlar, to believe the best where one cannot be absolutely sure of the worst. And like the Pedlar, More’s mantra throughout the *Dialogue* is that, where an individual has reasonable doubt about the validity of a claim or a practice, but no absolute proof, the only sure recourse is to trust, not one’s own insight, but the judgement of the Church through history.¹⁴ The long continuity of a doctrine or practice among the faithful was thus the best guarantee of its value and authenticity. This would be the principle on which More would later stake his opposition to the Royal Supremacy and the Boleyn marriage, and for which he would ultimately die, asserting that the individual will of Henry VIII could not outweigh the consensus of fifteen hundred years of catholic belief in the primacy of St Peter and the papacy.

Dating *The Four PP*

It is hard not to see More’s position and Heywood’s here as not only congruent but coordinated, so close are the echoes between the *Dialogue* and the interlude. Each writer sets up the Church as the only sheet anchor for those who are uncertain, subordinating the individual intellect to its wisdom. To be too sceptical, they both argue, is worse than being too trusting of the claims of others, for good may come of the latter, while from the former it never can. Thus, it is the benevolent credulity of the Palmer that ultimately triumphs, rather than the pragmatic scepticism of the Potycary and Pardoner. And the interlude ends, like the *Dialogue*, with a sense of order restored through humility, and a shared recognition that human frailty may be reconciled with virtue through the operation of God’s grace.

Given its lack of precisely datable allusions, *Four PP* might conceivably have been written and performed at any time between the late 1520s and 1534. But, given its close parallels with both the focus and the arguments of More’s *Dialogue*, it seems much more likely that the two works were composed at roughly the same time, perhaps even simultaneously, during the later months of 1528 and early 1529, and with the same agenda in mind. Both texts, as we have seen, discuss the merits of pilgrimage, relics, the veneration

¹⁴ For More’s attitude here, see Duffy, pp. 197-99.

of saints and pardons, and both strive to counter scepticism about the validity and value of these practices in an environment in which such doubts were newly pressing.

To think of Heywood and More working on their separate texts roughly simultaneously thus makes good sense. More may not have known what Heywood was doing, but it seems highly likely that Heywood was keenly aware of his uncle's endeavours. More states in the prologue to the *Dialogue* that he had showed drafts of the text to friends, "other mo than one, whose advice and counsel for their wisdom and learning I asked in that behalf, and which have at my request vouch[ed] safe to read over the book ere I did put it forth" (pp. 22-23).¹⁵ Might one of those friends have been Heywood, or one of the Rastells, through whom Heywood could have had access to the text or gained a good sense of its contents? Certainly, by the time it was ready for publication, John Rastell, who would print it, would have access to the completed text, and could have described its contents to Heywood. Either way, it seems safe to assume that at some point before its publication the playwright was well-informed about the emphases and agenda of the *Dialogue*, and that *The Four PP* offers a more light-hearted rehearsal of the same broad positions, perhaps intended for the entertainment of More's friends and family circle.¹⁶

Indeed, the play seems particularly well designed to address the kind of community newly troubled by religious doubts and differences over the appropriate response to evangelical reform evident in the More-Rastell circle in the period following Bilney's trial. Heywood's characters make the case for the reliability of their own vocations as a means of counteracting the prevailing uncertainty created by conflicting claims to religious truth and for the efficacy or otherwise of the traditional devotional practices allegedly criticised by the young scholar. In the light of the interlude's interest in the verifiability of claims to religious truth and the reliability of individual testimony, even its apparent diversion into a lying contest seems more obviously part of a sustained discussion of doubt and its consequences than might appear at first glance. In the months following Bilney's abjuration, the question of what constituted a lie, how one might lie, or conceal the full truth, and how honest folk might tell truth from falsehood were newly pressing public issues, nowhere more so than in More's close family circle. And Heywood's play seems designed to cast a burlesque comic light on all sides of the question.

15 More implies that more than simply one or two "friends" were asked to look through the draft, as he claims that in his corrections, "let I nothing stand in this book but such as twain advised me specially to let stand against any one that any doubt moved me to the contrary" (*Dialogue*, pp. 23-24).

16 For the suggestion of a performance among "like-minded family and friends", see Axton and Happé, eds, p. 45.

Heywood, More and Erasmus

If we read *The Four PP* in the light of More's concerns with the Bilney case in mind, and the criticisms of pilgrimage, relics and the veneration of saints that it raised, this also helps us to see more clearly the relationship with its other great source of inspiration, the colloquies and satires of Erasmus. For More's own attitude to his great friend and his writings seems to have undergone a significant shift during the later 1520s, a shift that colours the *Dialogue*, and hence also Heywood's interlude. In March 1527, Erasmus had "politely rebuffed" overtures from More encouraging him to write decisively against Luther in defence of traditional belief and practice.¹⁷ And his friend's disappointing refusal to be drawn decisively into the controversy was probably another contributing factor in More's willingness to take on the evangelicals in print himself, beginning with the *Dialogue*.

It is in the context of More's reassessment of the "Erasmian project" in the light of the spread of Lutheran heresy abroad and Bilney's trial nearer to home that Heywood's *The Four PP* is most profitably read. Where More brings a painstaking scholarly mind to the refutation of criticisms and the resolution of doubt about pilgrimage, relics, saints and pardons, Heywood offers a burlesque version of the same arguments. He has no equivalent of More's Messenger against whom to have his characters react, but the play nevertheless rehearses the same objections raised by More's interlocutor. They are voiced collectively by his quartet of flawed comic stereotypes, who argue with, insult, mock and try to deceive each other, only to discover that they have more in common than they think. And, finally choosing obedience to the Church over claims to individual agency or supremacy, they find a way to reconcile the differences that seemed at first to divide them without giving up the distinct vocations they pursue.

If Heywood was indeed at work on *The Four PP* alongside More in late 1528 or early 1529, this would make it among the earliest of his extant interludes. Probably only *Johan Johan* (which is hard to date on internal evidence) and *Witty and Witless* are earlier. And, whereas with the latter Heywood would feel a need to go back and revise it in the light of later events, he would seemingly never return to *The Four PP* to rework it to suit the changing circumstances of the coming years. It was probably too much a work of its moment for it to be readily adapted to suit later circumstances. Its faith in the reconcilability of differences within the self-regulating community of the faithful would struggle

¹⁷ Marius, pp. 334, 339-40. Hoping to prompt his friend to complete the second volume of his *Hyperaspistes*, written in defence of Free Will against Luther's views, More had written, on 18 December 1526, "If, according to some reports, the delay is due to the fact that you have been terrorized, and have lost all interest in the work, and have no courage to go on with it, then I am thoroughly bewildered and unable to restrain my grief. . . . I would not want you to become absorbed in anything that might turn your interests elsewhere and thus prevent you from completing this work at the earliest possible date" (*Selected Letters*, pp. 161-65).

to survive the disputatious first session of the Reformation Parliament, just as its sense that doubts could be resolved with good faith on all sides would struggle to account for the increased hostility between clergy and laity, reformers and conservatives, that spilled out after the fall from office and influence of Thomas Wolsey. A play like *The Four PP* might encourage members of a broadly conservative community collectively to reflect on the value of the diversity of existing practice, and not to fall out among themselves over degrees of virtue, or mistake the perversion of laudable practices for commentary on the value of the practices *per se*. But it was ill-designed to reflect the more turbulent energies unleashed in England over the course of the long summer of 1529. To engage with these, Heywood would have to turn to more outward-looking and overtly political forms of theatre.

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