

“*Gods lawfull remedye*”: Clerical Marriage and Royal Authority in John Bale’s *Three Laws*

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At the conclusion of the second *act* of John Bale’s allegorical comedy, *Three Laws*, visibly “corrupted” with leprosy as a result of *Sodomismus* and “mannys operacyon” (754), *Naturae Lex* turns to address the most powerful members of his audience:

Ye Christen rulers,	se yow for thys a waye:
Be not illuded	by false hypocresye;
By the stroke of God	the worlde wyll els decaye.
Permyt prestes rather	Gods lawfull remedye,
Than they shuld incurre	most bestyall Sodomye.
Regarde not the Pope,	nor yet hys whorysh kyngedom
For he is master	of Gomor and of Sodome. <sup>1</sup> (773-9)

The message is apparently simple enough; that priests will inevitably fall to sexual immorality if made to follow the hypocritical teaching of the Catholic Church. Catholicism forced priests to remain celibate, but this was merely an official line that was frequently ignored, according to Protestant critics such as Bale and Robert Barnes.<sup>2</sup> The attack here is, therefore, as elsewhere in Bale’s work, on an unfulfilled “act” of a theatrical religion, as opposed to a genuine manifestation of meaningful faith. A direct connection is thus made between the Pope’s “whorysh kyngedom” and the Biblical precedent of Sodom and Gomorrah to draw upon, and to extend, the Protestant interpretation of Revelation as Christian history. It is therefore evident at first glance that the subject of clerical marriage enables Bale to bring many of his favourite topics together. Indeed, the issue was central to wider debate, both in England and across

Europe, precisely because it encapsulated all of the major themes of reformation thought: ecclesiastical versus secular jurisdiction, the authority of scripture, doctrine and of textual transmission, alternative claims of history and novelty, the connection of morality and theology, to give just a few examples.

Clerical marriage was equally very likely chosen as an attractive theme for polemic for the myriad possibilities it afforded to include sensational tales of sex and immorality, frequently adopted to force theological points home. And, scant though interest in *Three Laws* has ever been, it is the issue of “Ydolatricall Sodometrye” that has provided the basis of the recent critical field, occupied most significantly by Alan Stewart.<sup>3</sup> In his important essay, Stewart develops the thesis that the play was “intricately linked with the propaganda materials produced by Cromwell [...] and a key part of the Reformation campaign” (Stewart 5), suggesting that Bale’s insistence on sexual depravity was useful as part of a dramatic tour of major cities to rouse support for monastic dissolution.

However, although the focus of his argument is both subtle and astute, particularly his clarification of the precise, and literally intimate, relationship between the figures of Sodomy and Idolatry, it is unfortunate that the essay’s scope is not wide enough to address Bale’s solution, which is promoted equally vigorously throughout. A related concern, due to this imbalance in the argument, is that the reforming party are presented as an essentially homogenous body at the time of the play’s composition. Stewart mentions Cromwell, Berthelet, Morison, Cranmer and Henry VIII. It seems

highly likely that Bale did indeed write, and rewrite, drama as part of Cromwell's campaign. But a proper examination of the issue of "Gods lawfull remedye" is necessary to illuminate a more profound and challenging relationship towards the king's authority than has previously been acknowledged.

Since the play is seldom discussed, an initial synopsis might be helpful. The general structure and narrative of the play are immediately apparent from its full title, *A Comedy Concernynge Thre Lawes, Of Nature, Moses, and Christ, Corrupted by the Sodomytes, Pharysees and Papystes*. After a brief consideration of the significance of law "In ych commen welthe" (1), the play introduces the three eponymous legal incarnations, whereupon each is briefly described and assigned a symbol to reflect its true nature and identity. Once sent into the world, however, each law is in turn attacked and "corrupted" by *Infidelitas* and successive pairs of representative Catholic vice figures. Thus *Naturae Lex* is "perverted" (762) by *Sodomismus* and *Idololatria*, until visibly afflicted with leprosy; *Moseh Lex* is left "a blynde crypple" (1266) by *Avaritia* and *Ambitio*; and *Evangelium* is degraded and "brent for heresy" (1759) by *Pseudodoctrina* and *Hypocrisis*. In the final act, the evil vices, represented by their chief *Infidelitas*, are punished and defeated, before the three laws are purified and restored to their original glory by God, figured in appearances first as *Vindicta Dei* and then *Deus Pater*.

Even from such a brief outline as this, it is clear that Bale uses a scheme from Biblical history to condemn Catholic corruption of the true faith and this is very much the theme for his support for clerical marriage. Debate concerning, and support for,

churchmen taking wives had long been available in England from Lollardy and its suppression; as Anne Hudson suggests, it was “regarded as desirable, if not obligatory for a ‘true priest’” (Hudson 357-8). However, it was ultimately Luther’s marriage and his writings on marriage in general that drew the focus of, and polarised, both sides of the argument. When news of Luther’s marriage to Katherine von Bora, in June 1525, became widespread, it triggered the anticipated reaction from Catholic adversaries. Erasmus, for example, in writing to friends, suggested that the bride was already pregnant and “ruminated on the ‘popular legend’ that the Antichrist would be born to a monk and a nun” (Marius 438).<sup>4</sup> Thomas More was even more vitriolic, the fact of Luther’s wedding apparently producing a different caste to his attempt to portray a correlation between his opponent’s moral and theological stance. As Alistair Fox suggests, in the *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523), More had characterised his target as a “Luder,” “a laughable, rather simple-minded buffoon for whom a fitting epitaph could already be written:

Men will recall and say that once long ago there was in a former age a certain rascal by the name of Luther who, when he had got the better of cacodaemons in impiety, in order to adorn his sect with fitting emblems, surpassed magpies in chatter, pimps in wickedness, prostitutes in obscenity, all buffoons in buffoonery” (Fox 141-2)<sup>5</sup>

In the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), by contrast, the portrait had become far more threatening; Luther was now seen as “an apostate [...] an open incestuouse lechour / a playne lymme of the devyll / and a manyfest messenger of hell” (CW 6 346/13-14). The breaking of Luther’s vows, or as More would have it, “his shamefull inceste and abominable bycherye” (Fox 142), was seen to prove once and for all the impiety and error of his theological writings and was therefore used as justification for the continued belief instead in the guidance of the pure and chaste corpus of the church fathers.<sup>6</sup>

A direct relationship with Luther, and a joint condemnation of clerical celibacy, can clearly be seen in *Three Laws*, when Bale provides examples of Catholic hypocrisy. The audience is told of spiritual authorities that attempt to condemn clerical marriage, but are instead betrayed by their sexual immorality:

*Pseudodoctrina*: Joannes Cremona, an other good cardynall  
For reformacyon of the clergie spyrituall  
Came ones into Englande to dampne prestes matrymonye,  
And the next nyght after was taken doyng bytcherye.  
Doctor Eckius also whych fearcely came to dyspute  
In Lipsia with Luther, myndyng there hym to confute  
For marryage of prestys, thre chyldren had that yeare. (1481-87)

The use of exempla to illuminate hypocrisy here serves simultaneously to link England and Germany as loci of a joint campaign. Furthermore, in suggesting that Johann Eck's famous public debate with Luther centred upon the issue of clerical marriage, Bale is attempting to "spin" a version of recent history that, although not entirely accurate, privileges his own primary concern as being shared by a great spiritual ally.

The appeal to reformation tradition is highly significant. Luther's defence of his decision to marry was precise and eloquent – particularly in contrast to More's splenetic insults – and was particularly influential in the formation of opinions published by many English reformers in adopting history as a basis for theology and as a principal mode of attack. Luther argues that matrimony could not be a sacrament, for example, since it had existed "from the beginning of the world" and among unbelievers (Marius 259). Similarly, in England, Tyndale dismisses the idea of wedlock as a sacrament on the "universal" grounds that it "was ordained for a remedy and to increase the world [...] and not to signify any promise that ever I heard or read of in the scripture" (Tyndale 110). Luther also argues philologically, demonstrating that the conventional scriptural support

for seeing marriage as sacramental, Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, had been wrongly interpreted, and he compared Erasmus' Greek New Testament (1516) with the Vulgate to show how "*sacramentum*" had not been translated consistently and reliably as "sacrament" in various instances (Marius 259). Tyndale, as part of his argument for a purely literal rendering of the scriptures, likewise attacks the allegorical exegesis of matrimony, that:

they call matrimony a sacrament because the scripture useth the similitude of matrimony to express the marriage or wedlock that is between us and Christ...If for that cause they call it a sacrament, so will I mustard seed, leaven, a net, keys, bread, water and a thousand other things which Christ and the prophets and all the scripture use, to express the kingdom of heaven and God's word with all (Tyndale 110).

Significantly, Luther also defends marriage on more striking grounds, arguing, for instance, in a German treatise *On Married Life* (1522) that "marriage was a natural state" and that "clerical celibacy was inspired by Satan" (Marius 391). The necessarily "unnatural" state of enforced chastity, and its inevitable conclusion, is equally present in Tyndale; the passage above concludes that, "they [the defenders of the Catholic Church] praise wedlock with their mouth, and say it is an holy thing, as it is verily: but had lever be sanctified with an whore, than to come within that sanctuary" (Tyndale 110).

By the probable date of *Three Laws*, Bale had married his wife Dorothy, an act he described as "exercising Christian liberty" (Happé 8-9), and for which he later provides scriptural authority. And, whilst the majority of references to clerical marriage are to be found in prose writings that post-date the play, works which were incidentally written from the relative safety of exile, Bale is insistent on the significance of the issue as a

major theme throughout the play. Towards the resolution, for example, *Evangelium* defends clerical marriage against charges expressed in similar terms to those used above:

<i>Infidelitas:</i>	Marry, so they saye, Forsake holy church,	ye fellowes of the newe lernynge and now fall fast to wyvyng.
<i>Evangelium:</i>	Naye, they forsake whoredome And lyve with their wives Whyls the Popes oyled swarme	with all dampnable usage, in lawfull marryage raigne styll in their olde buggerage.
<i>Infidelitas:</i>	Yea, poore marryed men I counte hym wysest	have very moch a do; that can take a snatche and to go.
<i>Evangelium;</i>	Thu semest one of them Whych is afore God Of soch as thu art By the Holy Ghost In the latter dayes Attendynge to spretes Whych in hypocresy With marked conscyences	that detesteth matrymonye, a state both just and holye. Saynt Paule ded prophecye, that a serten cumpanye from the truth of God shuld fall, of errour dyabolycall: wyll teache lyes for advauntage inhybytyng marryage. (1383 -97)

*Infidelitas* is made to ironically accuse *Evangelium* of representing “newe lernynge” and yet, as Luther and the English reformers sought to demonstrate, it was actually the Church’s prohibition of marriage that was the relative innovation, without apparent sanction of Scripture or practice by the Apostles and Church Fathers. Through study of the example of the early church, and particularly of the papacy, reformers drew attention to the fact that Popes, from Siricius (4<sup>th</sup> Century) onwards, had been forced to legislate on clerical celibacy.<sup>7</sup> This line of argument was then used as evidence that clerical marriage had continued throughout the history of early Christianity; Bale describes how Gregory had attempted to legislate against ecclesiastical marriage, for instance, but was soon forced to withdraw his reform:

[Gregory] did first com[m]aunde priestes to live single life: but aterwarde when he perceived that they were given secretly to fleshly pleasure, and that here upon many children were murdered, he disanulled that commaundement, and sayde that it was better to marry the[n] to geve occasion of murther (Parish 100).<sup>8</sup>

In *Three Laws*, *Sodomismus* boasts of how he will continue to thrive so long as there remain “monkysh sectes” and “popysh prestes” and glibly refers to murder as a similarly stark reference to the destruction of ‘incriminating evidence’:

Cleane marryage they forbyd,  
Yet can not their wayes be hyd;  
Men knowe what hath betyd,  
Whan they have bene in parell.  
Oft have they buryed quycke  
Soch as were never sycke;  
Full many a propre trycke,  
They have to helpe their quarell. (635-42)

Throughout the reformers’ works on the subject, Gregory VII was identified as the source of clerical celibacy laws, a fact that dated the innovation to the late eleventh century. And, as with Luther’s invocation of Satan, the introduction was seen to have sinister and prophetic symbolism since his papacy was deemed to mark the rise of a Satanic influence in the institutional church. Robert Barnes claimed, for example, that Gregory was “a great nygroma[nc]er and very familiar with the devyll” (Parish 110).<sup>9</sup> Although Gregory is not mentioned by name in the play, the associations that were later focused upon him are illuminating, because the consistent use of Revelation to organise and understand church history led to other Popes being similarly interpreted as historically significant of evil. At one point in the play, *Pseudodoctrina* tells the tale of Sylvester II and a devilish “Faustian” pact to sacrifice his testicles, a deprivation that serves as metaphor for the introduction of clerical celibacy, thus:

Sylvester the Seconde	to the devyll hymself ones gave
For that hygh offyce	that he myght dampne and save.
He offered also	hys stones to Sathan they saye
For prestes chastyte,	and so went their marryage awaye. (1603 -6)

The significance of Bale's choice of example is given historical integrity by the fact that Sylvester was deemed to be particularly important in protestant polemic, since his papacy spanned the turn of the first millennium (Parish 124).<sup>10</sup>

Along with Barnes' specific allegations of magic, charges which Bale extends to cover widespread Catholic practice in the play, Gregory's attitude to celibacy identified him more generally as a member of the 'church in error'. As Helen Parish suggests, "In the interpretation advanced by Barnes, Bale and Becon, the true congregation could be separated from the false church by their views on marriage, and clerical marriage in particular" (Parish 127). Again, this point is present in the play, made by Bale's use of St Paul in *Evangelium*'s response above. Furthermore, the nature of that falseness, made apparent through hypocrisy, is supported by the weight of authoritative history, albeit that it is presented ironically by the Catholic characters, who misuse it and thereby condemn their own teaching. *Sodomismus* first ironically boasts of the Biblical significance of his offence:

In the fleshe I am a fyre,  
And soch a vyle desyre,  
As brynege men to the myre  
Of fowle concupyscence...  
I dwelt among the Sodomytes,  
The Benjamytes and Madyanytes  
And now the popysh hypocrytes  
Embrace me every where.  
I am now become all spyrytuall,  
For the clergie at Rome and over all  
For want of wyves, to me doth fall,  
To God they have no feare. (563-6, 571-8)

And then continues to draw attention to widespread corruption at Rome, embellishing his point with historical exemplarity:

In Rome to me they fall,  
Both byshopp and cardynall,

Monke, fryre, prest and all,  
More ranke they are than antes.  
Example in Pope Julye,  
Whych sought to have in hys furye  
Two laddes, and to use them beastlye,  
From the Cardynall of Nantes. (635-50)

The significance of the issues of clerical marriage and sexual immorality, exemplified by Rome, was an argument that Bale primarily directs to domestic and nationalistic concerns, however. *Ambitio* remarks, that:

The Pope for whoredom hath in Rome and Viterbye  
Of golde and sylver a wonderfull substaunce yearlye.

But he then makes the more powerful and condemnatory statement:

Tush, they be in Englande that moch rather wolde to dwell  
Whores in their dyoceses than the readers of Christes Gospell. (1210-13)

There is a significant echo of Tyndale here, and his complaint against those that “had lever be sanctified with an whore, than to come within that sanctuary”. Indeed, whilst trawling the archives of the papacy provided valuable ammunition against Catholicism, it is important to note that “the history of the early English church was even more useful to Bale in the cataloguing of innovation in doctrine and practice” (Parish 104). In *The Actes of the Englysh Votaries* (1546), for example, Bale seeks to demonstrate that Christianity predated the Roman mission and argues that England had actually been converted in AD 63 by Joseph of Arimathea, who had preached a faith that was more perfect, and less corrupted by human invention, than that introduced by Augustine. The latter then, properly understood, had not in fact introduced Christianity to England, “but a Roman perversion of it” (Parish 105). To reject clerical celibacy, Bale argues, would therefore not merely be a restoration of an act of original Christianity, a powerful theological point

in and of itself. It would also be to restore an element of the original purity of the English church and would thereby help to satisfy the specifically nationalistic impulse to prove the supremacy of English jurisdiction over religious affairs.

The question Bale asks then seems simple enough; who would rather have “Whores in their dyoceses than the readers of Christes Gospell”? The answer, at least as far as the author is concerned, can be understood from the situation in England at the time of the play’s composition. To return to the quotation from *Naturae Lex* with which I opened this brief article, it is remarkable that Bale stresses his assertion that clerical marriage would not only be morally right, and pragmatically realistic, but also “lawfull”, a point that seeks to address not just opposing interpretations of God’s law, but also the more immediate jurisdiction of the King. And, in doing so, he moves the play from one that simply offers powerful propaganda for the Protestant agenda to one that alternatively seeks to persuade or dangerously condemn royal policy. It is one thing to use scripture and historical scholarship to discredit and mock what is presented as a foreign and usurping power in the Pope, “the holye popysh patryarke / Whych of all bawdrye myght be the great monarke” (1469-70). It is something else altogether to attempt to use scripture, and indeed drama, against the King of England. But if clerical marriage is lawful – and Bale follows Tyndale in placing the King as head under God, but absolutely under God – then policy that denies the true Word is surely necessarily deemed ultimately “unlawful.”<sup>11</sup>

The dating of the play, or of the text which we have, is absolutely critical here. Most scholarly opinion has centred on a date of c.1538 for the vast majority of the work, with a revision of the final post-Henrician section (lines 2021-2041) in time for the c.1548 publication by Dirik van der Straten in Wesel. I am certainly inclined to agree with a date at the end of the 1530s; the appeal for the audience to, “In no case folowe the wayes of Reygnolde Pole; / To hys dampnacyon he doubtles playeth the fole” (2005-6), for example, which might be seen as an understated reference to Pole’s perceived importance as spearheading a Franco-Imperial invasion, is compelling evidence that the play’s occasion was an opportunity to combat a particularly potent Catholic threat. But, unless the text was absolutely overhauled in the 1540s, that means that the original version of the play must have contained the numerous references to clerical marriage that I have considered here, far too many to dismiss as insignificant. In fact, the “resurgent” threat to the reform of the church, as Bale saw it, was not simply from Rome, nor indeed from the more obvious channels of domestic rebellion, as had been represented and defeated in the events of the Pilgrimage of Grace. As Greg Walker argues:

Alarming for the reformers, they and Henry saw the solutions to English problems in late 1538 lying in diametrically opposed directions. Both Cromwell and Cranmer felt that the opposition of the two great Catholic powers, backed by Rome, could only be met effectively by an even stronger commitment to reform, a further purification of religion and a closer alliance with the protestant princes of Germany. The King, conversely, saw a need to disarm the opposition with apparent concessions, to search for a reconciliation with the European Catholic princes through a restatement of the essential conservatism of English doctrine, and a distancing of the Crown from the extremes of reformed opinion. (Walker 204)<sup>12</sup>

In response to the potential invasion from Europe, Henry took the option of “securing” his position, withdrawing one might say to his innate conservatism in an attempt to develop allies. In January 1538, the King halted Cranmer’s reforming agenda with a list of some 250 emendations to the Bishops’ Book and he chose Cuthbert Tunstall,

conservative bishop of Durham, to accompany him throughout the summer progress (MacCulloch 185-97). On 16 November, the King personally presided over the trial of a protestant radical, John Lambert, who was charged for his heretical views on the sacraments, a spectacular occasion whereupon, “dressed in white for purity, he used the opportunity to deliver a powerful speech defending transubstantiation before consigning the unrepentant Lambert to the flames” (Leithead 25). To reinforce the new direction in his thinking, the King also issued a proclamation on the same day to prohibit apparently heretical books, to exile Anabaptists, to confirm the traditional understanding of the “Holy Sacrament of the altar” and to command all subjects to observe a broad and catholic range of “laudable ceremonies and rites heretofore used and accustomed in the Church of England”. As an adjunct to the consideration of sacraments, he then toughened the royal line on clerical marriage:

His majesty, understanding that a few in number of this his realm being priests, as well religious as other, have taken wives and married themselves, contrary to the wholesome monitions of St. Paul *ad Timotheum*, *ad Titum*, and *ad Corintheos*, both in the First and Second, and contrary also to the opinions of many of the old Fathers and expositors of Scripture, not esteeming also the avow and promise of chastity which they made at the receiving of their holy orders: his highness, in no wise minding that the generality of the clergy of this his realm should with the example of such a few number of light persons proceed to marriage without a common consent of his highness and his realm, doth therefore straightly charge and command as well all and singular of the said priests as have attempted marriages that be openly known, as all such as will hereafter presumptuously proceed in the same, that they nor any of them shall minister any sacrament or other ministry mystical, nor have any office, dignity, cure, privilege, profit or commodity heretofore accustomed and belonging to the clergy of this realm, but shall utterly, after such marriages, be expelled and deprived from the same, and be had and reputed as lay persons to all purposes and intents; and that such as shall after this proclamation, contrary to this commandment, of their presumptuous mind take wives and be married, shall run in his grace’s indignation and suffer further punishment and imprisonment at his grace’s will and pleasure (*TRP*, I, 270-6, 272).

The retreat to traditional theological authorities, “to the old Fathers and expositors of Scripture”, to justify the position is hugely significant here. But the distance that the proclamation reveals between the ambitions of the reforming party and the prevailing

attitude of the king at the end of 1538 is perhaps most clearly seen in the fact that one of the so called “light persons”, who had taken the step of apparently breaking his vow, was none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, himself (MacCulloch 72).

The King’s control over reform continued into 1539. During Holy Week and Easter, he made theatrical play of performing traditional ceremonies and, at the start of May, he adopted Lord Chancellor Thomas Audley as a mouthpiece to confirm his determination to control “diversity of opinions” (MacCulloch 242). A committee was established to re-examine church doctrine, although it was quite deliberately denied anything like the prerequisite time, and on 16 May, the Duke of Norfolk announced to the House that the committee had not been able to reach agreement and that discussions would instead be centred upon six predominant questions. Within a month, during which the King took an active part in proceedings in both public and private meetings, the extent of Henry’s conservatism was absolutely and finally confirmed through the Act of the Six Articles (7-16 June 1539), one of which stated that “priests after the order of priesthood received, as afore, may not marry, by the law of God”:

Be it further enacted by the authority abovesaid, that if any person which is or hath been a priest, before this present Parliament or during the time of session of the same, hath married and hath made any contract of matrimony with any woman, or that any man or woman, which before the making of this Act advisedly hath vowed chastity or widowhood before this present Parliament or during the session of the same, hath married or contracted marriage with any person; that then every such marriage and contract of matrimony shall be utterly void and of none effect; and that the ordinaries within whose dioceses or jurisdiction the person or persons so married or contracted is to be resident or abiding, shall from time to time make separation and divorces of the said marriages and contracts . (Bray 222-32)

Bale fled abroad in the wake of the Six Articles, as did Cranmer's wife and children. But whilst the Act's importance and ultimate effect upon the path of reform was huge, and although *Three Laws* almost certainly preceded it, it is important to note that, in essence, the royal line on clerical marriage presented by it is perfectly clear in the proclamation of the previous year.

If there were any doubts that the King was indeed among the targets of the play, these would have been dispelled by references in later works, in which Bale demonstrates his disappointment at Henry's failure to commit entirely to Cromwellian reform. Bemoaning the fact that, in retaining elements of blind Catholic ceremony, the slip back to Rome would be dangerously easy, just as the Beast of Revelation had been wounded, but not killed, "and I saw one of its heads as it were wounded to death, and his deadly wound was healed" (Rev. 13:3), so, for Bale, the battle against the Catholic Church had not yet been properly won. In *Romyshe Foxe*, Bale warns that lingering ceremonies were a threat of re-establishment, "had there been no ceremonyes never had there bene superstitions [...] yt wyll be easye ynough to bringe in them ageyne yf the other remayne" (Parish 153).<sup>13</sup> And prominent amongst his concerns was the survival of "theyr priestybulouse priesthode, their vowyng to have no wives, and their Sodomiticall chastitye" (Parish 130).<sup>14</sup> In *Romyshe Foxe*, Bale also explicitly blames the King for the lingering threat. Although he initially opts for concealment, attributing responsibility to Gardiner, he makes pointed, and rather obvious, allusions to idolatrous kings in the margins. As Parish suggests:

The first reference, to David, was complimentary to the king, and a standard image for the defeat of the Pope by Henry VIII. However, other citations, including a reference to the cursing of David in 2 Samuel 16, were more critical, "Soche vyllenouse contempt of

matrimonye spryngyng now of late [...] hath brought upon David, for all hys wonderfull vycorye [...] the plage promysed of the lorde for soche ungodlynesse". (Parish 155)<sup>15</sup>

Even with the theatrical protection that it was dramatic characters, and not directly Bale himself, that condemns Henry's legal policy on clerical marriage as being against God's law, *Three Laws* must be seen as a remarkably defiant text. In fact, given that it is *Naturae Lex* and *Evangelium* who speak the condemnatory lines, the embodiment of God's legal purity and the New Testament incarnation of Christ respectively, the statements are perhaps even starker.

Remarkably, clerical marriage is not the only example in the play of a popular and apparently general Protestant theme being used to attack a particularly germane royal legal position at the end of the 1530s. In March 1529, Henry had issued a proclamation, "Enforcing Statutes against Heresy; Prohibiting Unlicensed Preaching, Heretical Books", which appended a list of some fifteen banned works, "replete with most venomous heresies, blasphemies, and slanders intolerable to the clean ears of any good Christian man", including Biblical translations by Tyndale (*TRP*, I, 181-6, 182). A similar pronouncement in the following year, "Prohibiting Erroneous Books and Bible Translations", sought to directly address the importation of "blasphemous and pestiferous English books", once again including Tyndale's Old and New Testaments, which, "shall from henceforth be reputed and taken of all men for books of heresy, and worthy to be damned and put in perpetual oblivion" (*TRP*, I, 193-7, 194). The 1530 proclamation is particularly interesting because, whilst absolutely prohibiting the publication of Holy Scripture "in English Tongue", the objection, it is suggested, is rather to the nature of existing versions, which are seen as dangerous "in the hands of the common people", and

the prevalent threat of Lutheranism, “the malignity of this present time”, than to the principle of a vernacular translation in any circumstance. Indeed, Henry inserts the promise of a reward for religious conformity:

Albeit if it shall hereafter appear to the King’s highness that his said people do utterly abandon and forsake all perverse, erroneous, and seditious opinions, with the New Testament and the Old corruptly translated into the English tongue now being in print, and that the same books and all other books of heresy, as well in the French tongue and in the Dutch tongue, be clearly exterminate and exiled out of this realm of England forever: his highness intendeth to provide that the Holy Scripture shall by great, learned, and Catholic persons translated into the English tongue, if it shall then seem to his grace convenient so to be. (*TRP*, I, pp. 193-7)

By the time of *Three Laws*, however, the Bible in English had still not been officially provided. Cromwell’s “Second Injunctions”, of 1538, apparently heralded its arrival in the demand that “a book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English” be placed in every church by next Easter (*EHD* 811). But he had been far ahead of the King before, notably in his 1536 “First Injunctions”, that called for every parish church “to provide a book of the whole Bible, both in Latin, and also in English” (*EHD* 807), despite the lack of royal licence for an available translation. The Second Injunction certainly had more substance to it. Both Cromwell and Cranmer had been in touch with Richard Grafton, who was supervising the printing and export of the “Matthew Bible”, which was largely Tyndale’s text, completed by John Rogers under the pseudonym Thomas Matthew. And the translation had subsequently been approved and authorised by the King (MacCulloch 196-7). But the publication soon ran into difficulties when the Parisian printer, Francis Regnault, was prevented from continuing his work by the Catholic authorities. As Greg Walker confirms, “only Cromwell’s influence with the French ambassador, Castillon, eventually rescued the blocks and materials from

destruction and secured their shipment to London, where work was finally completed in April 1539” (Walker 217).

In the same month, however, the power of the provision of the vernacular was massively undermined by a further royal proclamation, “Limiting Exposition and Reading of Scripture”. In response to apparent attempts to “restore into this realm the old devotion to the usurped power of the Bishop of Rome, the hypocrite religion, superstitious pilgrimages, idolatry, and other evil and naughty ceremonies and dreams justly and lawfully abolished and taken away by authority of God’s word” (*TRP*, I, 284-86), the King’s instinct was again for conservatism. Rather than rely wholeheartedly on the scriptures themselves to emphasise the true religion, “the authority of God’s word” as understood by Tyndale and Bale, Henry instead preferred to turn to those whom he deemed to be reliable intermediaries, stating that “no person, except such as be curates or graduates in any of the universities of Oxford or Cambridge, or such as be or shall be admitted to preach by the King’s licence or by his vice-regent or by any bishop of the realm, shall teach or preach the Bible or New Testament”. Furthermore, those that could read the Bible in English by themselves were commanded to do so in silence, “as good Christian men ought to do”.

Such an imposition of interpretative strategy, as opposed to clear and free access to vernacular scripture, is anticipated in *Three Laws* by its criticism of Catholic practice. Just as the vices swear ironic oaths “upon the mass”, *Infidelitas* seeks to authorise a particularly bawdy tale by claiming to have told it plainly, “a my fayth, I do not glose”



And so, once again, his criticism is not just of Catholicism, but also of the King and his failure first of all to provide a vernacular text and then to allow free access to it. Such criticism is not confined to *Three Laws*; at the end of *The Temptation of Our Lord*, Bale bitterly attacks those who withhold the opportunity to know the truth of the Gospel:

What enemyes are they      that from the people wyll have  
 The scriptures of God,      whych are the myghty weapon  
 That Christ left them here, their sowles from helle to save,  
 And throw them headlondes into the devyls domynyon.  
 If they be no devyls      I saye there are devels non. (420-24)

But although I am not suggesting that Bale goes so far in *Three Laws* as to directly suggest that Henry is either an ‘enemye of the people’ or a ‘devil’, he must surely be seen as culpable, with the ‘Lordes without lernynge’, in the parallel Bale draws between the withholding of scripture and the Pharisees’ suppression of Christ (1555-71). Indeed, the provision of, and unrestricted access to, an English bible is the overwhelming demand of *Three Laws*, a plea given a particular emphasis because knowledge and understanding of the text are seen as fundamental for obedience to God’s law:

*Evangelium:*      In the lawes of God      wolde I instruct them gladlye;  
                          For non other waye      there is unto salvacyon,  
                          But the worde of God      in every generacyon, (1613-5)

Furthermore, from the examples that I have given, it is clear that the play insists that all secular laws must be composed in accordance with scripture, “For the law is God’s and not the king’s. The king is but a servant to execute the law of God and not to rule after his own imagination” (Tyndale 183). The tension between clerical marriage and royal authority, implicit in my title, thereby reflects the distance that the King must travel, in terms of the reform of church law, clerical marriage, heresy and the provision of the Bible itself, to satisfy the Bible’s, and Bale’s, demands. For Bale, God’s Law and the

King's must be one and the same, but it must be the rule of God, and not the other way around. As *Evangelium* concludes, "Gods worde næver taketh hys autoryte of man" (1620).

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<sup>1</sup> *Three Laws*, in John Bale, *The Complete Plays of John Bale*. ed. Peter Happé. 2 vols. Cambridge: Brewer, 1986. References from the play are from this edition and will hereafter appear within the main body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> The reformers' use of examples of 'clerical incontinence' is frequently considered by Parish.

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<sup>3</sup> Developing a similar connection of idolatry and gender politics, Brian Gourley has recently argued that “Bale uses the concept of feminised idolatry as a way of undermining the authority of Roman Catholic religious orthodoxy”.

<sup>4</sup> Quoting *EE* no. 1633; 6: 197-99. October 10, 1525.

<sup>5</sup> Quoting *CW* 5 684/22-7, 685/25-30.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Apology*, for example, More compares a list of “holy saynts” and “lewde” reformers and writes, “let all these heretyques and al that bere them favour, fynde out amonge them all so myche as one of all the olde holy sayntes, that so dyd construe the scrypture, as nowe these newe heretyques do for weddyng of monkes, freres, and nonnes, which the whole catholyke chyrch all thys fyften hundred yere, byfore these late lewde heresyges beganne have ever more abhorred and holden for abominable”. (*CW* 9 29/19-25).

<sup>7</sup> See, particularly, Robert Barnes, *Vitae Romanorum Pontificum*. Basle, 1555; John Bale, *Acta Romanorum Pontificum*. Basle, 1558.

<sup>8</sup> Quoting John Bale, *The Pageant of Popes*. sig. E2v.

<sup>9</sup> Quoting Robert Barnes, *A Supplication...* sig. U1r-v.

<sup>10</sup> The first part of Bale’s *The Actes of the Englysh Votaries* concluded with the year 1000.

<sup>11</sup> “The king is in the room of God, and his law is God’s law”. (Tyndale 96).

<sup>12</sup> See also Elton 274-83.

<sup>13</sup> Quoting John Bale, *Romyshe Foxe*, sig. A5r.

<sup>14</sup> Quoting John Bale, *The Image of Both Churches...* sig. g5v-6v.

<sup>15</sup> Quoting John Bale, *Romyshe Foxe*, sig. K2v-3r.

<sup>16</sup> “If any man desire authority of scripture, Christ saith (Luke 11): woe be to you lawyers for ye have taken away the key of knowledge...That is, they had blinded the scripture...with glosses and traditions”. (Tyndale 66).

<sup>17</sup> “For Paul commandeth no man once speak in the church, that is, in the congregation, but in a tongue that all men understand”. (Tyndale 77-8).