"THAT REVEREND VICE"
A Study of the Comic-Demonic Figure
in English Drama and Fiction

by

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ABSTRACT

One of the most puzzling thematic patterns prevalent in the literature of almost every culture is the recurrent association of the devil and clown; both in myth and art, there is a discernible relationship between the spirit of comedy and the dark, destructive forces of the demonic realm. It is the purpose of the dissertation to examine the comic and demonic forces which are interfused in the literary representations of a number of clown-demons, to explain the nature of what may be termed "diabolical humour," and to demonstrate why, in the words of Baudelaire, "the comic is one of the clearest tokens of the Satanic in man." This investigation is approached from the vantage point of a figure widely popular in English medieval and Tudor drama, namely the jesting Vice of the morality and interlude, in whom the elements of the comic and demonic converge.

While the first half of the dissertation examines the relationship between comedy and evil in light of the origins and dramatic characteristics of the Vice, the second half attempts to demonstrate that this figure can serve as a kind of prototype for a number of similarly morally ambiguous characters in both drama and fiction, characters whose double-visaged natures would otherwise appear somewhat inexplicable. The first three chapters are mainly historical, concentrating on the development of the comic-demonic figure in early English drama and establishing a sociological foundation upon which further discussion of the relationship between evil and comedy can be based. The following chapters are largely analytical in nature, focusing upon five problematical figures in English
literature—Falstaff in *Henry IV*, Volpone in Jonson's play by that name, Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, Fagin in *Oliver Twist* and Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*—and using the comic-demonic attributes of these figures as a threshold through which to enter the dramatic or fictional worlds of Shakespeare, Jonson, Thackeray, and Dickens. In each of the works discussed, not only are the forces of comedy and evil intrinsically related to the major strands of imagery and thematic motifs, but also each writer emphasizes a different aspect of the comic-demonic prototype whose composite features are identified in the first half of the dissertation.

In *Henry IV*, Falstaff's comic diablerie considerably elucidates the intermediary position within the socio-political framework which Shakespeare is delineating—the amoral, median position between virtue and vice, order and disorder, court and tavern. In *Volpone*, Jonson employs the magnifico as a kind of infernal priest whose idolatrous worship of his gold and licentious indulgence of his baser passions take the form of a comic profanation of the sacred, resulting in the temporary ascendency of a demonic, saturnalian world. The discussion of *Vanity Fair* examines a female representation of this figure. In this novel, Becky Sharp emerges as a demonic comic-heroine whose womanhood defines the quality of both the comedy and the evil she perpetrates. And finally, in *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Fagin and Quilp fulfill the traditional Vice-role, acting as aged corrupters of youthful innocence. Both men function thematically as surrogate father-figures whose comic-demonic attributes make them at the same time menacing and attractive to the children with whom they each interact.
The conclusion looks at the central question of the moral ambiguity of this figure, his or her simultaneous attractiveness and repellence, from the wider perspective of the interaction between the comic and demonic domains. The study closes with the assertion that the forces of comedy and evil function in a complementary manner as both instruments of engagement and distancing devices, and that the comic-demonic figure will be represented in literature as long as there continues to be a relationship between the spirit of comedy and the dark, hidden impulses of mankind.
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"THAT REVEREND VICE"

A Study of the Comic-Demonic Figure

in English Drama and Fiction
INTRODUCTION

One of the most puzzling thematic patterns prevalent in the literature of almost every culture is the recurrent association of the representations of the devil and the clown; both in myth and art, there is a discernible relationship between the spirit of comedy and the dark, destructive forces of the demonic realm. For example, Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* affirms that inherent in every myth, there is a conception of the pre-existence of evil. "Universal too is the casting of the antagonist, the representative of evil, in the role of the clown. Devils--both the lusty thick-heads and the sharp clever deceivers--are always clowns." Similarly, Ernst Kris in his section on the comic in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* makes the following comment:

We are familiar with the great company of comic figures which are to be found in the art and literature of all civilized peoples. We can often discover their genealogy and trace it right back to the antique satyr play, or even further. It is a fact that as a general rule, we can perceive behind them another more sinister shape once feared or dreaded. Satyrs who were at first goat demons, the pulcinella of South-Italian comedy, descendant of the cock dancers, the comic devils of the mystery plays, even the lovable Mephisto in Goethe's *Faust*, are the best known examples of such ci-devant demons now travestied as fools.

It will be the purpose of my dissertation to examine the comic and demonic forces which are interfused in the literary representations of a number of such clown-demons, to explain the nature of what may be termed "diabolical humour," and to demonstrate why, in the words of Baudelaire, "the comic is one of the clearest tokens of the Satanic in man." I intend to approach this question from the vantage point of a
figure widely popular in English medieval and Tudor drama, namely the jesting Vice of the morality and interlude, in whom the elements of the comic and demonic converge. Having examined the origins and dramatic characteristics of this figure, I shall then attempt to demonstrate that the Vice can serve as a prototype for a number of similarly ambivalent characters in both drama and fiction, characters whose double-visaged natures would otherwise appear somewhat inexplicable.

The emphasis of the first half of the dissertation will, consequently, be mainly historical, concentrating on the development of the comic-demonic figure in early English drama and establishing a sociological foundation upon which further discussion of the relationship between evil and comedy can be based. The second half will be largely analytical in nature, focusing upon five problematical figures—two dramatic and three fictional—whose comic-demonic features are intrinsically related to the thematic patterns and imagery of each of the literary works in which they operate.
Notes for Introduction


Chapter I

THE COMIC AND DEMONIC DOMAINS

The perplexing nature of the Vice's incorporation of the two forces of comic and demonic, of the roles of both devil and clown, is well outlined in a series of questions posed by William Willeford during his discussion of the development of the fool character in his recent work, *The Fool and His Scepter*:

> In the medieval stage . . . the Devil and the fool interacted with each other, and the Devil himself was often clownish, as were Herod, Pilate, and other "bad" characters. In a common form of this interplay, the Devil, not a comic figure, acted upon the farcical figure of the Vice, the terrible knave and the silly victim developing in the course of time in the direction of the familiar knockabout fool pair. . . . Some features of these developments are not at all clear; among the questions that have been raised about them are these: What is the origin of the Vice as a fool character in England? Was the Vice always distinct from the Devil? Did the stage fool simply grow out of the Devil or Vice, or was the Devil a fool much earlier? . . . And whatever the developments were in detail, why did they take place?

It is toward the issues raised in the above questions that this chapter will be directed.

A SURVEY OF THE LITERARY CRITICISM CONCERNED WITH THE ORIGINS OF THE VICE

The origin of the Vice as a dramatic character is a matter of dispute among critics and theatre historians who are divided according to their interpretation of his function on the medieval and Tudor stage. There are those who see him primarily aligned with the allegorical forces of evil, namely the Devil and the Seven Deadly Sins. Another group of
critics, however, lays more stress upon the comic function of the Vice and traces his evolution from the court jester and the fool of English folk drama. The dispute over the development of the Vice in early English drama was initiated over three-quarters of a century ago by L. W. Cushman in the only full-length study of this figure published to date, *The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare*. According to Cushman, the Devil and the Vice are distinct entities, related only insofar as all agents of evil have the same metaphysical source; the Devil is a theological being, the adversary of God, while the Vice is an ethical person, "an allegorical representation of human weakness and vices, in short, the summation of the Deadly Sins." Cushman is inclined to underplay the comic derivation of the Vice's role and sees him closely aligned with the moral forces of evil, his principal function being the temptation of man. He recognizes that in the course of time, the Vice became separated from his allegorical role, and "the term Vice came to be simply a synonym for buffoon"; he regards this fact, however, as evidence for the figure's comic degeneration.

Later critics have tended to disagree with Cushman, and with each other as well, in their discussion of the Vice's origins. Some, such as Robert Withington and A. P. Rossiter, do not accept Cushman's distinction between Devil and Vice, but rather find the ancestor of the Vice figure in the diabolically jocular character of the Devil drawn in the medieval mystery play. In Rossiter's view: "Much has been argued about the Deadly Sins and the Vice; but after noting the comic and always undignified devils of the Miracle-plays, the derivation of the Vice as riotous
clown and his usual supplantation of the other six--or all seven--needs little explanation. On the other hand, Bernard Spivack, in the chapter entitled "Emergence of the Vice" in Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil, supports Cushman in his insistence upon the separation of the roles of the Devil and the Vice; he finds himself at odds, however, with other aspects of Cushman's theory:

The Vice is not, as some scholars have supposed, the "summation of the Seven Deadly Sins"; but he springs, by a century-long process of doctrinal emphasis and dramatic specialization, from the numerous vices, including the Deadly Sins, who came upon the morality stage out of the diffuse homiletic allegory of medieval Christianity.

Also disagreeing with Cushman, some scholars have emphasized the comic origins of the Vice, while others, in sharp contrast to Spivack, have regarded the relationship between the Vice and the fool of tradition as much stronger than that between the Vice and the themes and characters of medieval homiletic literature. Tempe Allison finds untenable Cushman's view that the Vice was originally a sinister rather than a comic figure: "As we now see it ... the Vice of the early sixteenth century moralities represents the fusion of a group of minor vices, and as far back as we are able to trace these characters we find them exhibiting distinctly comic elements." Similarly, both Chambers and Ramsay believe that the comic side of the Vice's character requires more attention; both dispute Cushman's rejection of the fool-element in the role of the Vice, but rather, have discovered affinities between the comic antics of this figure and those of the medieval clown or jester. Supporting a similar standpoint, R. J. Tiddy traces the origin of the Vice through the Devil in the mystery play to the black-faced fools of the English folk play.
It is Tiddy's conviction that "the Morris fool, the Doctor's man, Beelzebub, the Fool of the Mummers' Play, the clown of the Sword Play, the devils of the Moralities and the Interludes are all by dint of their mischief or their black faces or their fooling, ultimately one and the same." More recently, F. H. Mares has taken Tiddy's argument one step further, and has attempted to demonstrate that "the Vice comes into the drama from the popular festival, that he is already established as a stage clown before he appears in the morality at all, and that he does not do so until the morality is in decline."

Not all the critical research has regarded the question of the Vice's origins as narrowly as my summary up to this point would indicate. Some theorists have recognized the double nature of the Vice's dramatic character, his tendency to combine elements of both comic and diabolic, to incorporate aspects of the roles of both demon and clown. In a recent unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Larry Gray, after discarding the devil of the miracles as a source for the origin of the Vice, finds this figure's ancestry in both the theological "vitiae" of the medieval period (the allegorical representations of human weakness), and especially, in the timeless representations of the archetypal fool. Similarly, Boughner regards the chief function of the Vice figure, "to compound viciousness with buffoonery," as an indication of his mixed origins. Spivack, too, in his interpretation of morality drama in terms of "the comedy of evil" asserts that the Vice, "like the morality play itself of which he is the essence, is a composite of homiletic 'sadness' and dramaturgic 'mirth.'" None of the critics and theatre historians, however, has provided a
satisfactory explanation for the puzzling duality manifest in both the origins and functions of the Vice. Indeed, after all the research in this area has been analyzed, Willeford's final and, to my mind, most significant question remains to be answered: Whatever the developments were in respect to the relationship between the Vice, the Devil, and the fool, "why did they take place?" The remainder of this chapter will attempt to provide an answer for this question.

THE COMIC ASPECTS OF THE DEMONIC REALM

Bernard Spivack is undoubtedly correct when he remarks that "it is easier to observe than explain this comic portrayal of evil everywhere visible in medieval art and letters." I shall begin to account for this association of viciousness and buffoonery, embodied in both the figure of the Vice and the literature from which he emanates, by examining two fundamental concerns: first, why, in medieval drama, are the forces of the demonic portrayed in essentially comic terms, and, second, why does comedy present itself with manifestly evil overtones? At first glance, these questions appear identical, but, as we shall discover, the relationship between the comic and the demonic is at least twofold; and the answers to these distinct, yet correlative questions will provide insights not only into the convergence of both forces during the medieval period, but also into their recurrent association in literature to the present time. During the medieval period, the devil, the supernatural enemy of both God and man, became the leading comic character in the art and homiletic literature of the time. In addition, another group of
characters, including the numerous vices in the devil's retinue, as well as Cain, Herod, Pilate, Noah's wife, and the torturers of Christ, also developed in such a way as to provide a source of comic horse-play on the medieval stage. All of these characters shared with the devil himself one common attribute that was singled out as a target for laughter. Within this context then, humour during the medieval period served the purposes of satire. This satiric aim was, of course, supported by homiletic teaching which demonstrated not only that evil was stupid and stupidity was comic, but also that the powers of the demonic could ultimately be overcome by virtue and obedience to the divine will. In other words, because evil was represented to be laughable, its essential folly, impotence, and vulnerability were exposed. In fact, the Biblical definition of the word fool, a term "applied to vicious or impious persons,"¹⁶ is in keeping with the medieval and renaissance persuasion that folly was analogous to sin.

Besides the purpose of satire, a second function of humour in relation to the forces of the demonic was that of providing comic relief. The presence of humour during the course of a sermon or a liturgical drama assisted in sweetening the moral pill, and fulfilled both requirements of what has been viewed since the time of Horace, as the dual function of literature—dulce et utile, to sweeten and make useful, to entertain and instruct. The average spectator could have little in common with the idealized, verbose and abstractly treated Christ, Mary, the various saints, or the allegorical representations of virtue. He shared, however, with the devil, his accompanying band of personified vices, and
the various "lurdans" and "losells" [rascals and low characters], the exuberance and vitality of ordinary human weakness. The considerable comic entertainment provided by the demonic character in medieval drama is affirmed in Jonson's *The Staple of News*, as Gossip Tattle reminisces about the old days:

My husband Timothy Tattle, God rest his pore soul! was wont to say there was no play without a fool and a devil in't; he was for the devil still, God bless him! The devil for his money, would he say, I would fain see the devil.17

The power of comic relief, embodied in the numerous characters metaphorically aligned with evil, resulted in their dramatic overshadowing of the forces of virtue on the early English stage. Although the forces of good were ultimately shown to be morally superior, the characters associated with the demonic realm were, quite understandably, the most applauded by the theatre audiences of the times.

The comic rendering of the demonic element in medieval art can also be viewed from a psychological perspective which casts a different light on the notion of comic relief. Not only did the injection of farce into medieval drama provide an element of levity for the spectator amidst a superabundance of homiletic teaching, but also, in many respects, it served as a defense against anxiety. By perceiving the menacing forces of hell as ridiculous, by laughingly degrading the diabolical character so that he becomes a clown or a fool, the audience is able to distance itself from the threatening and oppressive aspects of the demonic realm, and thereby obtain relief from anxiety and fear. It is this process of psychological distancing to which Spivack implicitly refers when he speculates that the comic portrayal of evil during the Middle Ages probably
"obeyed the same impulse evident today in the political cartoon—the degradation by caricature of a dangerous enemy, and an anodyne, therefore, applied to fear and pain." Pursuing a similar relationship between the fearsome and the ludicrous in his examination of the Grotesque in German Literature, Lee Byron Jennings also suggests that a certain "disarming mechanism" is at work whenever a fear-producing image evokes a comic response in the observer. Jennings goes so far as to question "whether, in the primitive condition of man, all expressions of the terrible may not pass through this disarming phase, whereby the stability and well-being of the mind is in some measure preserved and protected against disruptive forces."

Most of the critics concerned with the comic rendering of the evil element in medieval drama have used one or more of these three basic explanations—that the evil characters are made ludicrous in order to fulfill the purposes of satire, to provide comic relief, or to allow the audience a measure of psychological distancing from the malevolent forces of hell. In short, the literary criticism in the area has focused primarily on the demonic realm itself in an attempt to explain why the forces of evil have been depicted with expressly humorous overtones. We can, however, gain a further perspective in our consideration, if we turn to a discussion of comic theory, for here we can find an intrinsic relationship between the nature of comedy and the demonic realm of the human psyche.
THE DEMONIC FORCES OF COMEDY

Attempting to define the essence of laughter in 1855, Charles Baudelaire expressed his belief that there was a vital interconnection between the comic mode and the demonic impulse in human experience. For Baudelaire, "the comic is a damnable element and one of diabolic origin." Associated with the ancient idea of a physical and moral Fall from Grace, "the comic is one of the clearest tokens of the Satanic in man, one of the numerous pips contained in the symbolic apple." Interestingly, V. A. Kolve in *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, identifies a similar conviction prevalent in medieval theology. Using the twelfth century writings of St. Hildegard of Bingen as his source, Kolve states that during the Middle Ages "it was possible to believe that the faculty of laughter was one of the results of the Fall of Man, and that in our original perfection we voiced our higher joys in less carnal ways." Few critics have stated this relationship between the comic and the demonic with the boldness of Baudelaire; however, implicit in the theoretical writings devoted to the nature of comedy, an explanation for this interconnection may be found.

According to a prevalent and convincing theory, comedy and humour release psychological tensions resulting from the inhibiting process of maintaining the institutions of civilization. From its earliest origins, developing out of the Dionysiac revels and fertility rites in Ancient Greece, the comic genre has represented itself in the form of a holiday from everyday life, a celebration of the vitality of the human instincts and their temporary triumph over the repressive forces of civilization.
This theory is well documented by Professor Cornford's study of the
ritual pattern of Aristophanic comedy in *The Origins of Attic Comedy*.
Commenting on the major theme which is recurrent in most of Aristophanes' plays, Cornford writes: "The reign of Zeus stood in the Greek mind for the existing moral and social order; its overthrow, which is the theme of so many of the comedies, might be taken to symbolise . . . the breaking up of all ordinary restraints." 23

A number of literary critics, including C. L. Barber, James Feibleman, Susanne Langer, Wylie Sypher, and Northrop Frye, have supported the view that comedy is a festive art form which momentarily provides a publicly useful liberation from the constraints of authority and social institutions. 24 It is interesting that Freud too, in psychoanalytical terms, has affirmed the widely-held theory of literary criticism that comedy involves a "breaking up of all ordinary restraints." According to Freud, "humour has something liberating about it," 25 and comedy provides pleasure by permitting the temporary gratification of some hidden and forbidden wish, while the anxiety which normally causes the inhibition of the wish is reduced. More precisely, laughter occurs when the psychic energy built up in the unconscious is able to overwhelm the inhibiting restraints of the superego which generally exercises control over the individual's pattern of behaviour. As when any restraint is suddenly lifted, a reduction of tension takes place and, in this case, the discharge of energy manifests itself in the form of cathartic laughter.

With this view of comedy as a vehicle of psychological liberation,
it is not difficult to demonstrate its relationship to the forces of the demonic realm. The unconscious is, of course, that region of the mind which is the seat of the repressed "demonic" desires, the dark, destructive urges of the human psyche, which are permitted to be momentarily released through the emancipatory processes of comedy. We might further consider that there has been an obvious historical relationship between the comic and the sacred, resulting from the fact that, as one theorician suggests, "the comic cannot approach sacred things without appearing blasphemous." This relationship is indicated by the comic profanation of the sacred which takes place during the festive celebrations of almost all cultures. Discernible in the Dionysian fertility rites, the Roman Saturnalia, the Medieval Feast of Fools, the seasonal carnivals of continental Europe, and the various rituals of the North and South American Indian, the comic "burlesque of the sacred" appears to have an almost universal occurrence. Common to all of these festivals is the relaxation of the rigid structures of society, an attack on conventional value and belief, and the lifting of certain taboos, during which time, acts bordering on sacrilege are permitted.

During the Middle Ages, for example, a festival known as the Feast of Fools was celebrated, despite numerous ecclesiastical prohibitions, from the twelfth to sixteenth century in the cathedral churches of northwestern Europe. The feast usually began on 1 January, the Day of the Circumcision, and it generally took the form of a licentious parody of church ritual conducted by the minor clergy: the sub-deacons, vicars, chaplains, and clerks. "The ruling idea of the feast," as Chambers
observes, "is the inversion of status and the performance, inevitably burlesque, by the inferior clergy of functions properly belonging to their betters." This inversion and the deliberate profanation of the sacred order is evident in a fifteenth-century document issued by the Dean of the Faculty at the University of Paris, which in its condemnation, graphically describes the customs of the feast:

Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of office. They dance in the choir dressed as women, panderers or minstrels. They sing wanton songs. They eat black puddings at the horn of the altar while the celebrant is saying mass. They play at dice there. They sense with stinking smoke from the soles of old shoes. They run and leap through the church, without a blush at their own shame. Finally they drive about the town; and rouse the laughter of their fellows and bystanders in infamous performances with indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste.

It is significant that this document interprets the sacrilegious licence reflected in the Feast of Fools, as an indication not only of the survival of the rites of paganism but also of the failure to resist the "snares of devils."

The Feast of Fools was far more widespread in France than in England, although the custom was celebrated in several English localities, particularly at Lincoln and Beverley. Official censure was, apparently, more powerful on the northern side of the channel, and there are no English records of this festival after the end of the fourteenth century. Far more popular in England than the Feast of Fools was the Feast of the Boy Bishop or the Feast of Innocents. This feast also involved an inversion of status, for during its celebration the boys of the cathedral choir took on the offices and authority of the senior clergy. Although the Feast of the Boy Bishop involved a mockery of the divine service and
often led to licentious revelry, it was not held to be so much of an abomina-
tion by ecclesiastical reformers for, as Chambers surmises, "the choir-
boys must have been more amenable to discipline, even in moments of
festivity, than the adult clerks." This festival, however, shared with
the Feast of Fools the general condemnation and prohibitions afforded all
such ostensibly subversive customs, and both feasts gradually died out by
the time of the Reformation.

Both the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Boy Bishop are exam-
ples of celebrations in which laws lose their restraining force and the
spirit of comic inversion reigns in a topsy-turvy world. These festivals
were, of course, limited in duration, and the sacred order which had been
mockingly desecrated during the period of revelry was, ultimately, reas-
serted at the end of the celebration. Yet the existence, however tem-
porary, of an order of comic profanation in which even the most sacred
customs and values of a society are held up to ridicule, provides us with
an illustration of the kind of institutionalized "pressure release" which
is endemic to the festivity of all cultures.

The fact that humour is often a vital response to that which is
sacred is also illustrated by what we may call the laughing-in-church
syndrome, in which a similar kind of "pressure release" is involved. It
has frequently been observed that people often experience the intense
need to laugh in church, or in any situation in which an atmosphere of
solemnity is demanded. As Carlo Weber comments in an article entitled
"A God Who Laughs," "our need to laugh is apparently greatest at the most
sacred moments. For laughter is an escape from smug, pretentious bondage.
Placed in bondage, we either submit to it or laugh at it. . . . Laughter tends to correct abuses and release our aggressions against the binding force." In much the same way, Wylie Sypher has suggested that "comic rites are necessarily impious, for comedy is sacrilege as well as release . . . [M]an must periodically befoul the holy and reduce himself to folly." From this perspective then, it is not surprising that the medieval Church viewed the Feast of Fools as resulting from the "snares of devils," nor that the dramatic representations of evil, both the devil and the Vice, became the leading comic characters on the medieval and Tudor stage. Because the comically subversive antics of both figures were a challenge to the authority of God and the ecclesiastical teachings of Christianity, the audience was able, through laughter, to discharge its pent-up tensions against the moral restrictions and religious structures of the heavily-bound society in which they lived. Furthermore, an inversion of status is evident here as well, for the demonic realm supplanted that of Heaven, during the infernal characters' comic reign.

It is also important to recognize that the comic revelry of the demonic characters was short-lived, and the forces of virtue were ultimately victorious at the end of the dramatic presentation. This process was supported not only by religious doctrine, which sought always to demonstrate that the road to virtue was morally superior to that of vice, but also by the social functions of comedy itself. Although comedy is an agent of socially sanctioned release, it is, at the same time, a vehicle of social regulation. It is true that the unbridled expression of man's natural instincts may, from time to time, be necessary to
cultural survival; saturnalian reveling, however, cannot exist as a permanent state. Shakespeare has Prince Hal acknowledge this fact in Henry IV, Part I:

If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work,
But when they seldom come, they wish'd for come.

(I.ii.228-30)

What Hal is saying is that everyone looks forward to a holiday because it provides a break from the work-a-day-world. If, however, holidays were to become the general rule rather than a brief respite from it, the result would be tedium. Furthermore, we can safely surmise that "if all the year were playing holidays," man would eventually develop a countervoluntionary movement against the order of festive celebration. At any rate, it is the purpose of comedy to provide a momentary interlude during the course of everyday life, an interruption and suspension of the rules of daily living. It does so because holidays are necessary for the maintenance of the structures of civilization. Once the holiday is over, the members of society are temporarily purged of their anarchic and antisocial impulses, and are ready to embrace once more the values they have mockingly flouted. Moreover, comedy, in a sense, serves the interests of social, political, and religious authority as well. The fact that the comic attack on conventional value is permitted and in some cases, even encouraged, suggests that the authorities and social institutions are both powerful and tolerant enough to deal effectively with the forces which threaten the prevailing order.

We have seen that comedy often involves a liberating profanation of the sacred, and we are now, perhaps, in a better position to appreciate
the element of demonic insinuation gleaming from within the comic mask. We must also consider, however, that the comic spirit is, after all, as George Meredith recognized, "the ultimate civilizer." Moreover, a "holiday" is also a "holy day," and comedy not only, in Sypher's words, "desecrates what it seeks to sanctify," but also, at the same time, sanctifies what it seeks to desecrate. With this in mind, we shall now turn to the desecrations and sanctifications wrought by the comic-demonic figure in his earliest appearances on the English stage.
Notes for Chapter I


2 The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare (Halle, 1900), p. 63. Charles M. Gayley supports a similar generic distinction between the Devil and Vice in his introduction to Representative English Comedies (New York: Macmillan, 1912-36), pp. li-lii: "The Vice is neither an ethical nor dramatic derivative of the Devil; nor is he a pendant to that personage, as foil or ironical decoy, or even antagonist. The Devil of the early drama is a mythical character, a fallen archangel, the anthropomorphic Adversary. The Vice, on the other hand, is allegorical,--typical of the moral frailty of mankind. Proceeding from the concept of the Deadly Sins, ultimately focusing them, he dramatizes the evil that springs within."

3 Cushman, p. 68.


6 Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), p. 135. This work will be subsequently cited as The Allegory of Evil.


10 "The Origin of the Figure Called 'the Vice' in Tudor Drama," Huntington Library Quarterly, XXII (1958-59), 11-29.


The Allegory of Evil, pp. 121, 193.


The Allegory of Evil, p. 121.

OED, s.v. "Fool."


The Allegory of Evil, p. 121.


According to Aristotle, "Comedy originated with the leaders of the Phallic Songs" (Poetics, 1449 a9).


Freud's concept of the "id," and Jung's archetype of "the Shadow," are both attempts to describe, in essentially demonic terms, the repressed, hidden impulses of the human unconscious.

Ernst Kris, Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art, p. 216. It should be recognized that while this statement is true of Christianity, it does not exactly function this way in other religions. For example, in Hinduism the sacred and the comic are often mingled together in a complementary manner.

29 The Medieval Stage, I, 325.

30 Ibid., p. 295.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 349.


35 The historical relationship between the king and the court jester (whose role was to mock his master) is a case in point. In the words of Middleton and Rowley in The Changeling: "There's nothing in a play to a clown, if he / Have but the grace to hit on't; that's the thing indeed: / The king shows well, but he sets off the king."


Chapter II

FORERUNNERS OF THE VICE--THE COMIC-DEMONIC CHARACTER IN
THE ENGLISH RELIGIOUS DRAMA OF THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

My aim in this chapter is to trace the development of the comic-demonic figure in the English mystery and morality play of the Middle Ages in order to demonstrate the relation of this early, if crude character to the various representations of the Vice as he appears in the later morality and Tudor interlude. Because the story of the origin of English drama is both well-documented and well-known, and because an in-depth analysis of the dramatic conventions of the medieval period does not fall within the scope of this dissertation, it would be both redundant and unproductive to outline this historical development at great length.¹ A general summary is, however, required in order to examine the intrusion of the comic element into the early religious drama, for such an examination will test the validity of the comic-demonic relationship which I have postulated in the preceding chapter.

Early Christian drama had its beginnings in the services of the Church; the ritualistic element of the Mass, particularly the symbolic receiving of the Host, lent itself rather well to dramatic presentation. Because the liturgy was in Latin, visual representations were introduced as early as the fifth century in order to increase the appeal of public worship to the unlettered masses. Other dramatic qualities to be found in the Church service of early Christendom included the emphasis of certain portions of the Scriptures through dialogue chanting--short passages
in Latin were chanted by a solo voice or a section of the choir, and were answered by another section or all the voices in unison. The life of Christ became the main subject of the liturgical hymns or tropes, which were interpolations of dialogues employed to dramatize a specific part of the authorized Mass. Of the tropes, the best known is the *Quem Quaeritis* which became adjoined to the Easter service, and dealt with the visit of the three Marys to the empty tomb of the resurrected Christ (Mark 16:1-7; Matthew 28:1-7).\(^2\) The Easter *Quem Quaeritis* dates back to the end of the ninth century, and in this trope, according to Chambers, "the liturgical drama was born."\(^3\)

Soon tropes dealing with the birth of Christ found their way into the Christmas service, and gradually the liturgical presentations at Christmas and Easter were extended both forwards and backwards in time, until a fairly complete cycle of the Biblical story from the Fall to the Day of Judgment had developed. As the plays grew longer and their spectators increased in number, they began to separate themselves from the regular Church service. By the thirteenth century, they began to be performed in the church-yards outside, as well as in the churches themselves, and the use of the vernacular began to be preferred to that of the Latin tongue. Moreover, scenes and characters which were of secondary importance in the original Biblical narrative were introduced, and as these came to be depended upon by the audiences to provide humorous relief from the solemnities of prayer and homiletic teaching, the comic element in religious drama began to appear. As the popular element increased, the element of devotion began to wane, and as moral edification (*utile*) began
to be replaced by spectacle and entertainment (dulce), the drama itself grew more and more profane. Once outside the Church, the large crowds and ecclesiastical disapproval combined to force the drama into the market place where it was even more heavily influenced by the spirit of comic profanation.

The ritualistic element in the folk festivals which survived in England, as well as in the rest of Europe, as remnants of the Pre-Christian era, also contributed to the development of early English drama. These village festivities were usually seasonal and provided not only a vehicle for the expression of the pagan celebration of the spring or harvest period, but also an opportunity for the expression of the natural urge to mime. Moreover, it should be recognized that the prevailing spirit of festivity is comic rather than tragic. "Comedy," declares Susanne Langer, "is an art form that arises naturally whenever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings or initiations." Consequently, just as the primitive and pagan fertility rites influenced the origins of both Greek and Roman comedy, so these folk rituals, inherent in the village celebrations, contained the germ of the comic spirit in England during the Middle Ages.

The first volume of Chambers' Medieval Stage is an exhaustive account both of the festivals and folk-drama of the period--the May game, the Sword Dance, the Mummers' Play, the Feast of Fools, the Feast of the Boy Bishop--and of how these village ludi incurred the condemnation of the Church. In Chambers' view:

... the traditional beliefs and customs of the Medieval or modern peasant are in nine cases out of ten but the detritus of heathen
worship, enduring with but little external change in the shadow of a hostile creed. This is notably true of the village festivals and their ludi. Their full significance only appears when they are regarded as fragments of forgotten cults, the naive cult addressed by a primitive folk to the beneficent deities of field and wood and river, or the shadowy populace of its own dreams.6

Chambers explains that the basic approach of the early Christian missionaries in Western Europe was not to completely destroy all vestiges of heathen belief, but rather to bring about conversion wherever possible through the process of synthesis, or absorption of pagan practices into the creed of Christianity itself.7 And according to another scholar, it was, ultimately, the cleverness of the medieval clergy that "turned the Saturnalia into Christmas and the pagan licenses of May-day into the rejoicings of Easter, converted the love of fiction, the impulse for play and disguises and mumming into a potent means wherewith to spread a knowledge of bible story and an acceptance of Christian doctrine."8

A similar view is taken by A. P. Rossiter who also traces the origins of medieval comedy to the survival of pagan ritual, particularly that attached to the worship of the Greek fertility gods who were invoked "in the frenzies of intoxication or of animal lust."9 It is interesting for the purposes of this dissertation that Rossiter maintains that "in the nominally Christian Europe of the Middle Ages, the pagan underlay of dance, rite and revel had some effect at least on the nature of the drama and the dramatic, because the older gods had been subsumed by the legions of Christian devils"10 (emphasis mine). Rossiter supports Chambers' assertion that the village ludi not only bear witness "to the deep-lying dramatic instincts of the folk," but also made "a contribution to medieval and Renaissance drama and dramatic spectacle . . . greater than has been
fully recognized." To Chambers' observation Rossiter significantly adds, however, that this contribution particularly emanates from the heathen survival "of a kind of devil-worship: an odd mingle of magic, tricks for luck, dancing and fooling, farce and blasphemy, from which springs the strong element of the grotesque in all medieval art." Rossiter uses this premise as the basis for his argument that a profound ambivalence determines the intrinsic quality of medieval drama, an ambivalence deriving from the simultaneous presence of two rituals, two contradictory value systems--one Christian and the other pagan, "one standing for reverence, awe, nobility, pathos, sympathy; the other for mockery, blasphemy, baseness, meanness or spite, Schadenfreude, and derision." For Rossiter, it is the fact that the "other spirit" is comic which is of foremost significance, for this spirit of comic defamation is, in his view, the most important contribution of the medieval legacy to English drama.

In the preceding chapter, I attempted to explain why the forces of comedy became attached to characters who were essentially evil in nature. We are now, perhaps, in a position to review this problem from a slightly more enlightened perspective. It is now evident that although the values and priorities of each group were widely different, the comic portrayal of evil in the religious drama of the Middle Ages fulfilled paradoxically both the edifying purpose of the clergy and the underlying inclinations of the folk. When the plays became separated from the adjuncts of the Church service, and moved out of the church into the
churchyard, and then into the market and the village green, both forces --the clerical endeavor to increase the attractiveness of the Christian creed, and the profanation of the sacred which is almost universally characteristic of all folk ritual\textsuperscript{14}--combined to give the comic element in liturgical drama its most powerful impetus.

Moreover, in the mystery-cycles, villains such as Lucifer, Cain, Herod, Pilate, Judas, and the torturers of Christ were treated humorously because, from the point of view of the clergy, these characters were evil, and thus the target for ridicule, satire, and derisive laughter. From the point of view of the audience, these characters were mockingly blasphemous, a challenge to the authority of God, and thus provided, through a kind of liberating laughter, a momentary release from the sober restraints of religious doctrine. For these reasons, the comic-demonic figure played an incisive role in the development of early English comedy, a role so substantial as to lead one critic to comment: "It would be hardly too much to say that comedy in the craft cycle was the work of the Devil, whether in person or human disguise."\textsuperscript{15} Leaving the person of the Devil aside for the moment, we shall now examine some of his human representatives in the mystery plays of the medieval period.

Of the many mystery cycles which once existed, a few have survived, most notably the more or less complete cycles from Chester, York, Wakefield, and N-Towne (often called Coventry). Although there are comic episodes present to some degree in all four cycles, the Wakefield cycle (or Towneley plays, from the name of the owners of the manuscripts) is particularly rich in its manifestation of a kind of robust humour.
Striking similarities among some of the Wakefield plays, especially in versification and comic spirit, suggest that one person, a postulated Wakefield Master, wrote a number of them and revised several others. According to A. W. Pollard, the Wakefield Master was "a writer of genuine dramatic power, whose humour was unchecked by any respect for conventionality." Because this is precisely the kind of humour under scrutiny in this dissertation, an examination of some of the plays attributed to the Wakefield Master should provide some fruitful insights.

Mactacio Abel (The Killing of Abel), the second play in the Wakefield cycle, is commonly associated with the work of the master. Cain is, of course, the first villain in the Bible. As the perpetrator of the first murder, he is traditionally viewed as a criminal, a despiser of God and man. Interestingly, in Beowulf, Cain is identified as the ancestor of all evil spirits and monsters, and Grendel, that "feond on helle" (1.10) is designated as one of his offspring (1.1267). In the Wakefield play, the murder itself is really only of incidental significance in terms of the dramatic action. Instead we are given a rather humorous and realistic picture of Cain, a surly and ill-tempered husbandman out of humour with his brother, his ploughboy and his God. His relationship with his Garcio, or ploughboy, is a source of much amusement. Cain berates his boy for his slowness and his insolence, while the latter continues to provoke his master by his sardonic remarks. Cain's offer to fight is exuberantly accepted by his boy, but they are interrupted by Abel who reminds his brother that it is time to offer a sacrifice to God. Cain sharply responds with an obscene remark which must have provoked
much raucous laughter among the members of the audience. Abel continues to prevail upon him, and although Cain swears profusely, he finally agrees to offer a portion of his crop. He chooses, however, two of his worst sheaves of grain, continuing grossly to berate both his brother and God in the devil's name. When God reproves him for his rebellious spirit and his insolence, Cain sarcastically replies:

Whi, who was that hob-over-the wall?
We! who was that who piped so small?
Com go we hens for perels all;
God is out of hys wit.18

When Abel's sacrifice burns clear, while his brother's only smokes and sputters, Cain's anger provokes him to fratricide. A concluding note of humour is provided after the murder, when as Cain laments his outcast state, his boy mocks him in asides to the audience.

Cain's obscene oaths, his assertions that the Almighty has lost his mind, and his later suggestion that God look for Abel in hell are all salient examples of demonic humour. By profanely diminishing the stature and might of the Divinity, and by reducing His all-seeing and all-knowing power to insanity, Cain's mocking blasphemies provide a vehicle of comic liberation for the audience. This liberation is only momentary, however, and the play ends with Cain's recognition of his eternal banishment from both God and his fellow-men. This is in keeping with the homiletic purpose of the mystery cycle plays.19 Also in keeping with this purpose is the fact that humour is directed derisively at Cain as well. Through the sardonic comments of Garcio, Cain becomes the target of much of the audience's laughter, besides providing an element of comic relief in his reviling of both God and his brother.
The most famous of the plays attributed to the Wakefield Master and perhaps, one of the greatest representatives of comedy in the English drama before the Renaissance is the Secunda Pastorum or the Second Shepherds' Play. As in The Killing of Abel, the central Biblical story, in this case, the adoration of the shepherds at the Nativity of Christ, is completely overshadowed by a combination of secular realism and robust farce. By far the greatest portion of the play is devoted to the story of Mak, a notorious sheep-thief, who steals a sheep from the shepherds and puts it in a cradle, pretending it is his infant son to whom his wife Gyll has just given birth. Mak's deception is ultimately discovered by the shepherds when the "child" sticks his snout out from the swaddling clothes; and in order to restore justice, the shepherds treat Mak very roughly by tossing him in a blanket.

The folk-tale analogues to this story have been pointed out by a number of critics,²⁰ but by far the most significant feature of this drama is the manner in which the Mak incident is skillfully interwoven with the traditional scheme of the shepherds' play--the adoration of the infant Christ by the shepherds. As the shepherds lie down to rest after their strenuous dealings with Mak, an angel appears, bidding them go to Bethlehem to behold the newly-born son of God. If the parody of the Nativity in the Mak story was not evident heretofore, it becomes at this point, unavoidable, as the shepherds, for the second time that evening, journey from the moors to look upon a newborn child. The Mak story, taken by itself, is an example of realistic English comedy. The three shepherds are drawn with contemporary realism and good-natured fun--they complain about the
weather, taxes, landlords, and their troubles with shrewish women and marriage. Similarly, the humour of the sheep-stealing incident is in itself irresistably funny. When, however, the story of Mak, Gyll, the shepherds and the "child" is perceived as an almost blasphemous parody of the manger scene which is described in the last few pages of the drama, the comedy takes on decidedly demonic overtones. The Biblical allusions in the Mak story are manifold. The "lamb," of course, has long been the symbol of Christ, and when the shepherds visit Mak's house, the third shepherd refers to the "child" as "that lytyll day-starne" (little day star)\(^2\) and offers a gift, in keeping with the traditional role of the shepherds at the Nativity. During her altercation with the three shepherds, Mak's wife prays that if she has beguiled them, she will eat the child "that lygys in this cradle," a statement which may be taken as a rather profane allusion to the sacred receiving of the Host during Communion.

If the humour contained in the tacit identification of Mak and Gyll with Joseph and Mary is, in itself, charged with an element of blasphemy, the demonic aspects of the comedy are even further reiterated by a number of specific allusions to the affiliation between Mak and the devil. When Mak knocks at the door of his house, his wife calls out: "Then may we see here / the deuill in a bande / Syr Gyle." Another obvious allusion occurs when Mak states that if his theft is discovered, he will be forced to cry "Out Haroo!"--the traditional roar of the devil on the medieval stage.\(^2\) In an article entitled "Satan as Everyshepherd," Jeffrey Helterman suggests that "Mak is Satanic in his claims of mastery,
in his role as magician, in the wolf imagery that surrounds him, and as a deceiver." Helterman further adds, however, that Mak's satanic embodiments are funny as a result of his ineptitude in carrying his scheme off. For Helterman it is Mak's failure which "reduces him and the devil that he represents from evil power to comic bungler." Although Helterman is correct in this assertion, he is approaching the relationship between comedy and evil in *The Second Shepherds' Play* from only one point of view -- the one discussed in the first chapter under the heading of "The comic aspects of the demonic realm." In other words, Mak in his representation of the devil is made ludicrous in order to fulfill the homiletic purpose, namely the degradation of the demonic character through the forces of humour. We have also seen how this comic degradation provides a certain "disarming mechanism" for the audience, a psychological distancing from the threat of anxiety and fear. What Helterman is ignoring, however, is that just as humour serves to degrade the forces of the demonic realm, it serves to undercut the realm of the sacred as well. This comic profanation of the sacred, which, as previously noted, takes place during the festive rites of almost all cultures and had a particular prominence in the folk celebrations of Medieval Europe, is definitely at work in most of the plays attributed to the Wakefield master. Although the comic-demonic character loses in the end -- Cain is an outcast; Mak is roughly tossed in a blanket by the avenging shepherds -- and the plays end on a traditionally devotional note, humorous sacrilege is, in fact, the predominant spirit in the greater portion of each work.
Hardin Craig, in his study of medieval religious drama in England, reproaches those critics who "are unwilling that mystery plays should be what they are, namely religious plays and want them to be, as they were not, farces, comedies, and romantic dramas." V. A. Kolve takes a similar stance in his discussion of religious laughter in the medieval cycles: "the drama texts themselves offer our best proof that neither in detail nor in spirit do the cycles display any tendency to mock, blaspheme, or make merry with the sacred characters of the story." According to Kolve, the comic action in the sheep-stealing incident of The Second Shepherds' Play has as its purpose "to parallel the central action of the play, to honour and adumbrate that action by playing it twice, in different modes." Again, we must confront the critical predilection to overstate the devotional purpose of the miracle cycles--to identify the serious religious themes and to dismiss or ignore the ambivalence towards these themes reflected in play after play. Contrary to Kolve's view, there is a discernible tendency in several of these dramatic works to mock, blaspheme, and make merry with the sacred characters. As we have seen with the Wakefield plays discussed above, God is, at one point, described as a "hob-over-the-wall" who has lost his mind, while Christ is associated with an ignoble, bleating lamb--a marvelous parody of religious symbolism. Surely, if the Mak story has as its purpose, as Kolve suggests, to honour and sanctify the central religious action of the play, it also quite clearly functions as an irreverent burlesque and desecration of that very same action.

It is also difficult to agree completely with William G. McCollom
who holds that in the religious drama "Christ and Mary are inviolate, but the men and women surrounding them . . . are not." In the York, Chester, Wakefield, and N-Towne plays dealing with the birth of Christ, Mary's virginity is comically called into question time and time again as Joseph has serious misgivings about his wife's pregnancy, and suspicions about his own cuckolded state. It is true that it is Joseph who is the comic character in all of these plays, and that Mary is generally treated with both pathos and pious dignity, but at the same time we must recognize that one of the reasons Joseph's doubts are so comic is that they are directed toward the concept of the "immaculate conception"--a tenet of the Christian creed which even devout believers have been known to question. In much the same way, the cycle plays dealing with Christ's trial and crucifixion are filled with a kind of macabre and barbarous humour. In the York Crucifixion (Play No. XXXV) the four soldiers take a fiendish delight in torturing Christ as they nail him to the Cross, which turns out to be slightly too large for Christ's arms to extend the distance between the augur-holes. The comedy is grimly irreverent as they stretch the body with a rope so that the limbs will reach the holes, and then raise the cross and drop it with a jolt, gleefully inflicting further pain upon the crucified man. Juxtaposed to the demonic merriment of the torturers is the poignant human anguish of Christ--an anguish which is only heightened in dramatic intensity by the savage comedy which has preceded it. Nevertheless, to a medieval audience accustomed to the sport and revelry which accompanied the event of a public execution, the dramatic presentation of Christ's crucifixion could also afford considerable
fun. A similar double view is reflected in the Wakefield Talent Play (Processus Talentorun), attributed to the Master, in which the three torturers and Pilate dice for the coat of the dead Christ. In both plays, it is of course the villains who are infernally comic, and Christ himself as a dramatic character is never presented in a humorous vein. The comic innuendo in many of the plays of the craft-cycles is, however, sacrilegious in spirit, and although it is short-lived and purged, ultimately, by devout doctrine at the end of the drama, the sacred characters themselves do not escape totally untainted.

The comic villains of the mystery cycles--Cain, Mak, Herod, Pilate, the torturers of Christ--all provided with their ranting, obscene oaths and irreverent horseplay, a source of fun and amusement for the audiences of early English drama. But we have yet to examine the contributions of the supreme representative of evil, the devil himself, to the development of demonic humour on the medieval stage. According to Cushman, "the character of the devil in the English Mysteries is almost entirely serious. This peculiarity is due, not only to the nature of the devil-scenes, which are, in themselves tragical, but also pre-eminently to the fact that the devil of the English stage is the creation, not of the people, but of theology." Cushman concedes, however, that a freer and more humorous treatment of this character occurs in the representations of some of the under-devils (if not Satan or Lucifer himself) and in the later interpolations and revision, particularly of the Wakefield and N-Towne cycles. While it is true that the devil in
the mystery plays was a traditionally humourless character who was frightening to the audiences, we should also recognize that he was, at the same time, even in the earliest plays decidedly laughable. Through his grotesque appearance, his obscenities, and his constant roaring and bel­ lowing, the devil in the cycle dramas depicting The Fall of Lucifer, The Fall of Man, and The Harrowing of Hell incited a kind of elementary humour.

In the Chester and York versions of The Fall of Lucifer, the devils are self-admiring and foolishly vain. The Wakefield Lucifer is even more absurdly foppish and pompously conceited; he sits on God's throne, inflated with his beauty and power, and bids that the world kiss his toe. In the N-Towne version, Lucifer's realization of his impending doom is accompanied by a mild obscenity:

Now to helle the wey I take,
In peyn evyr to be pyght. [fixed]
For fere of a fyre a fart I crake;
In helle donjoone myn dene is dyth. [den is ready]

In a number of plays, the devil's entrance and exit is marked by roars of "Out, Out," "Welaway," or "Harrow"--the latter being, as Cushman points out, a cry of old Norman origin which expresses dismay, consternation, or pain. The roaring and bellowing of the devils, which appears quite monotonous to the modern reader, was undoubtedly a comic convention highly popular with the medieval spectators. Another convention which apparently furnished a similar source of great audience appeal was the devil's costume. His appearance was usually grotesque--black, tattered, and frightening. He was generally equipped with a hairy black suit, a black mask and a club or stick which was employed in driving the
damned to Hell-Mouth. While the humour provoked by these conventions seems often inexplicable to the modern point of view, John B. Moore accounts for it by observing that today there are numerous opportunities "to corroborate the fact that spectators trained to laugh upon application of a certain stimulus will continue to laugh uncritically whenever it is applied. The old joke is the best joke to them."  

Most of the devil-humour in the mystery plays is, when it does occur, clearly stereotyped and, for the most part, unimaginatively imitative. It was not until the devil broke away from his traditional theological role that he became a humorously malevolent figure whose pranks, wit, and diabolical mischief anticipated the demonic comedy of his successor, the Vice. Before we turn to these later developments, however, we should recognize that the kind of devil-humour discussed to this point is, in fact, concomitant with the ecclesiastical purpose of the degrada­tion of evil through satiric laughter. The devils were made comic in both their silly vanity and their subsequent discomfiture in order to demonstrate that evil was folly and, hence, ludicrous. The element of entertainment is, of course, also present here—scenes of levity were permitted in order to entertain the audience and increase the attractiveness of religious edification. Moreover, in the conventional comic response elicited by the monstrous appearance of the devils and their ranting and raging, we can also perceive traces of the "disarming mechanism" previously discussed, in which laughter provides an anxiety-relieving effect from the menace of fear. It is interesting that the comic response directed towards the devils in the early mystery plays is
in accord with Saint Augustine's view that the devil was created by the Lord, not as a frightening monster but, rather, as a kind of foolish plaything specifically designed for the amusement of his angels:

Likewise, it is written in the Book of Job, where it speaks of the devil: "This is the beginning of the Lord's creation, which he made for the sport of His angels," which seems to agree with the psalm, where it is written: "Here is the dragon which Thou hast made to be a laughingstock."34

A freer and more individualized comic treatment is discernible, when the devil becomes a self-conscious humorist, a satirist rather than a target for satire, a clever comedian himself rather than a bungling laughingstock. The Wakefield Juditium or Doomsday Play, which deals with the final judgment, contains such a character--the devil Tutivillus who, along with his companions, presents what is, according to Cushman, except for a few traces here and there "the only devil humour in the Mysteries."35

There is some critical dispute as to whether the Doomsday Play is the work of one author, or whether certain portions represent later revisions, but at any rate, the comic-devil-scenes are generally attributed to the pen of the Master.36 The comedy in these scenes is directed satirically against the vices and follies of contemporary life. The two under-devils consult their rolls and registers; one of them has a "bag full of brefes" which contains lists of the sins of the time. The satire is particularly leveled at the "feminine gender" whose sins are assembled on more rolls than the second demon is capable of carrying. After enumerating the various wrong-doings of the condemned, the two devils conclude that if the Last Judgment had been delayed it would have been necessary to enlarge Hell. The social criticism becomes jocularly animated when Tutivillus
enters and introduces himself as the Chief Registrar, Tax-collector, and Master Lollard of Hell, who has been responsible for conducting more than ten thousand souls per hour into the nether regions. With graphic vigor, he describes the various sinners--the extortionists, usurers, "backbiters," gossips and scandalmongers, the adulterers, gamesters, "ale-sitters," and dicers. He dwells with particular comic emphasis on the faults of women--their vanities and deceits--and satirically sketches the foppery of the male coxcombs who strut in their finery while their children go hungry. The carnal abuses of both sexes are sharply depicted--those of the lechers and wenches--and Tutivillus borders on humorous obscenity as he picturesquely describes Nell's "smock" which is open behind anticipating the capricious gusts of a westerly wind. The demons disclose that business has been so heavy of late that the porter of Hell has had to work overtime--"up early and down late"--in order to process the throngs of condemned souls. After the Final Reckoning, however, the devil humour lapses into its more conventional form of roaring and shouting at the end of the play, as Tutivillus and his demon-companions drive the damned souls to Hell with malevolent joy. V. A. Kolve comments that at a recent production of the Wakefield Doomsday Play, the driving of the condemned into Hell was still exceedingly funny, even to a modern audience: "In part we enjoyed the way the devils rolled, shoved, pricked and tossed the damned into Hell Mouth unceremoniously, as one might toss coal into a furnace; but far more than that we enjoyed a comedy of victory." What is manifest here is, of course, yet another representation of the double-view, the vital ambivalence intrinsic to demonic comedy. From a
Christian point of view, the damned and the devils are foolish buffoons who behave stupidly, thereby provoking in the audience a kind of self-righteous laughter of derision. On the other hand, Tutivillus and his sub-demons are also skillful comedians in their own right, and consequently the laughter they incite is outwardly directed as well. In other words, the dragon which God has made to be a laughingstock, has become, paradoxically, a rival laughingstock-maker.

Another realistic and totally unconventional example of devil-humour occurs in a sixty-line passage found in some of the manuscripts of the Chester Plays at the end of The Harrowing of Hell. This passage is obviously a late interpolation, and it consists of a humorous interlude between Satan, his two sub-demons and an ale-woman, who has remained in Hell at the time of Christ's delivery of the souls. The devils are delighted that this unredeemed woman has been left behind, and they welcome her with zestful jubilation. One of them, in fact, decides that he will marry her:

Salthanas: Welckome, deare darling--to us, all three; Tho Jesus be gone with our meayne.

Second Demon: Welckome, dere ladye, I shall thee wedd!

Third Demon: Welckome, dere darling, to endless balle

This comic episode is clearly an extraneous addition to the play itself, and presents one of the only occasions in the British mysteries in which the drama does not close on a traditional religious note. Although J. C. Adams finds it to be "not of any special merit," it does illustrate the fact that the devil is breaking away from his conventional theological
Before we leave the question of demonic humour in the mystery plays, brief mention should be given to the characterization of the devil in the Digby Conversion of St. Paul and Mary Magdalene. These plays, which were probably not a part of a complete cycle but rather isolated dramatic presentations acted in small communities during the fifteenth century, are transitional in nature, providing an ostensible juncture between the mysteries and the morality play. The devil scenes in the Digby plays are considerably enlarged, and violence and sensation are prominently employed for intensified theatrical effect. The traditional crying and roaring of the devils is even further played up, and the special attraction of the Digby plays includes the use of fire as part of the devil's machinery. Almost every stage direction in the Conversion of St. Paul calls for fire, thunder, or both: "Here to enter a dyvel with thunder and fyre", and similarly: "Here shall entere another devyll callyd Mercury with a fyering, commyng in hast, crying and rorying" (p. 44). Similarly, another sensational use of fire-works occurs in Mary Magdalene when Satan and his assistants punish the Bad Angel and the Seven Sins by setting their house on fire. The character of the devil in the Digby group is more like that of Tutivillus or the demons at the end of the Chester Harrowing of Hell, than of the traditional devil of the mysteries. Boastful and happily complacent (at least until the respective conversions of Mary and Paul take place), the Digby devils play pranks, tell jokes, and indulge in a number of verbal puns and obscenities, anticipating, in many respects, the later stage-character of
the Vice. It is interesting that Mary Magdalene, which resembles the morality in its theme of temptation and fall, contains as characters the Seven Deadly Sins who are to appear, according to the stage direction, "arrayed like VII dylf" (p. 76) and are later explicitly referred to as "the VII dyllys" (p. 81). We shall return to this point when we discuss the ancestry of the Vice—whether this figure is a descendant of the devil or the Deadly Sins—but for the present it is sufficient to observe that while the Digby play employs the character of the devil in the role of tempter, Lewis Wager's morality play The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene of 1567 dispenses with the devil altogether, and employs instead the Vice in much the same manner.

Like Satan in the Digby Mary Magdalene, the devil in the early moralities is not the sole representative of evil but rather, he is joined by a number of personified human weaknesses and vices, often including among them the Seven Deadly Sins. The major purpose of the evil powers in morality drama was the temptation of man, and in order to understand both this thematic shift of emphasis and the observable increase in the number of characters associated with the demonic realm, we must turn to the origins of the morality play itself. Just as the mysteries emanated from the Church service of the early Middle Ages with their rudimentary dramatization of Scriptural events, so the moralities found, in the later Medieval period, a similar derivation from the allegorical didacticism which was employed to dramatize the pulpit sermon.

G. R. Owst, in Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, has shown how medieval preaching made dramatic use of allegory in the sermon
as it sought to present a vivid and often theatricalized warning against the evil powers which threatened man's salvation. The central subject matter of the morality play— the dramatic representation of the conflict between the personified virtues and vices for the possession of Mankind— was first dealt with in Christian literature by the fifth-century allegorical *Psychomachia* or *Conflict of the Soul* by Prudentius in which the contention is presented in a series of Homeric combats between the good and bad powers of the human soul. Although the *Psychomachia* was among the most frequently read works of the Medieval period, the allegorical battle between the virtues and the vices was not itself dramatized until the late fourteenth century. The first dramatization probably occurred in the now lost *Paternoster* plays, which Bernard Spivack describes as follows:

The earliest records of the performances of moralities in Europe are English, and they refer to *Paternoster* plays in which apparently the separate clauses of the Lord's Prayer were related to the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Christian Virtues, and dramatized in cyclical pageants that displayed these two sets of moral personifications in allegorical competition for the human soul. The existence of such a play at York is mentioned by Wyclif about 1376, and in it, according to a later document (1389), "all manner of vices and sins were held up to scorn, and the virtues were held up to praise." Because these *Paternoster* plays have not survived, the earliest extant examples of the morality play are the fragmentary *Pride of Life*, and *The Castle of Perseverance*, both of which belong to the first quarter of the fifteenth century. From then on, the morality play itself and its various dramatic offshoots and transformations enjoyed tremendous popularity on the English stage for almost a hundred and fifty years.

The allegorical contention between the virtues and the vices in
the morality provided, at first, only limited opportunity for imaginative development. The plots were extremely stereotyped, and the personified abstractions of good and evil, schematically rigid in characterization. A certain dimension of creativity was, however, afforded not only by the potentiality for narratives no longer confined to Biblical stories and legends of the saints, but also by the fact that the element of entertainment was ultimately focused on the evil characters some of whom became realistically humanized as they resorted to all kinds of pranks, obscenities, and slapstick brawling in their high-spirited attempts to ensnare and debauch their human victim. While it is probably indebted equally to the sermon and the *Psychomachia* in its derivation, the morality play differs essentially from both in two significant aspects--firstly, the battle of the vices and virtues does not take place within the human soul, but rather centers upon the temptation, subsequent fall into sin, and final redemption of Mankind, who is presented not as a personification but as a universalized character type in his own right, and as such, is representative of both human weakness and moral worth; and secondly, while the evil characters are given a decidedly serious homiletic purpose, namely the temptation of man, at least some of them display tendencies which are markedly comic in nature.

In the morality plays written before 1500, most notably the Macro plays, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, and *Mankind*, the devil is a prominent figure whose major purpose is to bring about the damnation of mankind. Although there are scattered segments of comedy present in *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Wisdom*, the devil-humour in both these plays
is almost completely overshadowed by the serious homiletic theme. In *The Castle* (c. 1425), the devil, Belial appears in an allegorical trilogy with Mundus (the World) and Caro (the Flesh). To this trio of overlords, the Seven Deadly Sins owe their allegiance. The humour associated with these evil powers is pretty well confined to the traditional ranting, boasting, and foul language which we have seen in the mysteries; there is however, a blend of horror and comedy when Belial enters to lead the assault on the castle (where the forces of virtue have housed Humanum Genus) with the conventional fireworks burning in his hands, his ears, and his "arse" as well. Belial does not at any time reflect the dramatic characteristics of the jovial devil. He is, for the most part, grim and malevolent, the dangerous enemy of mankind. It is interesting that the most prominent comic character in *The Castle* is Detractio or Backbiter, who is neither a devil nor one of the deadly sins, but rather the messenger of the World. Detractio seems to glean much pleasure in backbiting for its own sake, and expresses his gleeful satisfaction when even his own cohorts are thrashed and abused. When Belial beats Pride, Envy, and Wrath because they have allowed Humanum Genus to escape, Detractio chuckles at their distress:

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Ya' for God this was well go,
Thus to work with Backbiting
I work both wrack and woe
And make each man the other to dynge. 43
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He then addresses the audience directly, referring to them as fellow-backbiters and urging them to learn from his example so there will be dissension between brother and sister, and so that they will spur one man to kill the next. Like the later Vice, Detractio is essentially the
amoral intriguer, delighting equally in the discomfiture of the agents of good and evil. We are also reminded of the Vice by Detractio's intimate discourse with the audience inviting their complicity in his moral (or rather amoral) stance. Similarly, in his role of messenger he is one of the prime propellants of the action of the play in the same manner as the Vice, in the later morality, was responsible for conducting the dramatic intrigue.

In the second of the Macro moralities, Wisdom or Mind, Will and Understanding (c. 1460), there are very few discernible comic notes. Like Belial, Lucifer is not a comic devil. Although he wears the clothes of a gallant beneath his devil's costume, there is implicit in all his actions an obvious hate for mankind and a powerful rage which is expressed in loud boasts about his future triumphs over his human victims. A single rather incongruous comic incident, however, accompanies his exit in the middle of the play. Having announced how, by craft, he wins over many a soul from Heaven to Hell, he goes roaring off the stage, taking with him a "shrewd [naughty] boy," presumably from the audience. In Cushman's view, this incident "does not at all correspond with Lucifer's role in this play and is certainly to be regarded as an interpolation."44

If the comic element is not very prevalent in the first two of the Macro plays, the third, Mankind (c. 1475), certainly overcompensates for what the earlier moralities lack in the way of demonic humour. According to Douglas Boughner, Mankind "shows what happens to the moral fibre of this drama when, the inn having replaced the church as the theatre, the audience flocked to hear a joke and not a sermon."45 This is not to
say that the play is devoid of serious homiletic intent. The conventional structure of the morality is, in fact, retained. Mankind, the protagonist, is tempted, falls, repents, and is finally redeemed from the degenerate forces of evil by Mercy, a priest who is the only personification of virtue in this play. But within this structure, the dramatic action is immoderately subversive of both morality and religious veneration as the vulgarity and raucous humour of the demonic characters completely undermine the moral and devotional framework upon which the play is ostensibly built.

As in the Digby plays and the two earlier Macro plays, the devil is not the sole representative of the demonic realm, but Titivillus in Mankind shares his role of temptation with four comic rogues—Mischief, Nought, Now-a-days and New-guise. These figures are not the conventionalized personifications of evil (their names suggest playful frivolity rather than moral sin); they are, instead, realistic, medieval lower world types—Now-a-days is a church-robber, New-guise is a horse thief, and Mischief is an escaped convict. The play opens with Mercy's appeal to the audience to persevere in good works and not to surrender to temptation, so that on the Day of Judgment they may be counted with the "corn" which will be saved, and not with the "chaff" which will be burnt. Mischief breaks in, and in a burlesque of Mercy's speech which has been full of Latinisms, puns on the metaphor of the corn and the chaff, ultimately demonstrating that the latter has as much use as the former. Mischief is, of course, pure "chaff," and his main purpose at this point is the "chaffing" of Mercy. He is soon joined in this attempt by his
three subordinates—Nought, New-guise and Now-a-days—who enter with their minstrels and try to persuade Mercy to dance. Mercy refuses to join them in their revelry and disdains them in his lofty and pedantic manner:

Mercy is my name and my denomynacyon
I conseyne (conceive) you have but a
lytell fairs (force) in my communycacyon. 46

New-guise contemptuously ridicules Mercy for his "Englysch Latin" (l. 123) and Nought utters a rather graphic obscenity and challenges Mercy to translate it into ecclesiastical terminology:

Now open your sachel with Latin wordis,
And say me this in clerical manner. (11. 128-29)

After being barraged with more insults and obscenities, Mercy finally succeeds in convincing the four rascals to leave, and in a short soliloquy, warns the audience of the Final Judgment that awaits these wanton pranksters.

The first portion of Mankind is, in effect, a concise statement of the dramatic conflict of the entire play. Mercy's solemn preachings open and close the section, as they initiate and conclude the larger drama. Although the forces of evil are, ultimately, driven off the stage, Mercy's victory is a dubious one for he has been made ridiculous as the target of the rogues' jibes, profanities, and sarcastic remarks. His tedious sermonizing and his propensity for Latinisms has been irreverently mocked; and moreover, the contrast between his sententious speech and the crude vitality and exuberant coarseness of the rogues' language only serves to direct the sympathies of the audience away from, rather
than toward, the forces of virtue. The humour of Mischief, Nought, New-
guise and Now-a-days is clearly demonic in nature. It is grossly subver-
sive and certainly functions so as to provide the audience with a
liberating belly-laugh directed against the strictures of the ascetic
ideal. Furthermore, just as the rascals reappear a few pages later to
continue their beleaguering of Mercy and his charge, Mankind, so at the
end of the play, the audience is left with the feeling that the victory
over the evil powers is only temporary. Comic vice in Mankind is irre-
pressible. The pranks, noisy banter, blasphemous mockery and rough-and-
tumble horseplay of the demonic figures not only serve as a source of
great theatrical delight, but also contravene the homiletic theme that
virtue is always preferable to vice. Mercy is a static figure, colour-
less and tediously verbose. While he is able only to preach, the evil
powers exuberantly sing, dance, brawl, and conduct their merry intrigues,
thereby demonstrating that although the path of virtue may be superior
in every-day life, the course of vice is, at least from the theatrical
point of view, undoubtedly the more attractive one.

The movement of the second section of the play is very similar.
Mankind, a farmer, who is attempting, under the guidance of Mercy, to
till the soil and lead a life of good works, is tormented by the four
pranksters who ridicule him as he toils with his spade. Like that of
Mercy, the speech of Mankind is bombastically pious, and as A. W.
Pollard comments, "in the wonders of his 'Englysch Latin' [he] leaves
Mercy altogether in the shade." Again, in direct contrast, Nought,
New-guise, and Now-a-days invite the audience to join them in a song
so filthy that J. C. Adams has omitted it from his edition of the play, deeming it "unprintable." We might further observe that not only is the song uncommonly obscene but also it concludes with a sacrilegious parody of the sacred words, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Mankind, no longer able to countenance the harassment and badgering, finally beats the tormenters from the stage with his spade. Although he and the doctrine of good works, which he is, at this point, espousing, are victorious, New-guise's comic clamour bemoaning the state of his battered "jewels" is the most memorable part of the skirmish.

Once more the defeat of the demonic figures is only temporary, for Titivillus, whom we are later told "sygnyfies the fend of helle" (1. 879), soon enters and announces to the audiences his plans to bring about Mankind's fall from piety. He is extremely clever in carrying out his intrigue as he buries a plank of wood in the ground making it impossible for Mankind to continue tilling the soil, steals his spade, and interrupts him during his prayers by profanely suggesting that "nature compels" (1. 553) the young farmer to relieve himself. When Mankind leaves the stage to "go do that needis must be done" (1. 556), Titivillus steals his prayer beads and asks the audience's approval for the considerable skill he has demonstrated. When Mankind returns, he reflects his waning piety by deciding to go to sleep rather than continue with his prayers. Titivillus then whispers into the ear of the sleeping man that Mercy has stolen a horse and now "rydeth over the galous" (1. 591), and recommends that Mankind seek the forgiveness of Mishchief, Nought, Now-a-days, and New-guise. Having "brought Mankynde to myscheff
and to schame" (1. 599), Titivillus bids farewell to the audience and leaves the stage.

Like his predecessor of the same name in the Wakefield Doomsday, Titivillus is an authentically comic devil. He indulges in the occasional obscenity, blasphemously blesses his four subordinates with his left hand, cracks jokes [for example, he sarcastically informs the audience that "the Devil is dead" (1. 586)], and contrives several pranks in his attempts to bring about the downfall of Mankind. We are left with the impression that the actions of Titivillus, unlike those of the other devils and most of the allegorical representatives of evil in the early moralities, are not prompted by his conventional role as the Archenemy of God and man. Rather, he delights so heartily in the cleverness of his intrigues, it appears that he is in the business of temptation more out of the pure fun and sport of it, than out of any firm moral allegiance to the perpetration of evil. Having fulfilled his promise to the audience of providing them with "good sport" (1. 569), he departs from the stage, his final comment being "I have don my game" (1. 598, emphasis mine).

Spivack sees Titivillus as "a figure in transition from devil to vice," and we should note here that the leading demonic figure of Mankind is really the last example of the self-consciously comic devil in the morality tradition. Medwall's Nature (c. 1500) is the first morality that does not include the character of the devil, and from this time on, this figure appears very rarely on the English stage. While a few of his subsequent appearances contain humorous elements, the devil, when comic, becomes a stupid buffoon who functions more as the target for the jokes
of the Vice, than as a self-cognizant comedian or jovial instigator of moral corruption. At the close of the fifteenth century, English drama moved out of the sphere of other-worldly Christian doctrine, and into the realm of secular life. Because the issues of heaven and hell no longer were the primary ethical concerns of the new dramatists, the devil, the traditional theological Adversary, lost his domain and could no longer function as a viable theatrical personage. Accordingly, both the roaring Satans, Lucifers, and Belials, and the wily, jocular Titivilluses, all of whom were immensely popular with the medieval audiences, ultimately disappeared from the stage. The diabolical humour they reflected in both the mysteries and the early moralities was, however, taken over by another far more human figure, a comic villain who dominated the stage for the greater part of the sixteenth century. This figure was, of course, the Vice, and a discussion of his dramatic character, its derivation and various manifestations, will be the primary focus of the following chapter.
Notes for Chapter II


2 One of the few versions of the *Quem Quaeritis* preserved from England is that from the *Regularis Concordia* of St. Ethelwood, which was in use at Winchester Cathedral at the end of the tenth century. Ethelwood's instructions to the Benedictines for the presentation of the Sepulchre trope included the suggestion that it be performed with both costumes and increased mimesis. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, II, 14-21, 306-9; Young, pp. 249-52, 581-83; Craig, p. 33.

3 *The Medieval Stage*, II, 10.

4 *Feeling and Form*, p. 33.

5 See James K. Feibleman, *In Praise of Comedy*, p. 34, for a discussion of the influence of Fescinine fertility rites on the development of Roman comedy.

6 *The Medieval Stage*, I, 94.

7 Ibid., pp. 95-99 ff.


9 *The English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans*, p. 15.

10 Ibid., p. 19.

11 *The Medieval Stage*, I, 90.


13 Ibid., p. 70. He is particularly convincing when he connects the ambivalences of Medieval drama to the juxtaposition of religious adoration and blasphemous clowning discernible in the "Gothic" paintings of Bosch, Bruegel, and other artists of the period.

14 See Chapter I, pp. 15-17 above.


Cushman sees the identification of Grendel with Cain as "an interesting instance of an early contact of heathen and Christian demonology." *The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare*, p. 3.


In Kolve's view, the play's "lesson is about murder, contemporary as well as historical; about unregenerate man in any age, cut off from God; and in a smaller, less important way but also wholly contemporary, about men who cheat the Church of its tithing." *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 105.


Towneley Plays, ed. Pollard, I, 577.


*Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, XII, 525.

Ibid.

*English Religious Drama*, p. 255.


Ibid., p. 173.

"From Dissonance to Harmony," p. 77.

Cushman, p. 16.

Ibid.


Cushman, p. 28.

34 The City of God, Bk. XI.17.

35 Cushman, p. 34.


37 The Play Called Corpus Christi, p. 141.


39 Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas, p. 190.


41 (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 56-109, 526-47.

42 The Allegory of Evil, p. 60.


44 Cushman, p. 47.

45 Braggart in Renaissance Comedy, p. 150.


48 Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas, n. 1, p. 311.

49 The Allegory of Evil, p. 125.
Chapter III

THE TWO FACES OF THE VICE

Two plays from the early years of the sixteenth century, Henry Medwall's *Nature* (c. 1500) and John Rastell's *The Nature of the Four Elements* (c. 1518) represent the transitional form of the morality play in early Tudor drama. This new humanistic morality, or moral interlude, as it is sometimes called,¹ reflects the secular spirit of the Renaissance -- God and the realm of Heaven are replaced by the personification of Nature; the virtues go by such new names as Reason and Studious Desire, and are opposed to the vices of the "new learning" such as Sensual Appetite and Ignorance. The moralities which follow *Nature* and *The Four Elements* continue to graft a variety of secular themes upon the didacticism of the conventional temptation plot. Spivack summarizes the effect of the "secular revolution" on the development of the moralities in the sixteenth century:

> From the arena of Christian metaphysics the action moves . . . into the arena of the world, and finds habitation even more local in England or London. The single transcendental subject is replaced by a world of particulars--by detailed issues respecting the Reformation, youthful delinquency, education, political unity, social justice, national prosperity, domestic happiness, and other topics equally specialized and secular. Simultaneously the ascetic ideal withdraws before the advance of moral standards in and of this world.²

Accompanying the secularization of the morality was an increased emphasis on the element of entertainment, which resulted in the greater prevalence of the elements of humour and farce. This tendency is already operative in *Mankind* which, in Chambers' view, "is a very degraded type
of morality aiming at entertainment rather than edification. As we have seen, the forces of comedy since the earliest beginnings of English drama served both the edifying purpose of the clergy and the unregenerate inclinations of the folk. This duality of purpose was sustained with various transformations and shifts of emphasis in the new moralities of the sixteenth century. The conclusion of the Prologue to *The Four Elements* is, in fact, an affirmation of the principles of *utile et dulce*:

\[
\ldots \text{because some folk be little disposed} \\
\text{To sadness, but more to mirth and sport,} \\
\text{This philosophical work is mixed} \\
\text{With merry concerts, to give men comfort,} \\
\text{And occasion to cause them to resort} \\
\text{To hear this matter, whereto if they take heed,} \\
\text{Some learning to them thereof may proceed.}
\]

Here Rastell is expressing his hope that a measure of comic relief will induce his audience to pay attention as well to the serious didactic concerns of the play. The didacticism of the "new learning" differed profoundly from the other-worldly concerns of the Christian myths; nevertheless, the same purpose underlined the concession to comedy made by the playwrights of both groups. There is also discernible in the drama of the Tudor period a growing propensity toward the presentation of comedy for its own sake, not merely as a "leavening agent" or a "sweetener" for the moral pill, but simply because it was a dramatic form which reflected the popular taste. Even Rastell, in the explanatory note which accompanies the title of *The Four Elements*, suggests that this new and "mery" interlude can be considerably shortened by omitting much of the non-humorous material: "if ye list, ye may leave out much of the sad [serious] matter." In much the same way the prologue of the later
morality, *Like Will to Like*, expresses Fulwell's intent to pursue the favour of his audience through mirth:

> And because divers men of divers minds be
> Some do matters of mirth and pastime require:
> Other some are delighted with matters of gravity,
> To please all men is our author's chief desire
> Whereforth mirth with measure to sadness is annexed:
> Desiring that none here at our matter will be perplexed.  

In these lines there is no suggestion of the utilization of merriment to enhance the edifying message of the work, but rather there is only an expression of the author's concern that the disparate demands of the playgoers be satisfied.

The humorous portions of the sixteenth-century morality, as in the drama that had preceded it, were largely given over to the characters who were aligned with the side of evil. *Nature* is the first morality without a devil, and with the disappearance of the Prince of Darkness from the English stage, the remaining personifications of evil (no longer representative so much of metaphysical evil as of human weakness and man's baser inclinations) were increasingly relied upon to provide amusement. We should remember that the devil was not the only comic figure in early English drama, and he shared his role of comic villainy with a host of human characters including Cain, Mak, Herod, and the torturers of Christ. Moreover, some of the sub-demons and minor evil personifications in the later interpolations to the mysteries and in the early morality plays, reflect a spirit that is decidedly comic in nature; these include such characters as Satan's subordinates in the appendage to the Chester *Harrowing of Hell*; the two lesser demons in the *Wakefield Doomsday*; Detractio in *The Castle of Perseverance*; and Mischief,
Nought, New-guise and Now-a-days in Mankind. The forces of comedy in the morality tradition of the sixteenth century continued to be associated with the side of evil; and while the comic element initially appeared diffused (although usually more prominent in one wicked character than another), it gradually became concentrated in one figure who ultimately developed into the official perpetrator of both fun and damnation, the stock figure widely known as the Vice.

At this point we should distinguish the word "vice" in its lower case from its upper case designation of the Vice, himself. In the morality tradition, "vice," from the Latin "vitium," was the term used to refer in a general and collective sense to the allegorical personifications of evil, including the Seven Deadly Sins and various other iniquities. In The Castle of Perseverance, one part of the action is described in the following manner: "Thus vycys agens vertues fytyn ful snelle" (1. 70); and in a document describing the Pater Noster play at York, we are informed that "all manner of vices and sins were held up to scorn." Since the side of personified evil was represented by characters generally designated as "vices," it seems both natural and expedient that the character who became dramatically the most important of the personifications of evil would be designated as "the Vice." The first appearance of a dramatic character officially labelled "the Vice" occurs in two plays by John Heywood--Play of the Weather and Play of Love--both of which were printed in 1533. In order to investigate this figure's emergence, we will first look at the elements of comedy reflected by the vice characters in the Tudor moralities which immediately preceded Heywood's plays.
Nature by Henry Medwall is a morality in the traditional "ages of man" pattern; it presents the history of Man from infancy to old age, his fall from innocence, his temptation into a life of debauchery by the allegorical representatives of evil, and his ultimate repentance in old age. The vice role is dispersed in the play among Sensuality, the chief agent on the side of evil, Mundus, Worldly Affection and the Seven Deadly Sins. Pride is the most important of this latter group of vices, and is, at one point, identified as "radix viciorum" which Sensuality humorously translates as the "root of all virtue." There is some disagreement among drama critics concerning which of the evil characters is the principal vice, Cushman designating the role to Sensuality, while Spivack and Boughner consider Pride to be the most likely contender. Cushman calls Sensuality "the Vice" (in the upper case) even though he is not explicitly identified as such in the text of the play; Boughner does the same with Pride, while Spivack more prudently includes Pride's role in his discussion of early examples of "the doctrinal and dramatic superiority of one vice over his fellows." The humour of the play, at any rate, revolves primarily around the evil characters who engage in much bawdy language and verbal wit in their temptation of Man. Sensuality directs a great deal of humorous satire against the Church, informing Man that his former whore, Margery, "hath entred into a religious place" (p. 92), meaning "a brothel," and at a later point he informs Envy that Covetise "dwelt with a priest . . . / For he loveth well / Men of the Church and they him also" (p. 119). Sensuality in many respects functions in a manner similar to that of the later Vice--he is basically
amoral, as reflected in the allegorical meaning of his name; he is probably the most important character in the play; and in his roles as both tempter and fun-maker, he indulges in obscenity and great wit. Pride, too, reflects aspects of the Vice-role. The most important of the Deadly Sins, he is represented as a swaggering dandy, dressed ostentatiously in the latest fashions, his sword so heavy, that he requires the services of a page to carry it. He particularly foreshadows the Vice in his relationship with the audience, informing them of his schemes to bring about the downfall of Man, and subtly implicating them in his profligacy by feigning ignorance and asking the men in the crowd the way to the brothel:

Now must I go to the stewes, as fast as I may
To fetch this gentleman; but sirs! I say,
Can any man here tell me the way?
For I came never here.
Ye know the way, Parde! of old;
I pray tell me which way shall I hold.

(pp. 101-2)

Replacing the military battle between the vices and the virtues of the Psychomachia and early morality (most notably The Castle) is a structure of intrigue in which the vices of the play attempt to corrupt man through deception and verbal cunning. Nature reflects the device which is to be repeated over and over again in the later moralities, of having the vices disguise themselves by assuming "reputable" names in order to deceive Man and avoid detection. Pride becomes "Worship," Gluttony becomes "Good-Fellowship," and so forth. Although a pitched battle never takes place, a "fray" is planned, and Gluttony, prefiguring Falstaff, enters "with a cheese and botell" (p. 112), his only "harness" for the impending combat.
According to A. P. Rossiter, in the Tudor period "comic drama can be watched getting nearer and nearer to the seething London streets," and in *Nature*, there is much of the spirit of the tavern and the "stews." Indeed, this spirit is suggested right from the beginning of the play, where Nature bids Man make the journey of life governed jointly by Reason and Sensuality. Although Reason is deputized as Man's chief guide, the necessity for man's expression of his instinctual passions is recognized and overtly supported.

A similar spirit informs Rastell's *The Four Elements* in which the chief vice is Sensual Appetite, who is Humanity's tutor in the dissipations of tavern and town. Convincing Humanity to leave the droning geographical lessons of Studious Desire, Sensual Appetite takes him to a tavern. He calls the Taverner, orders wine and dinner and engages their host in a bout of verbal wit. He then decides that more company is needed and proposes to introduce Humanity to some of the town wenches:

> Then we will have little Nell,  
> A proper wench she danceth well,  
> And Jane with the black lace,  
> We will have bouncing Bess also,  
> And two or three proper wenches mo.  
> Right fair and smoother of face.  

(p. 22)

Like Margery in *Nature*, "little Nell," "Jane," and "bouncing Bess" are never actually presented on the stage; their names suggest, however, that the emphasis on secularization has influenced the characterization of the morality, moving away from the depiction of allegorical abstractions towards the creation of more humanized character types.

Sensual Appetite, like Sensuality in *Nature*, is representative of
the vice-character as riotous man, and anticipates the later Vice in
several aspects. His entrance is rowdy and marked by a mild obscenity
and a merry song. He is both a tempter and a gay prankster, as well as
a master of verbal wit. Moreover, in his bragging description of the
"shrewd fray" in which he has fought, there are readily discernible
Falstaffian antecedents. Swearing by "Gog's nails" and "Gog's body," he
boastfully answers Ignorance's question, "Hast thou any of them slain?"

Yea, I have slain them every man,
Save them that ran away.
(p. 37)

As Ignorance continues to interrogate him, it becomes apparent that all
had run away with the exception of one man, whose leg Sensual Appetite
cut off. He finally admits that he would have cut off his head as well,
if someone else had not previously accomplished that feat.

It is interesting that in keeping with the growing humanistic
trend of the morality, Sensual Appetite is a vice not to spiritual virtue,
but rather to the secular virtues of knowledge and moderation. The
homiletic message of the play is given in the last speech of Natura
Naturata who advises Humanity against the over-indulgence of the senses:

Though it be for thee full necessary
For thy comfort sometime to satisfy
Thy sensual appetite,
Yet it is not convenient for thee
To put therein thy felicity
And all thy whole delight.
(p. 45)

An even more pointed emphasis on the necessity for temperance and
moderation marks Skelton's Magnificence in which a prince is tempted from
the rule of Measure, the chief representative of virtue, by a number of
allegorical personifications of courtly evil. The implied target is Cardinal Wolsey and Skelton's veiled purpose is presumably to warn the young King Henry VII against the extravagance and excess of Wolsey's policy. What particularly concerns us here is that the vice-role is divided between four evil courtiers—Counterfeit Countenance, Crafty Conveyance, Cloaked Collusion, and Courtly Abusion—and two fool figures—Fancy and his brother Folly. The four rogues who comprise the former group of vices are primarily tempters and schemers. Although they participate in some humorous interchanges and utter obscene oaths, they are, above all, dedicated to their allegorical roles as evil intriguers. The theme of deception is particularly manifest in this play, as almost all the vice characters disguise themselves and assume respectable pseudonyms. Cloaked Collusion particularly reveals the ambiguous and double-sided nature of the evil characters as he declares himself to the audience: "Two faces in a hood covertly I bear," and "Double Dealing and I be all one."13

This double-visaged aspect grew to be definitive of the Vice, and it stems, at least in part, from the dual function of his role—that of fun-maker and instigator of corruption. In Magnificence, both groups of characters aligned with the forces of evil, the four courtiers and the two fools, display both aspects of the vice role, but in the former group the intrigue and dissembling is emphasized, while in the case of Fancy and Folly, the role of fun-making is predominant. As R. L. Ramsay points out in the Introduction to his edition of the play, Fancy and Folly are representative of the two types of professional court fools. Fancy, a
man "so lytell of stature" (1. 522), is apparently a dwarf, and much is made of his weak-brained and feeble-minded nature. He, according to Ramsay, is the "natural" fool, while Folly, like Feste and Touchstone, is an "artificial" fool, a professional court jester. In contrast to his "brainsick" brother, Folly is a shrewd and extremely witty fellow. He is the self-conscious fun-maker who acknowledges that it is his job to reduce everyone around him to the folly which he allegorically represents. Folly is basically amoral; he makes even his evil cohorts the butts of his jests. He cleverly beguiles Crafty Conveyance, beating him in a wager and divesting him of his coat. Fancy, too, is the target for a number of Folly's pranks and mocking humour. In a comic exchange, Folly sells his brother his mangy pet dog, flagrantly cheating him in the bargain. When Crafty Conveyance acclaims Folly as a fool "that hast no peer" (1. 1196), the latter explains in much the same manner as Lear's fool, that he is not a fool at all, but rather he makes fools of all men, regardless of social stature:

Nay, it is I that foles can make;  
For he be cayser or he be kynge  
To fellowshyp with Foly I can hym brynge.  

(11. 1214-16)

In Skelton's depiction of the two fools, both elements of comedy and evil are intertwined. As Ramsay observes:

[The] "Vices" Fancy and Folly, as we have seen are carefully drawn fools; but they also fit into the allegorical scheme of the play, and it is important not to neglect this side of their portraiture. Fancy, or capricious self-indulgence is the cardinal sin of the play; when Magnificence yields to that, all his subsequent degradation follows as a natural result. Its last stage is the embracing of Folly. Despite his scatter-brained disposition of the "natural," Fancy is, in
fact, the prime schemer in the play. He is the first to gain admission into the favour of the prince, and it is he who ushers in the four evil sycophants who further tempt Magnificence, and bring him to his ruin. On the other hand, while Folly shares in his brother's intrigue and temptation, he is, above all, a comic character whose prime job is to incite laughter. In the later morality, the demands of both compression and dramatic unity required the two roles—malevolent intriguer and fun-maker—to be fused in one character, namely the Vice: Skelton's play is, however, significant in its presentation of the various potentialities for the Vice role. This spectrum of characterization ranges from the emphasis on conspiracy and deception reflected by the four evil courtiers, to the median role held by Fancy as both the prime mover of the intrigue and the dim-witted "natural" or buffoon, and finally to the jesting antics of Folly who, in his amorality and shrewd wit, approaches the role of the pure fool and is responsible for most of the comedy of the play.

The remaining moralities before 1533 can be quickly discussed. In *Mundus et Infans* (The World and the Child), the vice role is sustained almost entirely by Folly, who despite his name is more of a tempter than a fool figure. His entrance is raucous—full of noisy bluster and indecent language. He succeeds in tempting Manhood away from Conscience by offering to be his servant, and then leads him to London "to learn revel," by indulging his baser passions in dining, drinking, and whoring at the taverns and stews. The derivation of the chief vice from a composite of the Seven Deadly Sins is at one point in this play overtly asserted. Conscience instructs Manhood that he abstain from Folly, and when Manhood
asks, "what thing callest thou folly," Conscience replies:

Sir, it is Pride, Wrath and Envy,
Sloth, Covetous, and Gluttony,
Lechery the seventh is,
These seven sins I call folly.

(p. 182)

Like Sensuality and Sensual Appetite, Folly is representative of the riotous vice character who tempts man to give free reign to his senses and natural inclinations. It is also worth noting that as a result of the new spirit of secularization, with its emphasis on the material world, the tavern and the stews have replaced Hell as the seat of the demonic realm. Furthermore, as in the three plays previously discussed, the vice-role is directed toward the corruption of youth, a motif which is to be repeated in almost all of the dramas and novels which will be discussed in the second half of this dissertation.

The Interlude of Youth, as the title implies, is a morality also concerned with the moral delinquency of the younger generation. The vice-role is shared by Riot, Pride, and Lechery. Riot, a thief who has recently escaped from Newgate (like Mischief in Mankind), plays the conventional vice-role of the dissolute or "riotous" man, as his name would suggest. His entrance is marked by both bluster and comic nonsense. In answer to Youth's query "What brought thee hither today," Riot replies, "That did my legs, I tell thee." The tavern scene, by now a stereotyped comic situation, is again central to this play, and Riot leads Youth there to have a good time drinking, wenching and carousing.

A similar atmosphere of revelry and debauchery pervades Hicks-corner, which like Mankind appears to have been designed to demonstrate
the dramatic popularity of unregenerate vice. The virtuous characters Piety, Freewill, and Contemplation are bland figures, rather uninteresting in their piety and edification, and are completely overshadowed by the rowdiness and bawdy humour of the three sensual roisterers, Freewill, Imagination and Hickscorner. This play is extremely unusual in the morality tradition because the temptation motif is totally lacking, and the character representing Mankind is either absent or already so corrupt as to be morally indistinguishable from the vice characters. Hickscorner is the most likely candidate for the chief vice-role of the play. He is a sailor and a seasoned traveller, and he amuses the other vices with his account of his recent voyages replete with the conventional tales of debauchery at the taverns and brothels. Like Mischief and Riot, he too has spent time at Newgate, and it is becoming evident that the prison, as well as the tavern and the brothel, is emerging as another image of the underworld, the secularized version of the demonic realm. The central comic action in the play involves a rowdy dagger fight among the vices, and the baiting of Pity, a scene in which the three roisterers abandon their quarrelling and join forces to mock and deride Pity, and set him in the stocks. The latter situation is present as well in Youth where Riot and Pride bind Charity in chains when he attempts to prevent them from leading Youth to the tavern, and to a lesser extent in Mankind where Mercy is monstrously ridiculed by the four rogues. This pattern is commensurate with the schematic structure of the morality dating back to the Psychomachia, and presenting the combat between the vices and virtues. The motif of military confrontation in the early morality (as best
exemplified by the pitched battle in *The Castle*) has, however, been gradually replaced by verbal battles of derision between the vices and the virtues, battles of intrigue, scenes of baiting and stocking, and the rowdy quarrels and brawling horseplay among the vices themselves. It must be remembered, however, that each allegorical representative of evil, in his original homiletic conception, was a military soldier on the side of the forces of Hell. Although the dagger of lathe became, ultimately, the only remaining symbol of the vice's demonic armament, this figure continues to be an enemy to the restraints of all moral ideals, and therein lies a great deal of his comic power.

As we approach 1533, the date of Heywood's two plays in which the theatrical label "the Vice" occurs for the first time, the morality play has not as yet consolidated its various allegorical representatives of evil into a single vice-role. From our examination of some of the plays of the early Tudor period, however, it is apparent that the drama is on the verge of elevating one of the vices into a position of dramatic prominence. Spivack, in his chapter entitled "The Emergence of the Vice," discusses what he calls the "führer prinzip" among the vices, which is discernible in the moralities of the first half of the sixteenth century:

The crux of the development we are discussing exists in the fact that one of the vices is almost always distinguished from the others as their immoral superior and dramatic leader. He is captain of the forces of evil and they are his privates. When they contest his supremacy or show him insufficient deference, he puts them down with threats and blows, producing the inveterate quarrel of the vices along with its homiletic purpose, the exposition of who is top dog in the hierarchy of evil.

Within this context then, it is not surprising that as the role of this "immoral superior" increased in dramatic prominence, the roles of the
other allegorical representatives diminished accordingly, nor that the theatrical designation "the Vice," distinguishing the leader on the side of evil from his subordinates, began to appear in the cast lists, the stage directions and even in the titles of the later moralities.

What is somewhat puzzling, however, is the fact that this theatrical label makes its first appearance in Heywood's Plays of Weather and Love, both of which are not moralities at all but rather didactic social comedies depicting class-types as opposed to abstract personifications of the categories of good and evil. This fact has contributed to much of the critical dispute over the origins of the Vice, a number of scholars employing Heywood's "unvicious" Vices as a basis for the argument that the Vice initially developed outside the morality tradition from the fool or popular stage clown, and that he was largely imported into the later morality in order to provide its comedy. On the other hand, Spivack, commenting on the overzealousness of some critics in emphasizing the comic side of the Vice-role while neglecting the serious and sometimes tragic aspects of the evil he attempts to inflict, offers an alternate explanation:

In any moral play the indispensable roles of the vices, and of the Vice, were traditional and taken for granted, and they revealed themselves at once by their names in the list of players. In the morality of Youth, for example, there could be no question as to who the vices were in a cast that contained Youth, Charity, Humility, Riot, Pride, and Lechery. And in the morality plot itself ... one of the important homiletic aims is exactly to demonstrate who, among several cognates of evil, is the Vice-in-chief by virtue of his primacy as radix malorum, so that his designation as "the Vice" in the cast or stage direction is actually a piece of supererogation. These homiletic conditions, however, did not hold for Heywood's two plays, or for the other secular plays that likewise borrowed the Vice; and it was precisely because they did not hold that he was in special need of his generic title. In such plays he was not a traditional figure
but a theatrically attractive importation. Nor did his homiletic eminence appear in them from his association with other vices, because he was borrowed without the company of his allegorical cohorts, and exploited theatrically for his dramatic verve, not homiletically for his immoral primacy or metaphorical significance. In such plays therefore, he received the title that made his dramatic function patent. If it was of some use to have the Vice in a play to which he was not native, it was also useful to indicate his presence.22

Before us we have two contradictory views, one that the Vice was initially a buffoon who was imported into the morality from the role of the folk fool or stage clown, and the other, that he was initially a serious allegorical personification morally aligned with the forces of evil, who was imported into the secular drama from the morality. I shall attempt to reconcile these opposing views in more detail at a later point in the next chapter when we examine more closely the question of the Vice's origins, but for now it is sufficient to recognize that the vice characters in the plays we have discussed heretofore have practically, without exception, manifested characteristics and actions which are comic as well as evil in nature. We have seen them sing and dance, jest and brawl, indulge in nonsense, obscenity, verbal wit, and riotous buffoonery. In other words, comedy has never been extraneous to the dramatic representation of vice. We have also seen in Skelton's Magnificence a spectrum of potentialities for the vice-role. What Heywood has done in his two plays is to concentrate on the comic extreme of this spectrum without, however, totally foregoing the demonic, as a closer examination of the two works in question will reveal.

The dramatic action in both The Play of Love and The Play of Weather takes the form of debate. In Love four characters argue endlessly about which of them suffers the most pain and enjoys the most
pleasure in their experiences of love. Neither Lover Nor Loved is the Vice of the play, and he constantly interrupts the arguments of the other debaters with coarse jests and verbal horseplay. As his name would suggest, he is an amoral character outside the realm of love itself, and, indeed, a non-participant in human relationships. As he admits during a long monologue to the audience, he is, at the same time, totally egocentric, caring for no one but himself. A clever schemer and a practical joker, he delights in playing a somewhat cruel trick on his opponent in the debate, Lover Loved. Leaving to get a book, the Vice returns shortly thereafter, the following stage-direction marking his re-entrance on the stage:

Here the Vice cometh in running suddenly about the place among the audience with a high copper tank on his head full of squibs fired crying, water! water! fire! fire! fire! water! water! water! fire! till the fire in the squibs be spent.23

He announces that he has seen the house of his opponent's beloved burn down and that she has died in the blaze. Lover Loved is grief-stricken, and when he states that he is going to die with his beloved, the Vice triumphantly reveals that it has all been a trick he has contrived in order to win the debate. He has proven that his position, outside the realm of love, is more conducive to pleasure and joy than that of an individual whose love is requited, for the latter is always potentially susceptible to the agony of losing the object of his adoration.

Although Neither Lover Nor Loved is essentially a comic figure on whom rests the responsibility of amusing the audience, his association with the realm of evil is also implicit throughout the play. The temptation motif is admittedly lacking; nevertheless, the Vice is the most
convincing of the four characters in his argument, and despite the fact that the outcome of the debate is judged to be a tie, the audience is most sympathetic to the Vice's point of view. He reveals himself to be totally egocentric, and in this sense, we might add, closely related to the allegorical abstraction of Pride which is, according to Chaucer's Parson, "the chief and spryng of all other sinnes, the general roote." Moreover, he implicates the audience by enlisting them as his partners and making them his secret confidants:

And synce my parte now doth thus well appear,  
Be ye my partners now all of good cheer;  
But silence every man upon a pain,  
For master woodcock is now come again.

As we have seen, the use of fire and fire-works was conventionally part of the theatrical equipment of the devil, and in Castle and the Digby Mary Magdalene, the devil is responsible for setting a house ablaze. Armed with a huge tank of squibs or fire-crackers, the Vice in The Play of Love also shares with the representatives of the demonic realm the attributes of deceit and intrigue, making the other characters of the play his dupes, albeit in a humorous and essentially harmless manner.

The Play of the Weather has a similar debate structure in which a number of characters present various arguments, this time about their preferred kinds of weather. Merry Report, the Vice of the play, is a more fully developed character than Neither Lover Nor Loved, and he is responsible for conducting the dramatic action. Having gotten himself appointed as Jupiter's crier, he listens to the weather-preferences of the various suitors, and presents their petitions to the God. Like the Vice in Love, Merry Report is outside the realm of the debate--he claims
impartiality, stating he is indifferent to all weather:

For all wethers I am so indyfferent,
Without affecyon, standyng so upryghte,
Son-lyght, mone-lyght, ster-lyght, twylyght, torch-lyght,
Temperate or dystemperate, what-ever yt be,
I promise your lordshype, all is one to me.25

This indifference is a significant feature of the Vice-figure's character make-up, and is associated with the quality of fortuitous amorality he represents. Even in those figures morally aligned with the forces of evil, the aspect of indifference is operant as the Vice's cohorts in villainy are as often his dupes as the virtuous and morally upstanding.

Merry Report is similarly on intimate terms with the theatre audience. He enters, in fact, from the audience, volunteering to be Jupiter's crier. His fortuitous quality is reflected as well in his attitude to the theatre-goers. Despite the sense of camaraderie he assumes with them, he cracks jokes at their expense, showers them with humorous verbal abuse, calling them "caitiffs" and "drunken whoresons" (p. 401), and demands that they curtsy before him in deference to his authority.

Merry Report's comic irreverence is also extended to the petitioners. The first to present his suit is a gentleman hunter, whom the Vice greets with the following mocking insinuation:

On my faith, your maship has a merry life
But who maketh all these hornes, your self or your wife.
(p. 400)

When the gentleman chides him and states that he is, in fact, Merry Report's "head," the Vice indulges in a bit of obscene verbal sport:

By god, since ye came hither
I can set my head and tail together
This head shall save money, by Saint Mary
From henceforth I will no 'pothecary'
For at all times, when such things shall mister,
My new head will give mine old tail a glister [purge]
And, after all this, then shall my head wait
Upon my tail, and there shall stand at receipt.

(p. 403)

Merry Report's comic obscenities, word play, and nonsense are all part of the Vice's stock-in-trade. Another characteristic device, reflected by various later Vices as well, is the "who-am-I" game which Merry Report plays in response to Jupiter's request that he identify himself:

Jupiter: Why! what arte thou that approachest so nigh?
Merry Report: Forsooth, and please your lordship, it is I
Jupiter: All that we know very well, But what I?
Merry Report: What, I some say I am I per se I
But, what manner I so ever be I
I assure your good lordship, I am I.

(p. 399)

This game is related to the ambiguity of the Vice as reflected in the various motifs surrounding his nomenclature: his inability to remember his name; his refusal to identify himself; his change of name in play after play. All of these devices have to do with the Vice figure's desire to evade recognition. To know the name of an individual is, as Jung has indicated, to define and control that person, and the ineffable Protean quality of the comic-demonic figure circumvents any attempt to apprehend him.

Another characteristic manifested by a number of Vices is the allegation of being a great traveller. Several of the Vice figures, including Merry Report, present long narratives describing the places they have visited and the experiences they have had during their travels.
While Mares finds this fact puzzling and can discover for it no obvious dramatic explanation, a clue to its meaning can be found in Merry Report's speech outlining his expeditions. After presenting an extensive list of the places to which he has been, he concludes:

The devil himself without more leisure
Could not have gone half this much, I am sure.
(p. 401)

According to medieval belief, the devil was ubiquitous, ever-present throughout the world, ready at any moment to lure mankind to damnation. Within this context then, the Vice's claim to being a great traveller can be viewed as a remnant of his demonic heritage, and a symbol of the pervasiveness of the comic villainy which he perpetrates.

Both of Heywood's Vices are essentially comic figures who in their buffoonery resemble more the fool of tradition, than the allegorical representatives of evil of the morality drama. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Neither Lover Nor Loved and Merry Report implicitly demonstrate affiliations with the demonic realm, and, in this sense, the label "Vice" applied to these characters is not, contrary to critical opinion, entirely a "misnomer."

After Heywood, there are some twenty plays containing characters specifically designated as Vices, all of whom participate to a greater or lesser extent, in both the comic and demonic realms. Rather than treat each play individually, we will focus on the general lineaments of the Vice figure, employing specific illustrations from the plays themselves in an attempt to develop a dramatic overview of this enigmatic fellow.
In the late Tudor period and first two decades of Elizabeth's reign, the Vice was a character of such great popularity on the English stage that his name figures in the titles of several plays emanating from this period in dramatic history. He was a great favourite with the audience, and generally the most important character in the plays in which he appeared. Most of the plays in the later morality tradition—both the conventional moralities and the "hybrid plays"—were written to be played by a small company of five or six players, and a great deal of doubling of parts was, therefore, required. Because the Vice's role was so intrinsic to the action of the drama, and because his was almost consistently the longest part, the actor playing the Vice usually had no time for doubling. In fact, part of his role was to entertain the audience with various comic improvisations, while other members of the cast were changing costumes. *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, for example, contains the following stage-direction: "And [the Vice] fighteth to prolong the time while Wantonness maketh her ready" (Schell and Shuchter, p. 346).

As the most important character, the Vice is responsible for propelling the dramatic action and conducting the main conflict. He occupies the stage almost constantly, presenting other characters to the audience, explaining his identity and the nature of his intrigue, fulfilling the classical functions of both messenger and chorus by commenting on the action and reporting what has gone on behind the scenes.

Although he is closely aligned with the forces of evil, the Vice is pre-eminently a comic figure whose basic function is to incite
laughter. As a comic character he is given to obscenity and grossness, singing and dancing, brawling and buffoonery, satire and mockery, nonsense and verbal wit. The nonsense of the Vice usually takes the form of meaningless mumbo-jumbo, a mixture of English and foreign phrases or a stream of illogical, incongruous and contradictory utterances. In The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene, Infidelity sings the following nonsensical parody of church songs:

With heigh down down and downe a down a,
Salvator mundi Domine, Kyrieleyson,
Ite, Missa est, with pipe up alliluya,
Sed libera nos a malo and let us be at one. 32

Courage, the Vice in The Tide Tarrieth No Man, weaves an adventure story out of a hilarious sequence of absurd non sequiturs:

But in fine these three began to agree
And knit themselves up in one trinity.
And after, they loved like brother and brother,
For every love they did kill one another.
And then they were buried, I do well remember
In Stawtons straw-hat, 7 mile from December,
Where they had not lain the space of a day
But four of those three were thence fun away.
The Constable came, with a back on his bill,
And because they were gone he did them kill.
I, Courage, so cleft their cushions asunder
To see how they bled it made me to wonder.
I myself was smitten twice to the ground
I was very sore hurt, but I had not a wound.

(Schell and Shuchter, p. 320)

The satire of the Vice is directed at a variety of targets including the Church, new fashions in dress, money-lenders, the legal profession, marriage and the defects of women. The Vice is particularly prolific in the number of irreverent remarks he levels at both the Church and marriage; and the reason for this comic irreverence is essentially twofold, reflecting the double-nature of his character. In the first
place, because marriage is a sacrament of the Christian religion, and the Church is Christianity's prime dwelling-place, the Vice as an inhabitant of the demonic realm is intrinsically at variance with both.

Secondly, both the Church and marriage are social institutions, and it is the purpose of comedy to provide a momentary liberation from the oppressions of the prevailing social order. Feibleman's observations on the relationship between institutions and the function of comedy are also relevant here:

It is a notorious historical observation that customs and institutions never enjoy more than a comparatively brief life: and yet while they are the accepted fashion they come to be regarded as brute given, as irreducible facts, which may be depended upon with perfect security . . . It is the task of comedy to make this plain. Thus comedy ridicules new customs, new institutions, for being insufficiently inclusive; but even more effectively it makes fun of old ones which have outlived their usefulness and have come to stand in the way of further progress.33

In much the same way, the derisive comedy of the Vice points out the absurd weaknesses and ridiculous constraints of the institutions of marriage and religion, and calls into question the "brute givens" upon which these institutions operate.

Moreover, just as comedy generally involves a "breaking up of all restraints," so the humour of the Vice also provides a momentary release of the baser instincts, namely those of sex and aggression, which are normally held in check during the course of civilized existence. The sublimated release of the sexual instinct is reflected in the numerous obscenities, lascivious remarks, and coarse earthy humour displayed by every Vice, while the aggressive overtones in his comedy are manifested not only in his impudent mockery and baiting of the representatives of
virtue, but also in the quarrels, brawls, and rough-and-tumble fighting which take place between the Vices and various other characters in the drama. Anthony Ludovici in *The Secret of Laughter* claims that the response of laughter is an expression of "superior adaptation"; it is a reflex action deriving from the need to show one's teeth, to demonstrate the effectiveness of one's weapons against that which threatens his survival. The Vice's laughter--the triumphant "Ha, ha, ha," which pervades the later moralities--and his comic combats are indeed an expression of his avowed "superior adaptation," for practically all his actions are geared towards demonstrating his superiority not only over the forces of virtue but over his own followers as well. The most common stage directions of the later moralities are, in fact, those which reflect the Vice's comic pugnacity--"Here the Vice fighteth"; "He draweth his dagger and fighteth"--and those which reflect his boisterous laughter as he bares his teeth in exultant delight--"Enter Inclination laughing"; "Here entereth Nichol Newfangle the Vice laughing." One of the most sensational entrances of the Vice takes place in Preston's *Cambises*, in which Ambidexter's first appearance on the stage combines both elements. The Vice enters as the braggart soldier, his appearance a burlesque of the military overtones of the old Psychomachia. Dressed in armour consisting of a "capcase" (hat-box) for a helmet, a pot lid, a large spoon and a rake, Ambidexter boastfully proclaims:

Stand away, stand away for the passion of God;  
Harnessed I am, prepared to the field;  
I would have been content at home to have bed,  
But I am sent forth with my spear and my shield.  
I am appointed to fight against a snail,  
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
If I overcome him, then a butterfly takes his part,
His weapon must be a blue speckled hen;
But you will see me overthrow him with a fart,
So without conquest he shall go home again.
If I overcome him, I must fight with a fly,
And a black pudding the fly's weapon must be
At first blow on the ground he shall lie,
I will be sure to thrust him through the mouth to the knee.
To conquer these fellows the man I will play,
Ha, ha, ha, now ye will make me to smile,
To see, if I can all men to beguile.

(Dodsley, IV:176-77)

By far the most pervasive symbol of the Vice's comic aggression is his wooden sword or dagger. This came to be the definitive prop of the Vice, and was still commonly associated with the role after the Vice as a conventional theatrical character had disappeared from the stage. In Twelfth Night, Feste refers to the "old Vice . . . with his dagger of lathe" (IV.ii.134-36), while Tatle, in Jonson's The Staple of News, denies the presence of a Vice in the play he has seen because the conventional prop is missing:

Mirth: ... How like you the Vice i' the Play?

Expectation: Which is he?

Mirth: Three or foure: old Covetousnesse, the sordid Penyboy, the Money-bawd, who is a flesh-bawd too, they say.

Tatle: But here is never a Fiend to carry him away. Besides, he has never a wooden dagger! I'd not give a rush for a Vice, that has not a wooden dagger to snap at everybody he meetes.38

It is significant that the Vice's dagger is "wooden," and hence not lethal, for one of the most important features of the aggression displayed in comedy is the presence of violence without its consequences. It is tacitly understood that the aggression is released only in jest and is, thus, disguised under the cloak of laughter. This principle was implied
by Aristotle who describes the comic mask as being "ludicrous, without any suggestion of pain." Eric Bentley, in a similar vein, has observed that violence almost always underlies farce; the members of the audience are permitted to watch their violent, aggressive fantasies enacted before them on the stage without suffering any guilt, because the victims are spared any serious harm:

Prongs of a rake in the backside are received as pinpricks. Bullets seem to pass right through people, sledge-hammer blows to produce only momentary irritation. . . . All of which signifies that, in farce, as in drama, one is permitted the outrage but spared the consequence.

In play after play, the Vice batters his cronies and his comic dupes with his "woodknife" (Like Will to Like, p. 350), and a very common situation is like the one occurring in Pickeryng's Horestes in which Courage incites a brawl between two country bumpkins, and then beats both of them with his dagger while they are engaged in fighting each other.

Another identifying feature of the Vice associated with his comedy is his apt verbal wit. He is particularly fond of word play, and the dramas abound in punning, malapropisms, double-entendres, and a characteristic kind of verbal distortion in which the Vice alters the statements of either himself or another character, playing on the sound for humorous effect. The basic structure of this comic device involves the Vice's revelation of his true character and motivation only to retract it by pretending he has said something else. For example, in Respublica, Avarice (alias Policy) assures Respublica that he will restore her to wealth:

Avarice: Well, I will take some pain, but this to you be known, I will do it not for your sake, but for mine own.
Respublica: How say ye that, Policy?

Avarice: This to you be known,
     I will do all for your sake, and not for mine own.
     (Schell and Shuchter, p. 255)

Another of many examples of this comic device occurs in *The Trial of Treasure* where Inclination mocks Lust by undercutting the latter's praise of his mistress:

Lust: My lady is amorous, and full of favour.
Inclination: I may say to you she hath an ill-favoured savour.
Lust: What sayest thou?
Inclination: I say she's loving and of gentle behaviour.
     (Dodsley, III:292)

The Vice's propensity for word play is recollected at one point in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in an exchange between the two servants:

Speed: How now, Signior Launce? What news with your master-ship?
Launce: With my master's ship. Why, it is at sea.
Speed: Well, your old vice still--mistake the word.
     (III.i.279-81)

We should observe here that although Launce is adept at the "mistake-the-word" game, he does not qualify for the role of Vice, for the latter's use of double meanings in his verbal play generally carries more sinister overtones, reflecting as it does, his affiliation with the demonic realm. In *Appius and Virginia*, when Judge Appius requests the Vice's aid in his attempt to deflower Virginia, Haphazard replies, "At hand (quoth the pick-purse) here ready am I" (Dodsley, IV:129). And in *All For Money*, Sin's association with the forces of evil is revealed when Money asks him about his family lineage--"From what stock are you proceeded." Sin, punning
on the meaning of "stocks" as an instruments of punishment, answers, "The last stocks I was in was even at Bambury" (Schell and Shuchter, p. 451).

In its equivocal quality, the word play of the Vice is, in effect, representative of the duplicity of evil. Shakespeare acknowledges this relationship in another play, Richard III, during a dialogue between Richard and the young Prince, which is a conscious imitation of the pattern of verbal distortion intrinsic to the Vice-role.

Gloucester: (aside) So wise, so young they say do never live long.

Prince: What say you, uncle?

Gloucester: I say, without character, fame lives long.
   (aside) Thus like the formal Vice, Iniquity, I moralize two meanings in one word.

   (III.79-83)

The double-sided quality of the Vice is not only confined to his comedy; it is, as well, a symbol of this figure's demonic heritage, for deceit and dissembling are his chief instruments in carrying out his malevolent purpose. As a representative of evil, the Vice, like the double-tongued Serpent in the Garden, is both a tempter and a schemer, seducing his victim toward corruption and moral damnation, and employing various devious stratagems in order to achieve this goal. Deceit is the most common method of operation in the intrigue of the Vice, and a great many of these figures employ both disguise and change of name in order to make themselves more attractive to their prey. "Two faces in a hood, covertly I bear," states Cloaked Collusion in Skelton's Magnificence in an explicit assertion of the double-visaged nature of the Vice; and in almost every play the Vice and his cohorts adopt virtuous sounding
pseudonyms to mask the quality of evil allegorically signified in their true names. In Respublica, Avarice disguises and re-christens both himself and his fellow-vices: Avarice adopts the name Policy, and turns his gown inside-out in order to hide his money bags; Adulation becomes Honesty, Oppression becomes Reformation, and Insolence is given the name of Monsieur Authority. The Vice then explains the need for dissembling to his followers.

But changing your ill name fewer shall reprove you,  
As I mine own self, where my name is known  
Am right sore assailed to be overthrown.  
But doing as I will now counterfeit my name,  
I speed all my purpose and yet escape blame. 

(Schell and Shuchter, p. 250)

And in The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom, Idleness, disguised as a priest, proudly congratulates himself on his skill in the art of dissimulation.

Detected I cannot well be: I am of that condition  
That can turn into all colours like the chameleon.41

Another manifestation of the Vice's dissembling is the manner in which he feigns sorrow and tears. Covetousness in Wager's Enough is As Good as a Feast puts on a dramatic display of howling and weeping in order to convince Worldly Man of his sincerity. The Vice in Cambises whose name, Ambidexter, is an exposition of the quality of double-dealing, or the playing with both hands which he represents, cries and then laughs over the fratricide he has incited by lying to the King: "Ha, ha, weep! nay laugh, with both hands to play" (Schell and Shuchter, p. 218). And at a later point, he mourns the death of the Queen, undercutting the authenticity of his grief, however, with a comic obscenity: "O, my heart, my heart, O my bum will break" (p. 243).
Although almost all the Vices are both tempters and mischievous schemers, in some of the figures one of these roles predominates. Those who are primarily tempters are closely aligned with the forces of evil—sometimes their actions are precipitated by an agreement with the devil to bring about the damnation of mankind, and sometimes they merely grow out of their being allegorical representatives of evil, and as such, diametrically opposed to salvation or moral good. Among this group of Vices are Iniquity in *King Darius*, Infidelity in *Mary Magdalene*, Avarice in *Respublica*, Covetousness in *Enough is As Good As a Feast*, and Sin in *All For Money*, all of whose names are indicative of the ethical evil they personify. In another group of characters, however, the temptation function is underplayed or even absent altogether. These figures combine a homiletically evil purpose with a dramatic character that is primarily amoral in nature; these are the fun-loving pranksters and mischief-makers whose actions are arbitrary, and who are not really committed to either good or evil, but are instigators of adversity for the "game" or the "sport." Again the nomenclature of the most amoral of these characters, like that of some of the earlier Vice-incumbents we have examined (namely *Neither Lover nor Loved*, *Sensual Appetite and Sensuality*) reflects their uncommitted, arbitrary, and essentially instinctual behaviour: Haphazard in *Appius and Virginia*, Natural Inclination in *The Trial of Treasure*, Desire in *Tom Tyler and his Wife*, and Courage (meaning "blind will" or "appetite") in *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*.

Almost all of the Vice-figures, whether they are essentially tempters, schemers, or a combination of both, function to some extent
outside of the moral law. Indeed, the amorality or indifference of the Vice is one of the most interesting and pervasive aspects of his character make-up. The indifference is dramatically manifested in the Vice's habitual attitude of unconcern, even at the prospect of his own death. Avarice stops in his flight from the retributive forces of virtue in order to sing a song; Ill-Report in Virtuous and Godly Susannah jests at the point of his own execution. Insensitive to the threat of his own doom, he is equally impassive in face of the suffering of others. Covetous, who cried and moaned earlier in Enough is As Good As A Feast, reveals his true nature when he fails to demonstrate any sympathy as Worldly Man lies in anguish in the moments preceding his own death. Rather, he reflects his callous merriment with vulgar jests, obscenely punning on the Physician's name—Master Physician becomes "Master Fleshbischiten" (p. 411)—and suggesting that the latter look in the patient's rear-end and examine his urine in order to determine the nature of the malady. Similarly, Natural Inclination in The Trial of Treasure mocks Lust's cries of pain prompted by the arrival of God's Visitation:

Lust: Gog's wounds! these pangs increase ever more.

Inclination: And my little finger is spitefully sore;
You will not believe how my heel doth ache.

(Dodsley, IV:294)

Although the Vice figure is aligned with the side of evil, he is, nonetheless, indifferent to the moral categories of good and evil. A complete egoist by nature, he is out for himself alone, and delights in the misfortunes of others whether they are friends of foes. Flatterie, the chief of the vices in Lindsay's Three Estates, betrays his two
fellow-conspirators in order to save his own neck from hanging; and Avarice, in much the same way, seeks to escape Justice by exposing the wrongdoings of his followers. Ambidexter provokes a "fray" between two neighbours, Hob and Lob, and then reveals his lack of concern over the welfare of either of them: "If they had kill'd one another, I had not cared a pease" (Dodsley, IV:224). Perhaps the most amoral of all the Vices is Nichol Newfangle in Ulpian Fulwell's Like Will to Like. Although as Lucifer's godson, he is intrinsically affiliated with the forces of evil, he mocks and abuses the devil himself, calling him "bottle-nosed knave" (Dodsley, III:311) and refusing to kneel down in deference to him. Two of Nichol's victims are his old acquaintances—pickpockets named Cuthbert Cutpurse and Pierce Pickpurse. He sings and cavorts with them, warns the audience to guard their purses against them, and later halts them and leads them to the hangman, appropriating one of their coats as payment for his part in capturing them. The disassociated sensibility of the Vice figure, his freedom from any bonds of human feeling or ethical allegiance, is crystallized in the words of Subtle Shift, the Vice of Sir Clyomon and Sir Clamydes:

Well, seeing I have played the crafty knave with the one [man],
I'll play it with the other.
Subtil Shift for advantage will deceive his own brother.42

Another aspect of the amorality of the Vice is reflected in the seemingly arbitrary, unmotivated or "haphazard" quality of his actions. Characters like Jack Juggler in the play of the same name, or Politic Persuasion in Patient and Meek Grisill are, to all appearances, unmotivated in their intrigue and mischief-making. Neither is an allegorical
representative of evil in the strict morality sense, but each delights in making innocent people the victims of his sport. As a result of this lack of motivation, some of the Vices are not evil masquerading under the guise of virtue, but are agents of either good or evil fortuitously, subject to the laws of blind chance or accident rather than to the laws of any moral code. Haphazard, as his name suggests, is not motivated by his affiliation to any ethical stance, but acts "haphazardly" in a random and purely venturous manner. His is the philosophy of taking chances. He asserts his reckless "come-what-may" attitude in his attempt to convince Judge Appius to go ahead in his plans to ravish Virginia:

Do so my lord, be you not afraid,
And so you may happen to hazard the maid
It is but in hazard and may come by hap,
Win her or lose her, try you the trap.
(Dodsley, IV:132)

At his entry, Haphazard attempts to define himself to the audience, to answer the question "What am I?" He explains that he is ubiquitous, a part of all men and all creatures, and that he prompts all things either to fortune or to adversity in an essentially arbitrary manner:

Most of all these my nature doth enjoy,
Sometime I advance them, sometime I destroy.
(p. 118)

In much the same way, in The Tide Tarrieth No Man, Courage, whose name does not mean bravery so much as the now obsolete meaning of the word, "blind energy" or "spirit," reveals his vital essence to the audience:

Now may you see how Courage can work,
And how he can encourage both to good and bad.
Thus you may see Courage contagious,
And eke contrarious--both in me do rest,
Courage's role explains, perhaps, how the Vice can be both amoral and egotistical at the same time. His amorality is defined by the fortuitous quality of his actions. He is completely self-centered, but his self-seeking more often follows the blind dictates of natural law rather than the prescripts of any moral code. Moreover, in Courage's address we can perceive not only the characteristic amorality of the Vice figure, but also the Protean quality of his nature. Not only is he indifferent to the moral categories of good and evil—he serves both randomly—but also he is essentially indefinable, for he changes shape whenever an attempt is made to grasp him, to encompass him, to bring him under some kind of control. Furthermore, in light of the Protean element of the Vice, some of his other characteristics take on an added dimension. His dissembling, his chameleon-like change of both name and appearance, his frequent failure to remember or reluctance to admit who he is, are all, in fact, designed to evade recognition, categorization, or restraint.

Another predominant aspect of the Vice role is the holiday spirit which underlies this figure's comic progression during the course of the dramatic action. Courage, like Natural Inclination in The Trial of Treasure, is representative of the Vice as sensual man, who not only supports a philosophy of "make hay while the sun shines," but who also advocates an unbridled release of the senses. Discernible in the actions of these two characters is both "the breaking up of all restraints," which is the foundation of the comic spirit, and the expression of the élan vital, the life-force which is, according to Susanne Langer, integral to
the festive art of comedy. As integral to the forms of comedy is the process of inversion, as Henri Bergson observed in Laughter:

Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene . . . There is no necessity, however for both identical scenes to be played before us. We may be shown only one provided the other is really in our minds. Thus, we laugh at the prisoner at the bar lecturing to the magistrate; at a child presuming to teach its parents; in a word, at everything that comes under the heading of "topsy-turvydom."

Freud, too, in Wit and Its Relationship to the Unconscious, has implicitly affirmed Bergson's concept of inversion as playing a fundamental role in the apprehension of the comic. According to Freud, the comic response is generated when the repressed forces of the unconscious are momentarily able to break through the inhibiting controls of the super-ego--a situation in which inversion does, in fact, take place: the primitive, irrational, and amoral forces of the personality overwhelm the forces of reason and morality; in a metaphorical sense, the child temporarily dominates his parents; the prisoner rules his keeper; that which was held in subjection below subversively gains the upper hand.

The principle of inversion is also manifested in such festive celebrations as the Dionysian revels, the Roman Saturnalia, and the medieval Feast of Fools, in all of which laws are overturned, licentious revelry becomes the order of the day, and a mock-king reigns in an upside-down world. This spirit of "topsy-turvydom" characterizes the comic-demonic machinations of the Vice throughout almost every play. In his breeding of dissension (between vice and virtue, man and virtue, man and man, vice and vice), chaos replaces order; in his temptation of man away from ethical ideals and other worldly concerns towards the unhindered
expression of his natural inclinations, licence usurps authority; and in his dramatic overshadowing of the representatives of virtue on the stage, the forces of the instinct triumph over those of rationality and moral law. We have already seen how, as a result of the secularization of evil in the later morality, the tavern, the brothel, and Newgate prison have gradually replaced Hell as the image of the underworld; and the demonic realm, of which the Vice as sensual man is representative, is now given over to the essentially lawless material forms of the life of the instincts. During the brief space of the Vice's topsyturvy domination of the stage, he functions as a kind of Lord of Misrule, a King of the Underworld, who permits the audience to gratify its hidden desires, to release its impulses, to enjoy a liberating attack against traditional law and value. Bentley's description of the audience-appeal occasioned by farce also holds true for that engendered by the Vice:

Shielded by delicious darkness and seated in warm security, we enjoy the privilege of being totally passive while on stage our most treasured unmentionable wishes are fulfilled before our eyes by the most violently active human beings that ever sprang from the human imagination.46

Comedy, like tragedy, provides an essentially cathartic experience for the audience. The comic catharsis is both a purgation of the darker passions and a source of release and relaxation—a holiday from the constraints of routine existence. This release is necessary so that we may be able to return to the rules and regulations of civilized life rejuvenated, and, therefore, more capable of complying with them. Ernst Kris has further elucidated the psychological aspects of the Aristotelian concept of catharsis:
The progress of psychoanalytical knowledge has opened the way for a better understanding of the cathartic effect; we are no longer satisfied with the notion that repressed emotions lose their hold over our mental life when an outlet for them has been found. We believe rather that what Aristotle described as the purging enables the ego to re-establish the control which is threatened by dammed-up instinctual demands.47

The function of re-establishing control is decidedly critical here, for a permanent expression of unbridled instinctual energy cannot take place within the context of civilized existence. This is why the reign of the Vice, like that of the mock-king or Lord of Misrule, is by necessity of limited duration. In order to serve the social purposes of comedy, in order to re-establish the control of authority and the status quo, the Vice generally loses in the end—he is either hanged, imprisoned or banished to hell.

The end of the Vice is strikingly similar to that of the scapegoat king in the seasonal folk festivities of both ancient and modern times. Frazer has observed in The Golden Bough that the carnivals of modern Europe share with the Roman Saturnalia "a burlesque figure personifying the festive season, which after a short career of glory and dissipation is publicly shot, burnt, or otherwise destroyed."

Frazer further explains that the scapegoat generally functions as the means by which evil and sin are expelled from the community—on the head of the scapegoat are heaped all the misfortunes and transgressions of the society, and through his destruction, the forces of evil are banished, and the members receive absolution from both guilt and fear. It is interesting that Frazer has also observed that this ritual expulsion of evil is commonly "preceded or followed by a period of general licence, during
which the ordinary restraints of society are thrown aside, and all
offences, short of the gravest, are allowed to pass unpunished. In
the light of Frazer's anthropological research, we might argue that the
end of the Vice serves the audience's need for expiation from sin and
absolution from guilt emanating from the period of licentious revelry
in which they have vicariously participated.

The end of the Vice, of course, also served the homiletic pur­
pose of the morality tradition, which was to demonstrate the ultimate
superiority of the path of virtue to that of sin and corruption. In King
Darius, Iniquity is driven from the stage by fire and banished to hell;
Courage in The Tide Tarrieth is carried off to prison by Correction;
Ill-Report in Virtuous and Godly Susannah is publicly hanged on stage;
and at the end of Respublica, Nemesis sentences Avarice to be squeezed
like a sponge until he is divested of all that he has stolen, and then
to be turned over to the authorities to await further punishment. We
have, however, previously noted that one of the dramatic characteristics
of the Vice figure is his avowed unconcern at the prospect of his own
death. In the Vice dramas, we have what are probably the earliest
examples of gallows humour in English literature. Ill-Report cracks
jokes at the moment prior to his hanging; Courage, under similar circum­
stances, facetiously asks the members of the audience if there is not
anyone who would like to change places with him.

Is there no man here that has a curst wife?
If he will, in my stead he shall lose his life.
(Schell and Shucht, p. 364)

Moreover, the indifference of the Vice toward his own destruction to a
certain extent undermines the seriousness of his death-warrant, and
serves to enhance the implication of his ubiquity—an implication we have
encountered before in his claims to being a great traveller, in his
assertions that he is a part of all things in the universe, and in the
Protean quality of his nature. "Nichol Newfangle was and is and ever
shall be!" declares the Vice in *Like Will to Like*, and Idleness, having
escaped the punitive forces of justice at the end of *Wit and Wisdom*,
voices his ineradicable influence over mankind.

Detected I cannot well be; I am of that condition
That I can turn into all colours like the chameleon:
Although some do refuse me, some leaden-heeled lubber will
not refrain me;
And when men hath done with me women will retain me!^{50}

The play which perhaps best illustrates the relationship between
the end of the Vice and the ubiquity of the life-force which he repre-
sents is the anonymous *The Trial of Treasure*. Natural Inclination, the
Vice, during his first speech testifies to his great travels and his
experiences since the beginning of time. He remembers back to Noah's
ship, the cuckholding of Vulcan, and the Garden of Eden: "I can remember,
I am so old, / Since Paradise gates were watched by night" (Dodsley,
III:267). He advises the audience that he is contained in all men--"It
is I that do guide the bent of your bow, / And ruleth your actions also
day by day"--and that they are not easily rid of him: "I will not away
with the casting of stones" (p. 268). According to the homiletic doctrine
of the morality play, man's instinctual passions, if allowed to operate
 uncontrollably, would inevitably lead him to sin and damnation. Like
Sensuality in Medwall's *Nature*, who, ultimately, is forced to bow under
the authority of Reason, Natural Inclination is physically bridled by Just on two separate occasions during the course of the drama. The allegorical meaning here is obvious, but is asserted nonetheless: "Thus should every man, that will be called Just / Bridle and subdue his beastly inclination" (p. 279). Natural Inclination refuses to be subjected, however, and asserts his unyielding rebellious spirit:

And let not Just think but I will rebel,
Althouth he bridle me ten times all well;

Even so, though that I be bridled awhile,
The colt will at length the courser beguile.

(p. 280)

Natural Inclination is imaged as a horse throughout the play. He has some kind of a tail (perhaps an allusion to the dress of the fool) and in his kicking, whinnying and coursing, a great deal of literal comic "horseplay" is generated. The Vice is eventually freed by Lust later in the play, only to be bridled by Just at the conclusion. Natural Inclination's last words as he is led off to prison are a re-iteration of his irrepressible and recalcitrant vitality:

Was there ever poor colt thus handled before?
Fie, upon it, my legs be unreasonably sore;
Well, yet I will rebel, yea, and rebel again,
And though a thousand times you shouldest me restrain.

(p. 299)

Natural Inclination is an excellent example of the comic-demonic figure whose progression is, in fact, an image of the movement of comedy which we have been discussing. Like the forces of comedy which break through the restraints of custom and authority for a short period of revelry before the restraints are re-imposed, Natural Inclination is given free reign, and allowed to run his course before he is bridled. It is
impossible to subjugate him totally, however, for he breaks out again, is given free reign for another short space, and then is bridled once more.

The final aspect of the character make-up of the Vice to be discussed is one that we have touched upon at several points without totally confronting—his ambiguity. In his Protean shapes, his Janus-like visage, his coinciding amorality and egotism, his combination of the forces of both comedy and evil, and his simultaneous attractiveness and reprehensibility, the Vice poses something of an enigma. Like Ambidexter in *Cambises* who "with both hands finely can play" (Dodsley, IV:177), the Vice defies categorization, for we never know exactly what side he is on. The ambiguity of the Vice is particularly manifested in his relationship with the audience. He is, paradoxically, a dramatic character who stands outside the action of the play; he has a fundamental role in the major conflict, yet he is, at the same time, a detached commentator upon the events unfolding on the stage. He is on intimate terms with the theatre-goers—he jokes with them, reveals to them his true identity and devious intent, warns them against pickpockets, mockingly insults them, and, most significantly, makes them his confidants, thereby implicating them in the evil he represents. Avarice in *Respublica* addresses the audience as follows:

But now what my name is and what is my purpose,  
Taking you all for friends I fear not to disclose,  
My very true unchristian name is Avarice,  
Which I may not have openly known in no wise,  

For who is so foolish that the evil he hath wrought  
For his own behoof he would to light should be brought,
Or who had not rather his ill doings to hide
Than to have the same bruited on every side?  
(Schell and Shuchter, pp. 239-40)

The insinuation in Avarice's speech is quite clear. The Vice does not
reveal his true identity to those who are to be his victims. The audi­
ence is, therefore, presumed to be already corrupt, his "unchristian"
confederates in evil. Just as the Vice ultimately convinces his subordi­
nates of his superiority,51 he presents himself to the audience as their
leader in villainy, and they become, by implication, his followers. "Be
ruled by me," advises Nichol Newfangle at several points in Like Will to
Like; and Sin in All For Money invites the complicity of the audience by
declaring that all of them are his servants for they all share in the
corruption that love of money inevitably breeds. Because he is their
self-appointed leader, Sin demands his due respect from the crowd: "Off
with your caps sirs! It becomes you to stand bare" (Schell and Shuchter,
p. 435).

The final disposition of the Vice particularly reflects the
double-sided attitude of the audience towards this ambiguous figure.
Rossiter captures this essential ambivalence when he remarks: "At the
end of the play, when the moral ritual wants him hanged or otherwise pun­
ished, the comic wants him to get away with it."52 As members of the
audience, we partake simultaneously in both rituals. We want the Vice
to escape punishment for we have enjoyed the comic release of the darker,
demonic impulses he has permitted us, but, on the other hand, in order
to escape guilt for participating in what Rossiter calls a "stirring
debauch of wish-fulfillment," a "crowded hour in the glorious life in the
company of the Devil's disciples," we require that the Vice be fit-
tingly chastised for leading us into the temptation of the comic-demonic
realm. The audience becomes, in this way, both the henchmen and the
dupes of the Vice. We are, ultimately, both his fellow-conspirators and
the targets of his intrigue. He cleverly ingratiates himself into our
sympathies and wins us over to his point of view. In order to absolve
ourselves of the evil which he has skilfully forced us to acknowledge as
a vital part of our human temperament, we must, inevitably, distance
ourselves from him, banish him, or attempt to destroy him. He is
ubiquitous, however, and although he may be bridled like Natural Inclin-
ation, he can never be totally subdued.

It is a further indication of our ambivalence toward him that
we, in fact, do not want him to be completely suppressed. He is an in-
trinsically attractive figure, despite his moral reprehensibility, and
he too, is triumphantly aware of his potent magnetism. Haphazard is
astutely correct when he proclaims: "Ay, by the gods, my master, I told
you plain / Who companies with me will desire me again" (Appius and
Virginia [Dodsley, IV:136]). Indeed, the attractiveness and irrepres-
sibility of the Vice is signified by his tremendous vogue on the English
stage and his survival as a dramatic character for several decades after
the passing of the morality tradition that had spawned him. His inordi-
nate influence on the imagination of playwrights and theatre-goers
alike is even further affirmed by the fact that, although the Vice died
out as a conventional dramatic character around the beginning of the
Elizabethan period, his heritage is reflected in the numerous amoral
schemers, clown-demons, and diabolically humorous characters whose ambiguous demonic foolery has pervaded the history of English literature to the present time.
Notes for Chapter III

1 The terms "interlude," "morality" and "moral interlude" are frequently used with much confusion and ambiguity in discussions of Pre-Shakespearean drama. Quite often, a critical distinction is made between the morality—a play with a homiletic purpose represented in allegorical terms—and the interlude—a play which attempts to free itself from allegorical didactism and approaches more closely the area of farce (see Rossiter, p. 102). On the other hand, Chambers has demonstrated that the term "interlude" was without distinction "equally applicable to every kind of drama known to the Middle Ages" (The Medieval Stage, II:182). Spivack's excellent analysis of the development of the morality in Shakespeare and The Allegory of Evil usually avoids employing the term "interlude" as a critical tool, but rather includes within its discussion of the morality tradition a group of later plays beginning about the middle of the sixteenth century which are given the name of "hybrid moralities," or "hybrid plays." These plays, transitional in nature, are moralities in that they still retain an ostensible didactic purpose, but they present side-by-side with the traditional personified abstractions characters out of history, romance, or legend, resulting in a mixed or "hybrid" dramatic metaphor.

2 The Allegory of Evil, pp. 226-27.


5 The Allegory of Evil, p. 113.

6 In A Select Collection of Old English Plays, ed. Robert Dodsley, 4th ed. (rev. by W. C. Hazlitt) (London, 1874-76), III, 308. This collection will be subsequently referred to as "Dodsley."


9 Cushman, p. 61. At one point, however, Cushman concedes that "Pride plays quite independently a good Vice-role" (p. 61).

10 The Braggart in Renaissance Comedy, p. 153.

11 The Allegory of Evil, pp. 144, 143.
12 Rossiter, p. 102.
15 Ibid., p. cvi.
16 There is some differentiation in this group of characters as well. Courtly Abusion is representative of the braggart dandy who tempts Magnificence through his courtly manners, his flattery and his extravagance of dress; Cloaked Collusion is the master of dissemblance, treachery and double-dealing. Crafty Conveyance and Counterfeit Countenance are, however, largely undifferentiated.
18 The Interlude of Youth, Schell and Shuchter, p. 149.
19 In The World and the Child, Folly is the only vice, but this morality is highly unusual in its being so compressed as to be performed by only two actors.
20 The Allegory of Evil, p. 141.
21 E. K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage, II, 204; F. H. Mares, "The Origin of the Figure Called the 'Vice' in Tudor Drama," p. 11.
22 The Allegory of Evil, pp. 149-50.
27 "The Origin of the Figure Called 'The Vice,'" p. 15.

29 The following chart of plays (p. 105) containing named Vices is taken with a few modifications from F. H. Mares, "The Origin of the Figure Called 'The Vice,'" p. 12.

30 For example, Common Conditions and Jack Juggler, the title of each being the name of the respective Vice in each play; and Pickerynge's *A New Enterlude of Vice*, Contayning the Historye of Horestes, in which there is the suggestion that the Vice is the most important aspect of the play, and that the story of Orestes is circumscribed by the Vice-role, rather than the other way around.

31 See footnote 1 above.


34 That the release of sublimated aggression does, in fact, underlie the comic response is suggested by an examination of the terminology used to describe joking and humour: "to break a jest"; "to crack a joke"; "that destroys (slays, kills) me"; "I was tickled to death"; "I nearly died laughing"; "I laughed so hard I thought I'd die."


36 *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, Schell and Shuchter, p. 364; *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*, Schell and Shuchter, p. 382.

37 *The Trial of Treasure*, Dodsley, III: 278; *Ulpian Fulwell, Like Will to Like*, Dodsley, III: 309.


39 *Poetics*, 1449 a9.


43 The title of the play in which Courage is the chief character
## PLAYS CONTAINING NAMED VICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Name of Vice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play of Love</td>
<td>J. Heywood</td>
<td>1533</td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>Neither Lover Nor Loved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play of the Weather</td>
<td>J. Heywood</td>
<td>1533</td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>Merry Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Three Laws</td>
<td>John Bale</td>
<td>1538-47</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Ambition, Avarice, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Estates</td>
<td>D. Lindsay</td>
<td>1540-54</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Dissat, Falset, Flatterie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respublica</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td>1553</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Avarice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Juggler</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td>1553-58</td>
<td>Plautine</td>
<td>Jack Juggler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Darius</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td>1565</td>
<td>Scripture</td>
<td>Iniquity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enough is as Good as a Feast</td>
<td>W. Wager</td>
<td>1565-70</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Covetousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Grissil</td>
<td>J. Phillip</td>
<td>1565</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Politic Persuasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Magdalene</td>
<td>L. Wager</td>
<td>1566</td>
<td>Scripture</td>
<td>Infidelity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horestes</td>
<td>J. P[ickerynge]</td>
<td>1567</td>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>Courage or Revenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trial of Treasure</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td>1567</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Inclination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appius and Virginia</td>
<td>R.B.</td>
<td>1567</td>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>Haphazard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like Will to Like</td>
<td>U. Fulwell</td>
<td>1568</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Nichol Newfangle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambises</td>
<td>T. Preston</td>
<td>1569</td>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>Ambidexter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glyomon and Clamydes</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td>c. 1570</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Subtle Shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Conditions</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td>1576</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Common Conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tide Tarrieth No Man</td>
<td>G. Wapull</td>
<td>1576</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Courage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Tyler and His Wife</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td>c. 1578</td>
<td>Farce</td>
<td>Desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All for Money</td>
<td>T. Lupton</td>
<td>1577-78</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanna</td>
<td>T. Garter</td>
<td>1578</td>
<td>Scripture</td>
<td>Ill Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wit and Wisdom</td>
<td>F. Merbury (?)</td>
<td>1579</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Idleness (Secular)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reflects this philosophy—The Tide Tarrieth No Man. It is significant, however, that this proverb is to be interpreted in a double-sense from the point of view of either virtue or vice. With respect to the former, the implication is that because time waits for no one, man must prepare himself for the Day of Judgment, while with respect to the latter, there is the suggestion that man must take advantage of what little time he has, to live life to the fullest—that the holiday one can experience on earth is of limited duration.

44 "The Great Dramatic Forms: The Comic Rhythm," Feeling and Form, pp. 326-50. Describing a similar aspect of the Vice-role, Cushman observes: "The Vice appears as the embodiment of worldliness and sensuality, he is free from all restraints of religion and from all bonds of moral ideals. He is concerned only for one thing, that humanity shall give free reign to his inclinations, not however that a soul may be by this means ruined, but that man may be led to enjoy an existence of freedom and pleasure, the vicious ideal of happiness being in every sense the reverse of the spiritual" (p. 91, emphasis mine).


47 Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art, p. 45, emphasis mine.


49 Ibid., p. 754.


51 The Allegory of Evil, p. 141.

52 Rossiter, p. 91.

53 Ibid., p. 127.
Before we leave the Vice of convention and turn to an examination of some of his later descendants, it is necessary to provide a short statement concerning his origins. This was, in fact, the starting point of the first chapter of this dissertation—an attempt to discover an answer to Willeford's question concerning the relationship between the Vice, the devil, and the fool as dramatic characters. After examining the development of the comic-demonic figure from his early, crude beginnings in the mystery cycles to his full-blown realization in the character of the Vice, we are able to perceive traces of the influence of all of the following: the devil, the fool, the earlier allegorical vices, as well as two character types of Plautine comedy—the crafty servant and the braggart soldier. Contrary to the critical predilection for choosing one, or less frequently, two, of these four influences and discounting the rest, it is impossible to identify only a single source for the derivation of the Vice—his origins are unquestionably mixed. Because he combines both the forces of the comic and the demonic, he is, in a sense, a composite of all the infernal villains and merry-making buffoons, tricksters, and clowns who have preceded him.

The influence of the allegorical representatives of evil loosely referred to as "vices" is probably the most obvious to discern, because it is the most immediate. We have seen the process of differentiation at work within the development of the morality tradition, the evolution of
one figure as the dramatic superior over the other characters morally aligned with the forces of evil. This process of differentiation is apparent in the prologue and cast-list of Respublica, the first play within the morality tradition to use the theatrical label "the Vice." In the prologue, the characters Insolence, Flattery, Oppression, and Avarice are referred to as "these vices," while in the cast-list, Avarice is distinguished from the others by receiving beside his name the designation, "the Vice of the play."

The influence of the devil and the fool on the Vice's derivation is not as direct; however, elements suggesting both of these as the forerunners of the Vice are manifested at several points within the plays themselves. The devil, in some of his representations in early English drama, was a broadly comic character, whose infernal humour in many respects is quite similar to that of the Vice. Noise, bluster, and sensation characterize the entrance and exit of both figures, and the fireworks which were traditionally part of the devil's stage equipment are employed by perhaps the earliest figure to be labelled the "Vice," in Heywood's Play of Love. The devil's traditional ubiquity and his duplicity, as reflected in his use of disguise and deception, are also qualities shared by the Vice. Similarly, both are given over to frequent profanities and obscene jests. Moreover, several of the Vices themselves acknowledge that they are the direct descendants of the devil. Infidelity in Mary Magdalene reveals that he is the son of Satan, Nichol Newfangle is identified as both Lucifer's apprentice and godson, and Covetous suggests his affiliation with the Archenemy as follows: "'Covetous,' sayeth the wise
man, 'is the root of all evil:' Therefore Covetous is the chiefest that cometh from the devil" (Enough Is As Good As A Feast, Schell and Shuchter, p. 382). Prompted by the forces of secularization, the evolution of the more human Vice from the supernatural devil would, therefore, appear to be a natural progression. An indication of this evolutionary process can be discovered by comparing the dramatis personae of the Digby version of the Mary Magdalene story with the later play by Lewis Wager. In the cycle play, it is the Devil who, along with the World and the Flesh, commissions the seven deadly sins, significantly referred to as the "seven devils," to bring about Mary's downfall, while in Wager's play, the devil is totally absent. Although Infidelity refers to Satan as his father, the role of temptation is conducted completely by the Vice, aided by the three lesser vices who are his confederates in evil. Titivillus in Mankind probably provides the most salient example of the dramatic relationship between these two characters. Although Spivack denies a continuity in dramatic development from the earlier figure to the later one, he nevertheless describes Titivillus as "a figure in transition from devil to vice."¹ Despite the fact that Titivillus is explicitly identified as "the fiend of hell," his clever intrigue and deceptions, his obscenities, his practical jokes, and jovial spirit are all elements of the later, more humanized Vice role. Also like the Vice, Titivillus is on intimate terms with the audience: he reveals his plans to them, promises them much "sport," and invites their respect for the great skill he has demonstrated in bringing about the downfall of Mankind. The comedy of the Vice inevitably invites his comparison to
another figure, none other than the archetypal comedian himself, namely the fool of tradition. In his babbling nonsense, his predilection for witty verbal play, his horseplay and numerous pranks and jests, the Vice is, in fact, an embodiment of the clown, the jester, the buffoon, and the trickster—all forms of the fool in his various manifestations. There are, for example, numerous references to the Vice's tail or fox-tail, which is part of the conventional garb of the fool who often wears fox-tails, donkey's ears, coxcombs, calf-skins, or other animal relics.² A number of Vices reveal themselves with the "natural" aspects of folly, and demonstrate what Willeford calls the "psychic aberration" of the fool.³ Like the "brainsick" Fancy, one of the early clown- rites in Skelton's Magnificence, Avarice has a swarm of bees buzzing in his head, and Iniquity, the fox-tailed Vice in King Darius announces: "I am mad now to the sole of my foot."⁴

The theatre commentaries of the late fifteenth century suggest that the two roles of Vice and fool were commonly identified,⁵ and the most famous professional jester of the Elizabethan period, Richard Tarleton, was often referred to as the Vice.⁶ Some literary critics have argued that there is yet a prior relationship between the fool and the devil which precedes that between the fool and the Vice, that the fool of the folk games gave rise to the devil of the mystery-play who then developed into the Vice,⁷ while others believe alternatively that the evolution took the formula of: devil became Vice became clown.⁸ The exact direction of the relationship between the fool and the Vice can probably never be determined, but in the face of much conflicting opinion
it is expedient to note that the fool in his multiform representations prior to the emergence of the Vice inevitably influenced the Vice's comedy, while the comic aspects of the Vice-role undoubtedly influenced the development of the stage clowns who followed him.

A further factor, which has not been mentioned but probably, to some extent, influenced the development of the Vice, lies in the contribution made by Roman comedy to the evolution of Tudor and Elizabethan drama. In some of the plays the role of the Vice resembles that of the miles gloriosus, the braggart soldier—for example, that of Sensuality in The Four Elements, Iniquity in King Darius, Ambidexter in Republica—while in other plays, most notably The Play of the Weather, Jack Juggler, and Ralph Roister Doister, the Vice-figure functions to a large extent, like the crafty servant of Plautine drama. We should recognize that neither of these roles is totally extraneous to the character of the Vice—the allegorical vices were frequently represented as soldiers on the side of evil as a result of their derivation from the military Psychomachia; the demonic character has always been loud and boastful about his plans and deeds; and a number of Vice-figures have insinuated themselves into the good graces of their human victim by offering to be his servant. Robert Withington, writing about the influence of Latin comedy on the ancestry of the Vice, argues convincingly that "a figure from foreign drama cannot be naturalized away from home unless there is a congenial soil in which the transplanted element can root itself." Such a congenial soil for the naturalization of the witty servant and miles gloriosus existed in the evolving character of the Vice.
To extend Withington's metaphor one step further, we can generalize that the ground had, similarly, been prepared for the propagation of the Vice-figure himself in all the representatives of the comic and demonic realms who came before him or whose development coincided with that of his own. Indeed, a great deal of the Vice-figure's perplexing ambiguity stems from his heterogeneous derivation. To over-emphasize the comic aspects of his character by arguing that the Vice is pre-eminently a descendant of the fool, or to accentuate the serious homiletic nature of his origins by insisting that he is a summation of the Deadly Sins or the allegorical vitiae of the morality tradition is to deny the essential duality which has defined his character throughout all its manifestations. Just as the forces of both comedy and evil define the fundamental aspects of the Vice role, so neither force can be ultimately dissociated from the factors which contributed to the origins of this figure. The devil, the fool, the allegorical vices, the figures from Roman comedy, the characters in the English folk play, as well as such infernal humorists as Mak, Cain, Herod, Pilate, and the torturers of Christ, all contributed to the procreation and further cultivation of the Vice, in much the same way as the Vice, in turn, prepared the soil for the numerous amoral tricksters, jesting villains, and diabolical fun makers who succeeded him. We shall now turn to an examination of five of these later representatives of the comic-demonic figure whose comic ebullience, devilish intrigue, and moral ambivalence would, perhaps, appear somewhat unfathomable, if we had not previously encountered the Vice.
In Jonson's play *The Devil Is An Ass*, Satan reminisces about the past, the old days "when Every Great Man had his Vice stand by him, / In his long coat, shaking his wooden dagger." These times have long since passed, however, and Satan feels that the modern world is in need of Vices "stranger and newer" (1. 101) in order to fulfill the demonic purpose. Because the Vice of tradition is no longer viable, Satan explains that

We must therefore aim  
At extraordinary subtle ones now,  
When we do send to keep us up in credit:  
Not old Iniquities.  

(11. 114-17)

The remainder of this dissertation will examine a number of the "stranger," "newer" and "extraordinary subtle" representatives of the old Vice as they appear transplanted in a few selected works of English drama and fiction. I intend to focus upon five problematical figures—Falstaff in *Henry IV*, Volpone in Jonson's play by that name, Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, and Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. All five of these figures combine features which are both humorous and diabolic in nature; and in each character, the attribute of comic-demonic ambiguity is heightened to such an extreme that it informs an over-all ambivalent response to the literary work in which he or she operates.

This dissertation set out to discover the relationship between the comic and demonic realms by investigating the workings of a number of literary characters in whom the qualities of both devil and clown are intertwined. The study of this pattern might have been initiated from the vantage point of myth, primitive ritual, the literature of other
cultures, or even painting, because as Kris, Campbell, Rossiter and others have shown, it is possible in all of these to isolate figures who conform to the character-type in question. The vantage point of the morality Vice was, however, the one chosen because in tracing this figure's origin from the liturgical element in early English literature, it was possible to provide a historical and sociological foundation upon which further thematic exploration of this topic could be structured.

As we have seen, the association of the forces of comedy and evil in medieval drama served not only the external, regulatory demands of the traditional order (the doctrinal authority of the Church), but also the internal, subversive demands of those bound by that order (the heathen temper of the folk). And it is, of course, this relationship between external authority and internal subversion which underlies the central problem of the moral ambiguity of the comic-demonic figure and the ambivalence of the emotional response he precipitates.

Up to this point then, I have been mainly concerned with the development of the comic-demonic figure from his rudimentary beginnings in early drama to his emergence as the most popular personage on the Tudor stage. My basic purpose is, however, not to trace the development of a dramatic character from his earliest beginnings to the present time, but rather to explore the factors which underlie the literary representation of the converging forces of comedy and evil. In order both to expand and facilitate this exploration, the method of inquiry in the second half of this study will shift in focus away from a historical examination of the direct influence of the morality Vice on later literary
characters, towards a discussion of the recurrent psychological patterns which define the essential ambiguity of the comic-demonic figure. The following chapters will, consequently, be much more analytical in nature, attempting to demonstrate how the comic-demonic features of each character under scrutiny are intrinsically related to the thematic patterns and imagery of the larger literary work.

The characters I have chosen to discuss were selected primarily for two reasons. In the first place, each one presents something of an enigma. In an attempt to make whatever insights as far-reaching as possible in implication, I decided to concentrate upon figures whose comic-demonic nature places them among the most prominently problematical in the body of English literature. Just as the field of literary criticism has had difficulty in identifying the origins of the Vice, in determining whether this figure is basically a descendant of the devil or the fool, so it has encountered similar problems in determining whether each of these five later characters is essentially comic or evil in nature. Falstaff, Volpone, Becky, Fagin and Quilp all experience the characteristic final disposition of the Vice—they are ultimately either banished, imprisoned, killed off, or considerably reduced in circumstance—and in every case, commentators have articulated an uneasy, ambivalent response towards the fate of these figures. Secondly, the comic-demonic attributes of each of the five characters can be viewed as a threshold through which to enter the dramatic or fictional worlds of two major playwrights and two major novelists—Shakespeare, Jonson, Dickens and Thackeray.

Moreover, in each of the works I shall be discussing, not only
are the forces of comedy and evil significantly related to the major strands of imagery and thematic motifs, but also each author emphasizes a different aspect of the prototypical comic-demonic figure whose composite features we have observed in our discussion of the dramatic characteristics of the Vice. In *Henry IV*, Falstaff's comic-demonic nature considerably elucidates the intermediary position within the socio-political framework which Shakespeare is delineating--the amoral position between virtue and vice, order and disorder, court and tavern. In *Volpone*, Jonson dramatizes the ambiguous underworld of the comic-demonic realm, and employs the *magnifico* of Venice as a kind of infernal priest whose idolatrous worship of his gold and licentious indulgence of his baser passions takes the form of a comic profanation of sacred value, resulting in the temporary ascendancy of a demonic, saturnalian world. The discussion of *Vanity Fair* examines Thackeray's representation of a female infernal humorist. In this novel, Becky Sharp emerges as a kind of demonic comic-heroine whose womanhood intrinsically defines the quality of both the evil and the comedy she perpetrates. And finally, in Dickens' exploration of the ambivalent feelings contained within the parent-child configuration, Fagin and Quilp fulfill the traditional Vice role, acting as aged corruptors of youthful innocence. Both men function thematically as surrogate father figures whose comic-demonic qualities make them at the same time menacing and attractive to the children with whom they interact.

There are of course, numerous other figures in English literature who might have been included in this study. Merrygreek in *Ralph Roister*
Doister, Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Subtle and Face in *The Alchemist*, Horner in *The Country Wife*, Richard Lovelace in *Clarissa*, Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, Sir Willoughby Patterne in *The Egoist*, Christy in *The Playboy of the Western World* and Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses* are examples of other dramatic and fictional characters who combine to a greater or lesser extent, features which are both humorous and diabolic in nature. Furthermore, it is not difficult to conceive of placing these characters within a historical framework, using the antecedent Vice of the morality tradition as the basis for observing the evolution and transformation of the comic-demonic figure in conjunction with the socio-political and literary developments of later centuries. My basic premise in this dissertation has been, however, that the relationship between the spirit of comedy and the dark, destructive forces of the demonic realm is a recurrent pattern in human experience, a pattern which is manifested almost universally, regardless of the factors of time, geographical location, or the form of artistic or cultural representation. Without question, in each of the works which are to be investigated in the following chapters, the socio-political, economic, cultural and artistic climate of the times has prepared a congenial soil for the transplantation of the comic-demonic figure. Rather than dwell at length on the historical developments which have contributed to the preparation of this soil, I have chosen to focus upon the element of congeniality itself. Because the comic-demonic figure is essentially more an archetype than a dramatic convention, I have found it more fruitful to consider extensively the ways in which a few of the most dynamic of these archetypal figures
function within the personalized artistic vision of four major English writers. In this way then, the last half of this dissertation will present an analytical treatment of what are, to my mind, five of the most "congenial" representatives of the comic-demonic figure, employing the Vice not so much as an analogue as an avatar--an early, pervasive, and singularly formalized embodiment of the confluent forces of the comic and demonic domains.
Notes for Chapter IV


3. The Fool and His Scepter, p. 23.


9. In Ralph Roister Doister, Merrygreek, although not specifically designated as a Vice, definitely fulfills a number of the elements of the Vice-role.


Chapter V

"A GENTLEMAN OF THE SHADE"—FALSTAFF AS VICE IN HENRY IV

That Shakespeare employed several patterns from the morality tradition in the structuring of Henry IV has been acknowledged by a number of critics.¹ According to popular chronicle and legend, Prince Hal was a dissolute youth, a madcap Prince, who, after a period of wild exploits and riotous living, suddenly underwent a kind of moral reformation prior to his accession to the throne. In both parts of Henry IV, Shakespeare examines Hal's licentiousness and reform within the morality framework. The Prince is presented as a Mankind figure (in some respects similar to Skelton's Prince Magnificence) who is corrupted by the forces of evil, yields to the excesses and revelry of the tavern and the brothel, and ultimately repents, abandoning his evil companions and aligning himself at the end with the side of virtue. In Shakespeare's History Plays, E. W. Tillyard argues for the unity of the two plays partly on the basis of the similarity in the morality structures of both parts. In Part 1, the Prince "has to choose Morality-fashion, between Sloth or Vanity, to which he is drawn by his bad companions, and Chivalry, to which he is drawn by his father and his brothers," while in Part 2, "he has to choose Morality-fashion, between disorder or misrule, to which he is drawn by his bad companions, and Order or Justice (the supreme kingly virtue) to which he is drawn by his father and by his father's deputy the Lord Chief Justice."² Although he appears only in the second part, the Lord Chief Justice is the principal representative of virtue in Henry IV, and Sir
John Falstaff, appearing in and dominating both parts, is, without question, the chief representative of vice.

The metaphor of the morality is pervasive throughout both plays especially in reference to Falstaff. He is explicitly identified as "that reverend Vice," "that grey iniquity" "that vanity in years," and is imaged as beating Hal out of his kingdom with "a dagger of lath" (1, II.iv.134), presumably driving him to hell. Falstaff's role as a tempter is asserted as the Lord Chief Justice accuses him of being the Prince's "ill angel" (2, I.iii.186)--like the Malus Angelus of The Castle and the Digby Mary Magdalene--and Hal calls him a "villainous abominable misleader of youth" (1, II.iv.456), and "the tutor and feeder of my riots" (2, V.v.66). He is also associated with the Prince of the demonic realm, himself; he is "that old white-bearded Satan," "a devil . . . in the likeness of an old fat man" (1, II.iv.457,441). Moreover, as a dramatic character, Falstaff resembles, in many respects, a number of the Vice figures we have encountered in the previous chapter. We have already remarked upon the Falstaffian analogues discernible in the character of Gluttony in Medwall's Nature, who arms himself for battle with a cheese and bottle, and in theswaggering bravado of Sensual Appetite who proves the extent of his military prowess by "killing" an already deceased man. Other cowardly braggarts preceding Falstaff include Iniquity in King Darius, who boastfully lies of his bravery in confronting Charity and then later attempts to flee to his mother for protection, and Ambidexter in Cambises, who also vainly boasts and then runs for fear. Falstaff's first appearance in 2 Henry IV "with his Page bearing
his sword and buckler" and his speech about his tailor and the twenty-two yards of satin for his new coat, recalls the flamboyant entry of Pride in *Nature*, another swaggering dandy whose sword is so heavy that he requires the services of his boy to carry it. As the sensual man given over to the unbridled release of the baser passions, Falstaff resembles Sloth, Gluttony, and Lechery of the deadly sins, as well as such characters as Sensuality, Sensual Appetite, Courage, and Natural Inclination. In his ability to double-deal, to change positions in the midst of any situation, he is evocative again of Ambidexter who plays with both hands and also of Subtle Shift in *Clyomon* and *Clamydes*.

Furthermore, Falstaff is an inhabitant of the demonic realm, the secularized underworld of the tavern, the brothel, and the gallows. Like such figures as Mischief, Riot, and Hikscorner, he is a thief, a highwayman, a taker of purses; and jokes about hanging and incarceration abound throughout both plays so that the ominous reality of Newgate, Tyburn, and the Fleet is never very far away from Falstaff's person. Similarly, in his role as "the villainous abominable misleader of youth," he fulfills a function of several of the Vice figures previously examined—namely, the tutoring of the young moral delinquent in the dissipations of tavern and stews. In Falstaff's first dramatic appearance, we are given a salient image of the riotous world in which he dwells. To his scene-opening question of "what time of day is it," the Prince replies:

> What a devil hast thou to do with the time of day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping houses, and the blessed sun himself a
fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of day.  

(1, I.ii.6-12)

Shakespeare's rich idiom as reflected in the words of the Prince conveys a marvelous picture of the landscape of Falstaff's demonic universe. In its embodiment of the timeless realm of the instincts and the eternal presence of sensual gratification, the world of the fat knight is not circumscribed by minutes on the clock or days on the calendar, but rather by the repetitive experiences of eating and drinking, and fornicating at the brothels ("leaping houses") with "hot wenches" wearing the traditional taffeta petticoat of the prostitute.

Like all Vice figures, Falstaff is both a tempter and a schemer. In his role as tempter, he encourages the Prince to give reign to his predisposition for "riot," a word which the king employs four times when speaking of his son's dissipations. Falstaff, who describes himself as living "out of all order, out of all compass" (1, III.iii.18-19), is, in fact, an incarnation of the spirit of disorder or misrule, and he attempts to make the Prince his pawn in the dissemination of this spirit throughout the kingdom. He advises the Prince to rob the king's exchequer "with unwashed hands" (1, III.iii.183), and attempts to convince him to eliminate the gallows from the realm:

Falstaff: ... But I prithee sweet wag, shall there be gallows standing in England when thou art king? and resolution thus fubbed as it is with the rusty curb of old father Antic the law? Do not thou when thou art king hang a thief.

Prince: No, thou shalt.

Falstaff: Shall I? O rare! By the Lord, I'll be a brave judge!
Prince: Thou judgest false already, I mean thou shalt have the hanging of thieves, and so become a rare hangman.

Falstaff: Well, Hal, well; and in some sort it jumps with my humour, as well as waiting in court, I can tell you.

Prince: For obtaining of suits?

Falstaff: Yea, for obtaining of suits, whereof the hangman hath no lean wardrobe.

(1, I.ii.56-71)

The above interchange reflects a number of Vice-motifs interfused in the character of Falstaff. Besides the pattern of temptation, the concept of inversion is quite conspicuous in Falstaff's vision, as the thief is to become a judge, and the potentially convicted felon to become the hangman. Similarly, the quality of resolution commonly associated with the forces of justice and order here becomes descriptive of the temperament of the law-breaker, while the law itself becomes "father Antic," the old buffoon, which is, of course, an inversion of the role that Falstaff himself plays within the context of the drama. We also are presented with an example of the double-sided nature of the Vice's verbal wit, in the puns on the words "court" and "suits." Hal interprets Falstaff's remark to mean that he would just as soon be a judge or a hangman as a suitor in the king's court waiting for royal favour. Falstaff, however, picks up the alternate meanings of the two words to suggest that he would like to wait in the courts of law for the culprits' "suits" or coats, which were traditionally given to the hangman after the execution. Like all Vices, Falstaff is always looking out for his own material advantage, and the role of the hangman (which has also been associated with a number of Vice-figures) appeals to him as a result of both the physical benefit
and the element of topsyturvydom which this position would afford him.

In his role of tempter and as an embodiment of the forces of disorder, Falstaff is diametrically opposed to the figure of the Lord Chief Justice, his chief antagonist in the struggle for the moral allegiance of the Prince in the second part of *Henry IV*. He openly defies the Chief Justice, ignoring the latter's summons to appear for questioning in respect to the Gadshill robbery, and uses his position as an officer in the service to escape chastisement. The initial encounter between these two is indicative of Falstaff's attitude towards the law—he both mocks it and evades it, pretending that it does not exist. Like Folly in *Magnificence*, he feigns deafness, making believe that he cannot hear the official voice of reprimand, and changes the topic of conversation whenever it is directed at his misdeeds. He also baits the Chief Justice with "more than impudent sauciness" (2, III.ii.123), accusing him of being old and infirm, and turning his serious pronouncements to bantering jest, another pattern we have previously seen in the mocking attitude of the Vice towards the personified representative of virtue:

Chief Justice: Well, the truth is, Sir John, you live in great infamy.

Falstaff: He that buckles him in my belt cannot live in less.

Chief Justice: Your means are very slender and your waste is great.

Falstaff: I would it were otherwise; I would my means were greater, and my waist slenderer.

(2, I.ii.155-62)

Towards the end of Part 2, Shakespeare explicitly asserts Falstaff's enmity towards the Chief Justice, and hence underlines further the
morality structure of the plays, as Sir John triumphantly proclaims upon his preparation to leave Gloucestershire to greet the newly-crowned king: "Let us take any man's horses, the laws of England are at my commandment. Blessed are they that have been my friends; and woe to my lord chief-justice" (2, V.v.142-45).

Besides being a tempter figure, Falstaff is also an inordinate schemer. He is a flagrant prevaricator whose "incomprehensible lies" (1, I.ii.180) are pervasive throughout both plays. The Chief Justice at one point remarks upon Falstaff's "manner of wrenching the true cause the false way" (2, II.ii.120-21), and the fat rogue's "monstrous devices" (1, II.iv.309) include hacking his sword and smearing the blood from a self-inflicted nosebleed over his garments in order to attest to his valour during the Gadshill robbery; stabbing the body of the already deceased Hotspur and taking credit for killing him; cleverly manoeuvring his way out of paying his tavern debts to Mistress Quickly; duping Justice Shallow out of a thousand pounds; and "misusing the King's press damnably" (1, IV.ii.12) by accepting bribes from conscripted men who wish to avoid being sent to battle.

Falstaff's comedy also owes much to his derivation from the morality Vice. In the passages from the plays cited above, several examples of the double-edged quality of the Vice's verbal wit are readily apparent; and indeed, the pun and double entendre are intrinsic components of Falstaff's humour. Moreover, the sublimated release of instinctual aggressive and sexual energy is also manifest in the comic response which he generates. The tavern episodes, particularly in Part 2, are
laden with obscene sexual innuendos--references to the pox, "naked weapons," and riding the "mare" abound; and the comic battles with Fang and Snare and with Captain Pistol recall the rough and tumble brawls of the Vice and the low characters in almost every morality. During the scuffle that takes place when Fang and Snare attempt to arrest Falstaff for failing to pay his tavern debts to Mistress Quickly, the aggressive overtones are clearly evident in the fat knight's mock-heroic cries: "Away varlets! Draw, Bardolph: cut me off the villain's head: throw the queen [Mrs. Q.] in the channel" (2, II.i.i.50-52). Like the Vice's dagger of lathe, Falstaff's weapons are, however, essentially non-lethal; he carries a bottle of sack in his pistol case at Shrewsbury, and the only person he stabs with his sword in battle is already dead.

The final disposition of Falstaff at the end of Part 2--his banishment from the new king's presence--is also in accordance with the morality structure of *Henry IV*. Traditionally the Vice flourished until the conclusion of the drama, whereupon he was hanged, banished, or served with some other measure of punishment by the triumphant forces of virtue. Falstaff's banishment also is in keeping with the social purposes of comedy: the reassertion of the traditional system of values which, during the course of the drama, has been mockingly flouted. We shall later examine more closely Falstaff's liberating attack on conventional value and the comic catharsis of repressed instinctual desire he provides, but at this point we should note that Sir John manifests here both the characteristic unconcern at his own destruction, and the typical ubiquity of the Vice which transcends all attempts to constrain him.
Undismayed at his sentence, Falstaff is more concerned with the thousand pounds he has taken from Shallow, and he advises the latter that his banishment has been a pretence devised by Hal in order to gain public approval, and that he will be privately sent for that night to be fittingly rewarded. Moreover, in the Epilogue, Shakespeare undercuts the gravity of Falstaff's punishment by promising the audience that they will see more of "fat meat" in the sequel to *Henry IV*.

Both Falstaff's indifference towards death and his irrepresibility have, in fact, been implied at various points throughout both plays. When the sheriff knocks at the door to investigate the Gadshill robbery, Falstaff expresses his lack of alarm with a typical verbal jest: "... let him enter. If I become not a cart as well as another man, a plague upon my bringing up! I hope I shall as soon be strangled with a halter as another" (1, II.iv.490-92). Punning on the words "bringing up" which have a double meaning of "the summons before a court of law," and "social breeding or upbringing," Falstaff implies that his upbringing has been such that it would be appropriate for him to take his place on the cart bearing the condemned to the gallows. He nonchalantly adds that he might as well die by hanging as by any other means, and then proceeds to fall asleep behind the arras while the sheriff and his men search the house. His lack of concern is extended toward the death of others as well. Without any thought for their safety, he leads his army of "ragamuffins" into the thick of battle where all are slaughtered. Although some critics view this fact as an indication of his lack of cowardice, it is more likely that Falstaff, always looking out
for his own material advantage, is more interested in collecting his men's
death pay, which was generally given to the captain of soldiers slain in
combat. When Hal comments on the pitiful sight of the band of vagabonds,
Falstaff's retort reveals the almost inhuman indifference of the Vice
towards the mortality of his followers: "Tut, tut, good enough to toss,
food for powder, food for powder, they'll fill a pit as well as better;
tush, man, mortal men, mortal men" (1, IV.ii.65-67).

The ubiquity of the Vice in his embodiment of the unbridled
energy of the instincts is also reflected by Falstaff on several occasions.
When Bardolph informs Poinson and the Prince that his master is "in bodily
health," Poins declares: "Marry, the immortal part needs a physician;
but that moves not him: though that be sick, it dies not" (2, II.ii.111-13).
And it is of course this immortal and demonic part of him that also "dies
not" on the battle-field at Shrewsbury. Prevailing over such evanescent
values as honour and courage, Falstaff's life instinct is so powerful
that he paradoxically counterfeits death so that he may live. Feigning
death in order to escape being slain by Douglas, he later rises in
phoenix-like fashion only to assert himself as "the true and perfect image
of life indeed" (1, V.iv.118). Moreover, the sheer pervasiveness of the
life-force of which he is representative is dramatically asserted when
at one point he identifies himself as "Sir John with all Europe"
(2, II.ii.146), and even more inclusively, when he warns Hal against sev­
ering their relationship: "banish plump Jack, and banish all the world"
(1, II.iv.474). When Hal replies "I do, I will" (1. 475), he is fore­
shadowing the inevitable doom which awaits Falstaff at the end of Part 2.
It is also inevitable, however, that in banishing "plump Jack," the Prince will deprive himself of the vitality of the life-force which the "world" of the fat knight represents.

Up to this point we have been examining the morality structure of Henry IV and Falstaff's embodiment of the role of Vice within that structure. To view the two plays simply as examples in the later morality tradition is, however, to limit immeasurably the scope of Shakespeare's complex moral vision. Using the pattern of the morality as the foundation for the dramatic action, Shakespeare thematically probes the meaning of this conventional structure in both plays. Although the sides of contention are clearly drawn—order versus disorder, virtue versus vice—there is a serious questioning of the validity of this kind of categorical division, an implicit suggestion that neither side is pre-eminently the morally superior one, that both sides are necessary for the development of a complete experiential awareness, and that each side contains both deleterious weakness and nurturing strength. Shakespeare suggests that, rather than a clearly demarcated division of the cosmic forces into the moral categories of good and evil, a profound ambiguity underlies all experience, and nowhere is this suggestion more discernible than in his treatment of Falstaff, a character in whom the Vice-like quality of ambiguity is, perhaps, developed to its fullest potential.

The foregoing chapters have discussed how a profanation of the sacred characteristically underlies the comedy of the Vice, how his blasphemous mockery undercuts the sacred values of the traditional order,
resulting in the "breaking up of all restraints" which is generic to the comic response. Falstaff's comedy contains this very kind of liberating irreverence directed against such sacred values as truth, virtue, valour, honour, law, kingship, and death. Bradley, in his analysis of Falstaff as "the enemy of anything serious, and especially everything respectable and moral," presents an excellent summary of the various ways in which this infernal humorist promotes the comic profanation of sacred values in *Henry IV*:

He will make truth appear absurd by solemn statements, which he utters with perfect gravity and which he expects nobody to believe; and honour, by demonstrating that it cannot sit a leg, and that neither the living nor the dead can possess it; and law, by evading all the attacks of its highest representative and almost forcing him to laugh at his own defeat; and patriotism, by filling his pockets with the bribes offered by competent soldiers who want to escape service while he takes in their stead the halt and maimed and gaol-birds; and duty, by showing how he labours in his vocation—of thieving; and courage, alike by his mocking at his own capture of Colville and gravely claiming to have killed Hotspur; and war, by offering the Prince his bottle of sack when he is asked for a sword; and religion, by amusing himself with remorse at odd times when he has nothing else to do; and the fear of death, by maintaining perfectly untouched, in the face of imminent peril, and even while he feels the fear of death, the very same power of dissolving it in persiflage that he shows when he sits at ease in his inn.  

There is, however, another factor underlying Falstaff's demonic mockery of the sacred mores of the traditional order besides "the breaking up of all restraints." Shakespeare employs the fat knight's comic desecrations as a means of exposing the weakness and corruptions of the prevailing social institutions. Like the Vice who holds a curious intermediating position between the audience and the dramatic action, Falstaff is somewhat detached from the incidents presented on stage, and serves as commentator on the political overtones of the historical events which
are the focus of the two plays. When Falstaff defends thievery as being his vocation, an honest way to make his living, not only is he diabolically parodying the divine scripture ("Let every man abide in the same vocation wherein he was called" [I Corinthians, VII]), but he is also indirectly providing a sharp criticism against the ingrained thievery of the world of the court. While Falstaff's vocation is purse-taking, that of the court may be defined as throne-snatching; the King has stolen the crown from Richard II, and now the rebels led by the Percies are preparing to take the throne once more. In his last speech to Prince Hal, the king admits that his acquisition of the crown has not been an honest one, and it has subsequently resulted in a further rebellion by another group of power-seekers:

God knows, my son,
By what bypaths and indirect crook'd ways
I met this crown; and I myself know well
How troublesome it sat upon my head.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

It seem'd in me
But as an honour snatch'd with boisterous hand,
And I had many living to upbraid
My gain of it by their assistances;
Which daily grew to quarrel and to bloodshed.
Wounding supposed peace.

(2, IV.v.184-96)

Similarly, Falstaff's avowed lack of concern over the slaughter of his men—"food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better"—is not only an example of the indifference of the Vice; it is, as well, a scathing comment on the insensibility of the ruling class towards the vast expenditure of human life which takes place in battles prompted by petty and often unscrupulous causes or the personal desire for power. In much the same way Falstaff's devious nature, his predilection for telling
"incomprehensible lies" (1, I.ii.180) is mirrored in Prince John's equivocating promise to the rebels that he will redress their grievances, only to lead them to their execution after they have discharged their armies in good faith. And his feigning of death on the battlefield is also reflected in the similarly underhanded military tactic of having several men disguise themselves as the king in order to deceive the enemy. Furthermore, Falstaff's rejection of the chivalric ideal of honour serves as a commentary on the dubious quality of the honour manifested even by those nobles who are acclaimed to possess it. Where is the honour in a man like the king who steals the crown from another, or in a man like Prince John who, through false promises, convinces the enemy to agree to a truce? And finally, the quality of Hotspur's honour is likewise assailed as Shakespeare reveals him to be a man who, while professing his idealistic belief in the justness of the rebels' cause, cold-bloodedly plots to divide the kingdom into three equal parts, a man who goes so far as to suggest altering the course of the River Trent in order to ensure that his section will have as much land as the others.

Like the comedy of the Vice, that of Falstaff is characterized by the festive spirit of "topsy-turvydom." Shakespeare has carefully structured both plays so that the comic sequences, in style and structure, represent an inversion of the serious sections of the plot: the life of the court is replaced by the life of the tavern; verse yields to prose; gravity of language is superseded by obscenity and verbal wit; vice supplants virtue; disorder overwhelms order; authority gives way to licence; and idleness dispels the spirit of enterprise. Although he is the chief
protagonist of the comic sections, Falstaff, paradoxically, holds a median position between both plots: he is both a knight and a frequenter of taverns. In a remarkable example of the kind of verbal wit typical of the Vice, he describes himself as a "squire of the night's body" (1, I.ii.24), punning on both "night" and "body" so that the various combinations become "squire of the knight's body," "the night's bawdy," and "the knight's bawdy." The triple ambiguity of Falstaff's word-play may in fact, be taken as a graphic crystallization of Shakespeare's three-dimensional moral vision. The first meaning is representative of the side of virtue--the protector or bodyguard of nobility; the second is an image of the riotous living of the underworld realm; and the third is a composite of the previous two, and is the one which most closely approximates the hybrid quality of Falstaff's ambiguous moral stance. Through the upside-down impulse of his comedy, Falstaff transports the world of the court to the tavern at Eastcheap when he conducts the money of the "King's exchequer" to the "King's tavern," and when he parodies the sovereign role in the great Tavern Scene in Part I; and conversely, he transports the spirit of the tavern to the affairs of the court when he carries a bottle of sack in his pistol case at Shrewsbury, and when he indulges in satiric comment and jest both on the battle-field and at the Council of War at which, significantly, both he and the king are present.

When Falstaff takes a cushion for his crown, a dagger for his scepter, and ascends his joint-stool throne at the Boar's Head Tavern with Prince Hal kneeling at his feet, he does, in fact, literally become
a mock king, a lord of misrule presiding over a topsyturvy realm. During his sovereignty of disorder marked by the comic violation of cultural value and the undermining of both parental and political authority, laws lose their restraining powers and licence becomes the inverted order of the day. Replacing the serious concerns of battle and civil government are the indulgences of the sensual appetites—the eating, drinking, and love-making which are characteristic of holiday celebration. Although Falstaff is never seen actually eating—as a matter of fact the tavern bill in his pocket indicates that the amount of food he consumes is excessively outbalanced by "an intolerable deal of sack" (1, II.iv.535)—he is constantly associated with a kind of epicurean gastronomy, through references to his huge belly and his "gormandizing" gluttony, and through the proliferation of food imagery which surrounds him. It is significant that through this imagery, Falstaff is presented not only as a glutton but also as a feast. He is identified as "fat meat" (2, Epilogue), "sweet beef" (1, III.iii.176), "ribs" (1, II.iv.109), "chops" (1, I.ii.132), a "roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly" (1, II.iv.446-47); and when Poins refers to him as "Martlemas," or the feast of St. Martin, and when Doll Tearsheet endearingly calls him "thou whoreson little tidy Bartholomew boar pig" (2, II.iv.250)—the famous sucking-pig served at the Bartholomew fair—the association of Falstaff with both the carnival and the feast is explicitly affirmed.  

Falstaff's association with the spirit of festivity is also dramatically underlined in Prince Hal's soliloquy at the end of the first Tavern Scene in Part 1. Referring to the "unyok'd humour of [the]
idleness" (I.ii.191) of his tavern companions (an image of the unbridled release of the instincts definitive of both the comedy of the Vice and the festive order of celebration) the Prince suggests that his dalliance with the "loose behaviour" (1. 203) of the underworld realm has provided him with a holiday from the everyday world:

If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work;
But when they seldom come, they wish'd-for come.  
(11. 199-201)

Also contained in the Prince's soliloquy, however, is the suggestion that the holiday is only of limited duration. He reveals that he intends at some future date to reform, to dissociate himself from the idleness of merry-making, to "redeem time" (1. 212) when he returns to the serious concerns of the work-a-day world. Within this context then, Falstaff's banishment is inevitable. Not only will he be, in strictly expedient terms, an unsuitable companion for the Prince once he ascends the throne, but also as a symbol of the carnival and the feast, his reign of misrule must terminate once the holiday is over.

The ritualistic pattern of comic festivity is, however, only one dimension of the quality of topsyturvydom which Falstaff reflects in his embodiment of the role of Vice. As previously observed, Falstaff's comic profanation of sacred value not only provides a momentary liberation from the constraints of the prevailing socio-political order, but it serves as a kind of moral commentary upon the hypocrisy and lack of principle inherent in that order as well. Indeed, his power of inversion is such that he stands the world on its head, revealing the so-called realm of virtue to be as demonic as the chief representative of vice.
Although this pattern is present throughout both plays, it is particularly evident in Part 2 where, as has been frequently suggested, Falstaff is a less attractive and certainly more vicious character than in Part 1. Increasingly obsessed with his schemes—his taking of bribes, his fleecing of Shallow and Mistress Quickly, his evasion of the law of the Lord Chief Justice—and surrounded by images of his lechery and infirmities, both of body and spirit, Falstaff becomes a microcosmic symbol of the disease and corruption not only of demonic realm but also of the macrocosmic world. At the beginning of Act III, the King describes the infirm state of England, beset by civil strife:

Then you perceive the body of our kingdom  
How foul it is; what rank diseases grow  
And with what danger, near the heart of it.  
(2, III.i.38-40)

Moreover, the King himself, no less than his kingdom, is afflicted with disease, an illness which is to take his life near the end of the play. In this sense then, the banishment of Falstaff, "that swollen parcel of dropsies" (1, II.iv.444) is a ritual expulsion of disease from the realm; it is the inevitable decree of the new King in his attempt to restore his ailing land to health. Following a similar line of argument, critics such as J. I. M. Stewart and C. L. Barber have associated Falstaff's banishment with his embodiment of the role of scapegoat. According to Stewart, he "symbolizes all the accumulated sin of the reign, all the consequent sterility of the land," and, therefore, must be sacrificed to bring about the regeneration of the kingdom. Similarly, Barber, in his identification of Falstaff with the spirit of Carnival, examines his rejection in light of "the carrying off of bad luck by the scapegoat of
This ritualistic pattern, to which both writers refer, was examined in the preceding chapter in a discussion of the similarities between the end of the Vice figure and Frazer's description of the expulsion of the scapegoat, the personification of the festive season, upon whose head were heaped all the sins and misfortunes of the community, and whose destruction often followed a period of licentious revelry during which laws lost their traditional prohibitory powers. In many respects, the rejection of Falstaff at the end of Part 2 does fulfill this ritualistic pattern. He functions as both a symbol of disease and a personification of evil, and his banishment serves not only to rid the land of its pervasive infirmity, but also to provide the new king with a kind of expiation of guilt and absolution from sin deriving from his licentious participation in Falstaff's demonic world. A similar expiation and absolution is provided for the members of the audience who have likewise participated, albeit vicariously, in the violation of cultural value during Falstaff's holiday reign.

It is, however, an unfortunate oversimplification to assert that by banishing Falstaff, Hal removes disease and bad luck from his kingdom, for these are but one part of the double-sided nature of the comic-demonic figure. Throughout both plays Falstaff is imaged not only as an agent of evil, disease, and disorder, but conversely as an instrument of fertility and beneficence as well. Hal's description of the fat rogue's flight during the Gadshill robbery, although mockingly derisive, is, at the same time, an acknowledgement of the nurturing sustenance with which "plump Jack" is endowed:
Falstaff sweats to death, 
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.  
(l, II.ii.103-4)

To lard is to baste with fat, and in his formal tribute to sack, Falstaff claims a similarly nurturing effect on that which is also lean and barren, namely the Prince himself:

Hereof comes it that Prince Harry is valiant; for the cold blood he did naturally inherit of his father, he hath like lean, sterile and bare land, manured, husbanded, and tilled with excellent endeavor of drinking good and good store of fertile sherris, that he is become very hot and valiant. (2, IV.iii.127-233)

Falstaff, "the huge bombard of sack" (l, II.iv.445) has indeed cultivated Prince Hal. In his induction into the generative vitality of the demonic realm, the Prince has been "manured, husbanded and tilled with excellent endeavor" in order that he may emerge in full blossom as a king. It is also relevant to observe that the manure which Falstaff employs in his toil is another double-sided image of the Vice's simultaneous attractiveness and repulsiveness, his comic fertility and his infernal putrefaction.

In deciding to have Hal reject Falstaff at the end of Part 2, Shakespeare has apparently made a concession to the side of order and moderation as opposed to that of chaos and excess. Despite this concession to order, however, and the re-establishment of traditional authority conventional to the patterns of comedy, the play closes on a note of dramatic ambiguity as we are left to wonder at the dubious quality of that order, at the lack of humanity in a king who has expelled the vital principle from his realm. C. L. Barber also questions the dramatic validity of Shakespeare's decision to reject Falstaff and, thereby, to legitimize the prevailing social and political power of the play. In
Barber's estimation, Falstaff's ruthless opportunism and impersonal political manoeuvre as manifested in his philosophy, "if the young dace be a bait for the old pike, I see no reason in the law of nature but I may snap at him" (2, III.ii.356-59), is deeply ingrained in the entire society of the play. To free the society of this attitude merely by getting rid of Falstaff and sanctifying the emerging order of the new king and his principal advisor, the Lord Chief Justice, is to deny the pervasiveness of the opportunism which Falstaff represents. As a result, Barber argues that the final scenes of the play partly fail, and he implies that Shakespeare might have done better to "let the play end with this attitude dominant, a harsh recognition that life is a nasty business where the big fishes eat the little fishes, with the single redeeming consideration that political order is better than anarchy." 10 If we accept, however, the assertion that the play ends on a note of moral ambiguity, then it is, in fact, possible to adopt such an interpretation. By banishing from his presence his former close companion, Hal is decidedly manifesting the impersonality of political manoeuvre, and, in this sense, Falstaff's final rejection only proves that Sir John is but a small fish after all.

In Henry IV, Shakespeare has tackled the essential ambiguity of the comic-demonic figure. Represented as both a vehicle of evil, disorder and disease, and alternately as an agent of fertility and beneficence, Falstaff's double nature derives from his dual heritage--he is a character in whom the forces of evil and comedy are inextricably intertwined. Rossiter's observation concerning the presence of two rituals underlying
the audience-response to the final disposition of the morality Vice is extremely appropriate in accounting for the ambivalence evoked by Falstaff's banishment: "At the end of the play when moral ritual wants him hanged or otherwise punished, the comic wants him to get away with it." Although Shakespeare ostensibly makes a concession to moral ritual, a further, if indirect concession is, however, made to the comic as well, when in the Epilogue he promises to "continue the story, with Sir John in it," if the audience is not already "too much cloyed with fat meat." Like Ambidexter the Vice, Shakespeare too is apparently playing with both hands.

It is because the character of Falstaff is, in several respects, a study in comic-demonic ambiguity that so much critical dispute has arisen over the validity of his banishment and over such moral questions as whether or not he is a coward, a liar, and so forth. As a result of the unresolved ambiguity of the plays, we can now appreciate that Falstaff's final punishment is both fittingly satisfying and uncomfortably disappointing; similarly he is both a coward and a brave man, a liar and a teller of truths. And yet he is none of these as well. Like the Vice figure who, although allegorically aligned with the side of evil, was often an amoral character whose actions were haphazardly motivated, Falstaff both encompasses and transcends the moral categories of good and evil, coward and brave man, liar and teller of truths. Although he is old, he constantly refers to himself as being young; although he is pernicious, he is generative as well; although he is dynamically virile, he is, nevertheless, depicted with feminine imagery, at one point
referring to his huge belly as his "womb" (2, IV.iii.25), and at another identifying himself with "a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one" (2, I.ii.13-14); and although he dies in battle, he resuscitates himself in order to live once more. This latter pattern is, in fact, discernible at several points within both plays as Falstaff manages to elude every attempt made to apprehend him. When he is duped by Poins and the Prince at Gadshill, he evades the situation by explaining that he was aware of their identities all along and invented his "incomprehensible lies" to amuse them; when he is reprimanded by the Lord Chief Justice, and when he is arrested by Fang and Snare, his evasive tactic is to demand the rights and respect owing an officer in the service; and when he is assailed by Douglas on the battlefield, he evades death by assuming its mask; and finally when he is banished from the King's presence and carried off to prison at the end of Part 2, he is rescued and revived in the Epilogue.

An enemy to boundaries and constraints, Falstaff's ambiguity, like that of the Vice, defies all efforts not only to bridle him but also to categorize him. Constantly naming and renaming himself, and being named and renamed by others in the play, Falstaff reflects a Protean quality such that he can never be totally grasped. He can change shape in the twinkling of an eye, revealing yet another posture of his multidimensional character. There is, however, a name that he applies to himself during his first appearance on stage which, perhaps, more than any other, captures the quintessence of his moral ambiguity. Referring to himself as one of the "gentlemen of the shade" (1, I.ii.26), he reflects
a coalescence of all three levels of the morality pattern which Shakespeare delineates in Henry IV—the realms of virtue and vice as well as the third morally ambiguous world which lies between them. The topsy-turvydom of Falstaff's verbal wit, in the first place, results in an inversion of the traditional title used to describe members of the Royal Household, the Gentlemen of the Chamber who were the personal advisors of the king. By substituting the word "shade," Falstaff reveals the place of his origins—he is an inhabitant of the world of darkness, the nether regions of the demonic realm, "shade" being a synonym for Hades itself. Moreover, in this epithet we are again able to perceive Falstaff's role as the intermediary between two antithetical worlds. He is both a "gentleman," a member of the world of order and nobility, and the chief representative of the underworld of disorder and vice. Straddling two worlds, Falstaff paradoxically contains and transcends both of them. Defying moral categorization, he is, ultimately, a composite of good and evil, light and darkness, an inhabitant of the world of "shade"—the ambiguous in-between realm of the comic-demonic figure.
Notes for Chapter V


2 Shakespeare's History Plays, p. 265.


4 Dover Wilson in The Fortunes of Falstaff has given a thorough account of the similarities between Falstaff and Riot, the Vice in Youth.


7 Dover Wilson includes a comprehensive section entitled "Sweet Beef" in The Fortunes of Falstaff, which deals with the meat imagery associated with the fat knight; and J. I. M. Stewart uses some of Dover Wilson's observations as a basis for his argument that Falstaff is representative of the animal sacrifice required to bring about the future fertility of the land. "The Birth and Death of Falstaff," in Character and Motive in Shakespeare (London: Longmans, Green, 1949).


10 Barber, p. 217.

11 English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans, p. 91.

Barber mentions this aspect of Falstaff's character in passing but does not expand upon it ("Rule and Misrule in Henry IV," p. 197).
Chapter VI

THE BLACK SATURNALIA--THE COMIC-DEMONIC REALM OF VOLPONE

Although Jonson was heavily influenced by classical models in his development as a dramatist, at the same time he was, like Shakespeare, also indebted to the native element in English drama, particularly the allegorical morality tradition of the Tudor and early Elizabethan periods. A number of scholars have indicated the association between the homiletic morality tradition and Jonson's didactic comedies. Charles Gayley, for example, has commented upon the influence of the morality play on Jonson's "humour" comedies; ¹ Harry Levin has pointed out the morality conventions in Jonson's casts and plots, in the redende Namen of his characters, in the beast fable of Volpone, or the gaping Hell-mouth of The Devil is an Ass; ² Madelein Doran, while acknowledging the relationship between the mature comedies and classical and Italian models, has stated that "in their moral-psychological combination of motives, they seem ... to have closer affinity with the morality play tradition"; ³ and Alan C. Dessen in Jonson's Moral Comedy, a work devoted to the identification of the elements of the native morality play in Jonson's drama, has concluded that "the three great comedies [Volpone, The Alchemist, and Bartholomew Fair] represent the culmination of the English morality tradition." ⁴ One scholar has even traced the influence of the morality Vice himself on the characters of Volpone and Mosca. Rainer Pineas has suggested that Volpone fulfills the role of the Vice because he openly gloats over his schemes to corrupt his victims, because he employs the instruments of
disguise and deception, and because he is "motivated by his love of evil for its own sake rather than for any secondary cause." Following Spivack's observations on the emergence of one vice as the dramatic superior over the lesser forces of evil, Pineas finds Mosca to be the chief Vice of the play, because the parasite manipulates the action and most of the intrigue, because of his use of disguise and the dissimulation of laughter and weeping, and because of his moralizing against evil.

While Pineas' observations about Volpone's and Mosca's embodiment of the Vice-role are suggestive, the dramatic meaning of these observations is largely undeveloped. Through a more expansive examination of the Vice-like qualities of these two figures as they function within the thematic context of the play itself, it is, however, possible to demonstrate that not only is the prototypical Vice present in Volpone, but the entire play is, in fact, a dramatization of the ambiguous underworld of the comic-demonic realm.

In the Prologue, Jonson refers to Volpone as "quick comedy refined" and promises to rub the cheeks of the theatre-goers until they are "red with laughter." Although the abrasive quality of the humour is here implicitly acknowledged, neither "comedy" nor "laughter" are terms which, alone, are strictly appropriate in capturing the peculiar quality of this play. The world picture Jonson presents is one of darkness, corruption, and profound evil, unmitigated by an affirmative sense of order and decency. Critics have voiced their discomfiture at the play; they have protested against the malevolence and savage humour reflected in such situations as a father's unwarranted cruelty toward his son, a
husband's abhorrent prostitution of his wife, and the loathsome rape-attempt that subsequently takes place against her. On the other hand, however, they have also protested against the severity of the punishment which Volpone receives at the end of the play, one commentator suggesting that his fall leaves the audience "more disturbed at his unhappy lot than exhilarated at the return of some modicum of justice to Venice." This ambivalence discernible in the critical reaction to Volpone is one which we have previously observed in our discussion of the response generated by the comic-demonic figure, whose double-visaged nature makes him a character simultaneously alluring and repugnant to the audience.

Overtones of the demonic realm are certainly pervasive throughout Volpone, both in the implicit association of the magnifico of Venice and his parasite with the role of Vice, and in their explicit identification with the forces of diabolical evil. In an article entitled "The Satanic Nature of Volpone," Charles A. Hallet has demonstrated the relationship between Volpone and the beast fable tradition, in which the fox is a symbol of the devil:

The modus operandi of all these fox-devils is the same. First the fox plays upon the fleshy desires of man: whatever an individual's particular weakness--pride, avarice, lust--the fox will use it to undo him. Having trapped his prey he then proceeds to devour him. Both to manipulate and to punish sinners--therein lies the traditional role of the fox-like devil.

So also operates Jonson's fox. As a tempter and later as tormentor of those who succumb to his temptations, Volpone is manifesting the two attributes essential to the fox of the fable tradition. Mosca, whose name is Latin for "fly" is also identified with the forces of infernal evil. In Jonson's time, the likeness of the fly was commonly employed to depict the familiar spirit or demon associated with witches
or wizards, and Volpone's references to his parasite as "my witty mischief" (V.iii.102) and "my fine devil" (V.iii.46), also suggest that Mosca symbolically functions as the spirit of evil which informs Volpone's fox-like, demonic stratagems.

Like the Vice of the morality convention, Volpone and Mosca are further associated with the realm of evil by virtue of their roles as tempters and schemers. They consciously prey upon the avaricious and voluptuous desires of their victims, tempting Corbaccio to disinherit his son, Corvino to prostitute his wife, and Voltore to debase the principles of justice to which his profession is sworn. Volpone's principal instrument of temptation is his gold and the materialistic pleasures which unlimited wealth can afford the possessor. The "sensual baits" (III.vii.210) with which Volpone, in the remarkable seduction scene, attempts to entice Celia—the exotic delicacies, the heady eroticism of the imagery, the promise of Protean powers—are, in fact, the same lures he holds out to the three capatores, the birds of prey who hover around the death bed, waiting for the magnifico to die, each one believing himself to be the heir to a boundless fortune.

During the first scene of the play, Volpone in typical Vice-fashion confides his stratagems for temptation:

> Women and men of every sex and age,  
> . . . bring me presents, send me plate, coin, jewels,  
> With hope that when I die (which they expect  
> Each greedy minute) it shall then return  
> Tenfold upon them; whilst some, covetous  
> Above the rest, seek to engross me, whole,  
> And counter-work the one unto the other,  
> Contend in gifts, as they would seem in love.  
> All which I suffer, playing with their hopes,
Imaged in terms of a cherry dangled in front of the lips of his victim, the sensual bait of Volpone's gold embodies the potential gratification of man's voluptuous desires--a crystallization of the visual, tactile, gustatory and sexual sensibilities. Spivack's comments on the function of the Vice to bring about the moral and spiritual fall of his victim so as to reveal the fundamental effect of the evil he personifies, are applicable to Mosca and Volpone in their roles as tempters: "The heart of his role is an act of seduction, and the characteristic stratagem whereby the Vice achieves his purpose is a vivid stage metaphor for the sly insinuation of evil into the human breast" (p. 152). Furthermore, like the morality Vice, Volpone and Mosca not only delight in the successful temptation of their victims, but also at the same time offer some homiletic commentary on the nature of the fallen state to which they have led their prey. "What a rare punishment / Is avarice to itself" (I.iv.143-44), declares Volpone after Corbaccio has been persuaded to alter his will making the magnifico his heir, while Mosca goes so far as to moralize upon the nature of the evil embodied by his master himself. When, after the rape attempt, Volpone voices his fears of apprehension and retribution by the officers of the law, Mosca replies with a maxim which might have come right out of a pulpit sermon: "Guilty men / Suspect what they deserve still" (III.vii.20-21).

In order to carry out their plans for the temptation and
subsequent torment of their victims, Volpone and Mosca devise several schemes. Both are masters in the use of disguise and dissimulation; they are both skillful artificers—Volpone, once a professional actor who appeared in a masque in honour of the future Henry III of France, takes great pride in his ability to appear in "changed shapes" (III.vii.221), while Mosca boasts of his capacity to "change a visor swifter than a thought" (III.i.29). Under Mosca's theatrical direction, Volpone plays a sick and dying man in order to lure the three capatores, a mountebank in order to catch a glimpse of Celia, and a commendatore, a sergeant of the court, in order to badger and torment his gulls further. Not only Volpone's coach and tutor in the art of deception, Mosca himself has wide-ranging acting ability. In order to ingratiate himself with Bonario, he uses a technique characteristic of the Vice, the dissimulation of tears, an artifice which ultimately convinces the disinherited son that the parasite is a virtuous man, a friend who is altruistically concerned with the well-being of others. Similarly, Mosca plays the role of a humble and obsequious servant to perfection, not only to the gulls, but to the magnifico himself, flattering and manipulating for the purposes of his own crafty opportunism.

As we have seen, the ability to dissimulate, to appear in a guise other than one's natural form is intrinsic to the realm of evil. Related to this propensity to assume other shapes is Volpone's and Mosca's Satanic desire to transcend the limits of their ordained state and become God-like. In a perceptive reading of the play, Alvin Kernan emphasizes the importance of the theme of acting to the overall dramatic meaning,
suggesting that for both Volpone and Mosca "acting opens up ... a brave new world of the imagination where man can contend with the Gods themselves." Both master and servant revel in their Protean natures--Volpone promises Celia the insurmountable pleasures of enacting in "changed shapes" the many "fables of the Gods" (III.vii.221,225) and proclaims his ability to contend "in varying figures" (III.vii.152) with the god Proteus himself, while Mosca congratulates himself on his superhuman ubiquity, his power to "be here / and there, and here, and yonder all at once" (III.i.26-27).

The central image of the play, gold, also identifies both Volpone and Mosca with the demonic realm, money being, as the moral axiom would have it, "the root of all evil." Moreover, this image also associates them with such morality figures as Avarice, the Vice with the money-bags in Respublica, and Sin, the Vice who is the grandson of the allegorical personification of Money in All For Money. It is significant, however, that Volpone's fundamental concern is neither the possession of gold for its own sake nor its use in bringing about the moral damnation of mankind, but rather the power it provides him as an instrument in making dupes out of others. He makes this point very early in the play:

> Yet, I glory  
> More in the cunning purchase of my wealth  
> Than in the glad possession.  
> (I.i.30-32)

Combined with Volpone's cunning is a delight in the sport that emanates from his participation in demonic intrigue. Although he is metaphorically aligned with the forces of evil, he is, like the prototypical Vice, an essentially amoral character, who is attached to his ethical stance more
out of the selfish love of the pleasure it affords than out of any firm ideological commitment. Never satisfied with the success of one stratagem, he is constantly seeking more stimulation, in quest of "any device now of rare ingenious knavery / That would possess [him] with a violent laughter" (V.i.14-15).

Contained in the juxtaposition of the terms "knavery" and "laughter" is an overt statement of Volpone's comic-demonic nature, his double-sided role as fun-maker as well as devious instigator of evil. The kind of comedy which Volpone generates in his role as fun-maker is generally a hostile one in which the humour carries with it overtones of latent aggression. Volpone's comedy of aggression is in accordance both with the Hobbesian view that laughter results from the "sudden glory" experienced by the individual through a momentary perception of his own superiority, and with the hypothesis of later theoreticians such as Anthony Ludovici that laughter is an expression of "superior adaptation" --a reflex action deriving from the primitive need to bare one's teeth in demonstration of the effectiveness of one's weapons. Much of the comedy of the play does, in fact, emanate from Volpone and Mosca's aggressive victimization of their dupes in order to prove their own "superior adaptation." Volpone is not content merely to outwit Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore in order to make laughingstocks of them. Having succeeded in extracting a sizeable gift from each of them, he then prepares further to torment them. Revealing that Mosca has been made his heir, he assumes a new disguise, that of a clownish sergeant of the court, and openly taunts them each in turn. The aggressiveness of the humour is
also revealed in the language of the play. Volpone gleefully advises Mosca to "play the artificer now, torture 'em rarely" (V.ii.112) and "torment 'em more" (V.iii.106), while he voices his own desire to "vex 'em still at every turn" (V.iii.112). Mosca, using a conventional form of word play characteristic of the morality Vice, also manifests the underlying aggressive quality of the play's comedy. Taking advantage of Corbaccio's growing deafness, Mosca insults him shamelessly:

Corbaccio: I may have my youth restored to me, why not?
Mosca (aside): Your worship is a precious ass--
Corbaccio: What sayest thou?
Mosca: I do desire your worship to make haste, sir.

(I.iv.129-31)

Volpone, playing the role of a comatose man on his deathbed, can barely contain himself during Mosca's verbal abuse of Corbaccio, and when the latter leaves, the magnifico responds with the laughter of exultation also characteristic of the Vice:

0, I shall burst!
Let out my sides, let out my sides.

(I.iv.133)

Furthermore, like the Vice of convention, Volpone and Mosca not only demonstrate their superior adaptation by humorously attempting to set their dupes at cross-purposes--to "counter-work the one unto the other" (I.i.83) --but they are also involved in a battle of wits with each other, a battle somewhat evocative of Spivack's description of the comic contention which traditionally takes place among the morality vices in order to establish "who is top dog in the hierarchy of evil." Playing right into Volpone's scheme to torment his gulls, Mosca attempts to dupe his master out of his
fortune by refusing to admit to the court that the magnifico is still alive, and Volpone, rather than allowing himself to be outwitted by his servant, decides to condemn himself in order to expose the parasite.

The comedy of aggression inherent in Volpone is almost always directed at the undercutting of the human image; and by ultimately making both Volpone and Mosca the butts of each other's strategems, Jonson is, in fact, permitting both himself and the audience to express their own superior adaptation through the laughter directed at the protagonists' final discomfiture. It is interesting that the violation of the human image also underlies Jonson's own theory of comedy--the comedy of "humours." In Jonson's drama, the comic characters are generally motivated by a single "humour" or specific psychological trait, similar to Pope's concept of the "ruling passion" or Sterne's Shandean "hobby horse"; and it is this single trait which dominates and propels each character's behaviour throughout the play. The theory of humours is defined by Jonson in the Induction to Every Man Out of His Humour:

... when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluxion, all to run one way,
This may be truly said to be a humour.

In Volpone, the actions of the three gulls are completely determined by their blind avarice, Mosca's behaviour is always prompted by his crafty opportunities, and that of Volpone is motivated by his love of both sensuality and intrigue. Informing the comedy of humours is Jonson's use of the metaphor of the beast fable. Each character is rigidly conceived in terms of an animal--a fox, a fly, a raven, a crow, a vulture--in order to
demonstrate thematically that all of them are singly ruled by their bestial natures; that they have all, in folly, substituted the material pleasures of sensual gratification for the spiritual aspirations of man. The violation of the human image is also fundamental to Henri Bergson's assertion that laughter is provoked through the perception of "something mechanical encrusted on the living." In other words, when individuals lose the flexibility and elasticity which are definitive of being human, and function rigidly and automatically like machines, the comic response is elicited, and we laugh to see the ideal human image thus undercut.

When man is portrayed in terms of a machine or, as in the world of Jonson's play, in terms of a beast, it is also an indication that the comic principle of inversion is probably at work. The human and the mechanical, as well as the human and the bestial, are generally viewed as antipodal in nature, and when one is construed in the place of the other, a kind of topsyturvydom results. The spirit of comic inversion is, in fact, central to the pervading atmosphere of Volpone. From the opening scenes a reversal of traditional value is established, and this reversal is sustained throughout the entire play.

We have seen how the force of inversion integral to the role of the comic-demonic figure is generally conveyed by a profanation of the sacred, an overturning of the religious and moral precepts upon which the traditional order is founded. A profanation of sacred values is initiated in the first scene of the play in which Volpone is at his morning prayers, his hymn of devotion, a parody of Christian worship from its very first words:
Good morning to the day, and next my gold:  
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.  
Hail the world's soul, and mine  

(I.i.1-3)

The inversion of traditional value here is shockingly blasphemous, as the audience is abruptly introduced to the upside-down world of Volpone in which the worship of gold, a base metal, has replaced the worship of God. The perversion of religious imagery multiplies throughout the opening speech. Not only is gold Volpone's "saint" and "shrine," it is also his "soul" and his "relic" which he kisses with fervid adoration. Volpone's displacement of the spiritual with the material world is expanded metaphorically until it results in a total inversion of the natural order. The "splendour" of his gold has "darkened" the sun, the natural source of light and generation; and just as day has been eclipsed by night, so the realm of heaven has been obliterated by the sensual urges of the realm of hell:

Dear saint  
Riches, the dumb god that giv'st all men tongues  
That cans't do nought, and yet makes men do all things;  
The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,  
Is made worth heaven!  

(I.i.21-25)

In Volpone's idolatrous worship of his gold, the spirit of topsyturvydom is released, a spirit which is to inform the rest of the drama. The play itself is, in fact, a study in the reversal of values which takes place when hell becomes heaven, when the high is perverted to the low, when men become beasts, and when the comic profanation of the sacred results in the temporary ascendancy of the demonic underworld.

Most of the action of the drama takes place in the underworld
setting of Volpone's chamber, the fox-hole which is described by Bonario as "the den of villainy" (III.vii.273). As a result of the force of inversion, the infernal chamber becomes "this blessed room" (I.i.13), and Volpone's gold, a shrine or altar to which various supplicants are drawn to worship. It is an indication of the outrageous perversion of moral and spiritual value, that Corvino uses the religious metaphor of Christianity in order to rationalize his motivation for prostituting his wife. He explains that it would be "a pious work, mere charity" (III.vii.65), to offer Celia to Volpone's bed. The underworld realm is also conducive to the disintegration of human relationship. In Volpone's den not only are the ties of marital fidelity between husband and wife severed, but also the bonds between parent and child are ruthlessly broken. Volpone reveals his enmity to the natural forms of human connection in his opening speech when he states that the joy he derives from his gold far transcends "all style of joy in children, parents, friends" (I.i.17). He later re-asserts his position, one of emotional freedom, happily cut off from the restrictions of human bondage:

What should I do
But cocker up my genius and live free
To all the delights my fortune calls me to?
I have no wife, no parent, child, ally
To give my substance to.

(I.i.70-74)

Volpone's desire to "live free to all . . . delights," unencumbered by the obligations of human involvement or by any ethical or spiritual dictates, corresponds to Cushman's description of the Vice, who "as the embodiment of worldliness and sensuality . . . is free from all bonds of moral ideals." The attempt to achieve the freedom from all
restraint is, of course, characteristic of both the comic and demonic realms, the demonic constantly seeking to overthrow the prohibitions of divine law, the comic constantly seeking a release of the psychological tensions emanating from the inhibitory processes of maintaining the values and institutions of the social order. Moreover, we are also familiar with the fact that the "breaking up of all restraints" which is the keynote of comedy, often manifests itself dramatically in a saturnalian mode, a topsyturvy holiday from everyday life. In the underworld realm of Volpone's chamber, the rites of a grotesque Saturnalia are conducted in which the darker passions of the human psyche are momentarily permitted to triumph over the repressive forces of civilized life, and in which we, as members of the audience, are permitted vicariously to participate.

The pattern of licentious revelry is one of the motifs employed by Jonson in his construction of the various symbolic levels of *Volpone*. It is significant that the real name of Scoto of Mantua, the famous mountebank whose guise Volpone at one point assumes, was Dionisio, as Percy Simpson has pointed out. As a result of this allusion, somewhat obscure to modern audiences but probably familiar enough to theatre-goers of Jonson's time, an association is made between Volpone and Dionysius, the Greek god of wine and fertility, whose followers celebrated with processions of frenzied licence and drunken debauchery the Phallic rituals which gave rise to the origins of comedy in Ancient Greece. Throughout *Volpone*, images of the feast--of eating, drinking, and entertainment--abound. After each of the gulls has presented his gift to the magnifico
and departed, Volpone instructs Mosca:

Prepare  
Me music, dances, banquets, all delights;  
The Turk is not more sensual in his pleasures  
Than will Volpone.  

(I.v.86-89)

He also informs the parasite that he wishes to postpone meeting Lady Would-be until he is "high with mirth and wine" (I.v.99) and speaks of the pleasure he derives from tormenting his victim in terms of "a rare meal of laughter" (V.i.86). In the seduction speech of the Third Act, Volpone attempts to entice Celia with a sumptuously exotic banquet composed of rare delicacies:

The head of parrots, tongues of nightingales,  
The brains of peacocks, and of estriches  
Shall be our food, and could we get the phoenix  
Though nature lost her kind, she were our dish.  

(III.vii.202-5)

The perversion of religious value by material voluptuousness which marks the opening scene of the play is here re-inforced through the language employed by Volpone to describe his "sensual baits." Religious imagery is used to depict the ecstasy of sensual gratification. The "true heaven of love is to be 'tasted'" (I. 140), and their drink is to be "prepared gold and amber" (I. 217), a parody of the Divine Sacrament in which gold, Volpone's "dumb god," is itself to be consumed.

In Jonson's saturnalian vision, sensuality is carried to its most debased extreme. Volpone's invitation to Celia to share his "drink" of gold--as well as to "dissolve and drink" (I. 193) a rope of pearls and to "eat . . . at a meal" (I. 201) a brilliant carbuncle and a diamond that "would have bought Lollia Paulina" (I. 195)--carries with it, in
psychoanalytic terms, overtones of coprophilia. That there is a symbolic association between excrement and money, gold, or gems has been frequently suggested by Freud and later psychoanalytic writers, and the fact that Bonario subsequently refers to Volpone's gold as "this dross" (III. vii.271) supports the making of such an association with the underlying metaphor of the play. Moreover, this metaphor insinuates that not only is gold something to be ingested, but also people themselves are to be cannibalistically devoured. The cannibalistic allusions of the play are at one point made quite explicit when Volpone admits that he achieves more sensual pleasure in beholding the gifts of his victim than in growing "fat, by eating once a month a man" (I.vi.92). The animal imagery of the beast fable which underlies the plot of Volpone, also functions thematically as an indication of the carnivorousness of the central characters. The crow, the raven, and the vulture are all birds of prey; they flock around Volpone's chamber "to peck for carrion" (V.i.66), to feed upon the fox who purposefully presents himself as a dying old man "turning carcass" (I.ii.90). In turn the fox feeds on his gulls--"Who would / Have lost this feast?" (V.iii.107-8) cries Volpone after witnessing, from behind a screen, Mosca's consummate skill in tormenting Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino. And finally, Mosca, the "flesh-fly" (V.ix.1), who is by profession a "parasite," uses his devious opportunism to feed upon everyone with whom he comes in contact.

Volpone's saturnalia of instinctual gratification is manifested not only through images of eating and drinking but also by the most forbidden forms of sexual licence. In the seduction scene, Volpone attempts to
entrance Celia with a splendid poetic vision of sensuality, one in which
the images of food, drink, and eroticism proliferate one upon the other
and are interfused. The scene is (or at least should be), however, one
that is profoundly comic in nature, and much of the comedy derives from the
juxtaposition of the sensuously romantic language with the gross reality
of Volpone's aim. Volpone is a lecherous old man who wishes to ravish
the body of an innocent young girl. That Celia is somebody else's wife
only adds fire to Volpone's desire, as his imagined pleasure is intensi­
fied by the fact that he and Mosca have hoodwinked Corvino into playing
the role of procurer. Besides being comic, the scene contains demonic
overtones as well--Celia, whose name means the Heavenly one, is represen­
tative of the personification of virtue whom Volpone, in his role as
agent of diabolical evil, wishes to corrupt. There is, furthermore,
implicit in the sexual relationship between an old man and a young girl
an implicit vehicle for the potential violation of the taboo of incest,
which may, in this context, be viewed as one of the most threatening and,
thus, demonic of the hidden human impulses released in the saturnalian
spirit of comedy contained within the play.

Promiscuity, especially that of an exotic nature, characterizes
Volpone's sexual urge in all its manifestations. Free from the restraints
of the marital relationship, Volpone has fathered a number of children
whom, we learn, are all

   bastards
Some dozen, or more that he begat on beggars,
Gypsies, and Jews, and black-moors when he was drunk.
(I.v.43-45)
One of his bastards, Androgyno, is a hermaphroditic fool, a concrete symbol of the confusion in sexual boundaries which results from Volpone's comic-demonic perversion of sexual morality. This confusion in sexual roles, the representation in the play of "women and men of every sex" (I.i.77), is even extended towards the relationship between master and parasite. Volpone is constantly embracing and kissing Mosca, and addressing him in terms of loving endearment. The homosexual nature of their attachment is alluded to almost blatantly when Volpone emerges from behind the screen after watching Mosca's performance, and rapturously exclaims:

My witty mischief,  
Let me embrace thee. O that I could not  
Transform thee to a Venus.  

(V.iii.102-4)

Jonas A. Barish, in his brilliant analysis of the sub-plot of Sir Politic and Lady Would-be, and its relation to the main plot of the play, finds images of sexual ambiguity in both sections:

The confusion of sexes symbolized in Androgyno, in the indiscriminate journeyings of the soul of Pythagorus, in Volpone's masquerade as Antinous, in Lady Would-be's error, as well as in the reversed masculine-feminine roles of Sir Pol and Lady Would-be, contributes its own kind of abnormality to the deformity of the moral atmosphere chiefly figured by the metamorphoses of beasts into men.16

To Barish's observations we might add that the confusion of forms between male and female, as well as between man and beast, can also be connected to the pattern of saturnalian topsyturvydom which we have been exploring. It has been frequently pointed out by a number of anthropologists and literary critics that the donning of animal pelts and the masquerading in the clothes of the opposite sex have been characteristic features of
seasonal rites and festive celebrations of cultures, both ancient and modern. In this sense, the breaking up of all restraints incited by the forces of the comic-demonic realm is directed against the boundaries which separate the rational and bestial aspects of man's nature, as well as those which divide the human being into two poles of sexuality, each one of which has rigidly defined social roles which are not permitted to be violated during the normal course of everyday life.

It is also in keeping with the saturnalian spirit of the play that the order of licentious revelry is of limited duration. By the end of Volpone, the holiday feast has reached its end; the drive for sensual gratification has expended itself in its own self-devouring insatiability. As one of the justices of the Venetian court proclaims in a statement which reflects a symbolic fusion of the imagery of feasting, bestiality, and evil:

\[\text{Mischiefes feed} \]
\[\text{Like beasts, till they be fat and then they bleed} \]

\[(V.xii.150-51)\]

Like the prototypical Vice, Volpone is unmasked and punished at the end of the drama, and the four Avocatori, the representatives of the traditional social order, to some extent manage to reassert the system of moral value which has been mockingly flouted and debased during the temporary ascendancy of the underworld realm. The sentence passed down upon the magnifico by the First Avocatori is a harsh one:

\[\text{Thou art to lie in prison, cramped with irons,} \]
\[\text{Till thou be' st sick and lame indeed.} \]

\[(V.xii.123-24)\]

The comic-demonic figure cannot, however, be totally restrained. Although
he may be bridled like Inclination, the Vice of The Trial of Treasure, he can never be subjugated completely. While Jonson speaks in the introductory Epistle of his aim to "put the snaffle in their mouths that cry out: We never punish vice in our interludes," he seemingly undercuts this statement by having Volpone return from prison in order to speak the final lines of the play. Like Falstaff in 2 Henry IV, Volpone is expelled from the dramatic society only to be implicitly reintegrated at the conclusion of the drama. Jonson, as well as Shakespeare, has apparently been caught in the double-bind created by the ambiguous tension of the antithetical responses generated by the comic-demonic figure.

This ambiguity is crystallized in Volpone's remark upon receiving his sentence: "This is called mortifying of a Fox" (V.xii.125). Demonstrating once more his affinity with the Vice figure who characteristically reacts with avowed unconcern at the prospect of his own death or chastisement, Volpone displays a kind of gallows humour which centers around his punning on the word "mortifying." On one level, the verb "mortify" means to kill, destroy, or humiliate, and in this sense Volpone is articulating his awareness of his doom; on another level, "mortification" has a meaning of religious self-denial or sensual abnegation, and in this context, the re-assertion of traditional value at the end of the play is tacitly affirmed. By forcing the self-indulgent voluptuary to become an ascetic, the spirit of topsyturvydom ultimately completes its full circle, and the underworld realm is once again submerged, divested of its temporary predominance. On the other hand, however, its power and vital energy are implicitly acknowledged and even sanctified. As Percy Simpson has
indicated, "to mortify" also is a cookery term meaning to make meat tender by allowing it to hang after it has been killed. In this sense then, Volpone becomes both sacrifice and sacrament. Like Falstaff, who is also represented in terms of roasted game, Volpone not only participates in the saturnalian feast but also is, in himself, both the embodiment and sacrificial victim of that feast. Frazer has traced the widespread custom in primitive agricultural societies of "eating the god sacramentally, either in the shape of man or animal." This custom, which is also probably at the root of Christian ritual in the receiving of the Host, whereby worshippers consume in symbolic form the body and the blood of the sacrificial divinity, permits the members of the community to internalize the vital physical energy of the scapegoat figure. Volpone, although a representative of the demonic realm, is also, as Kernan has indicated, God-like in his ability to transcend the limitations of the human state through the transforming powers of his creative imagination. This essential duality is contained within the multiple levels of the pun, through which the "mortifying of a Fox" results in both his destruction and his regeneration.

As a result of Volpone's final disposition, he functions, like most comic-demonic figures, as a scapegoat for the members of the audience as well as for the Venetian society. Through the public expulsion of the evil which the scapegoat represents, the dramatic community receives a sense of absolution from both the fear of the menace he poses to the existing social structure, and the guilt which springs from the vicarious participation in the release of the instinctual urges definitive of the
comic catharsis. Although it is necessary that Volpone be punished for his transgressions against moral law, we, as members of the audience, at the same time want him to escape, secretly gratified by the release of the forbidden, demonic, impulses he has permitted us. Moreover, we desire his escape for he is, despite his moral reprehensibility, an extremely captivating character. In his imaginative vitality, his Protean powers, his sensual ebullience and passion for life, he totally eclipses Celia, Bonario, and the four Avocatori, the colourless representatives of virtue and justice in the play. Both he and Mosca possess the inordinate ability "to make / So rare a music out of discords" (V.ii.17-18), a music which, although of "false pace" (I.ii.4) like Nano's verse, is, nevertheless, strangely mellifluous and resonant in timbre.

In our contradictory responses to Volpone's final punishment, we may perceive a restatement of the double-view we initially encountered in the literary criticism of Volpone, some scholars protesting against the malevolence of the comic action, others protesting against the unmerited severity of the sentence given the magnifico at the conclusion of the drama. Jonson, like Shakespeare, dramatically plays upon the state of unresolved tension which arises whenever we are confronted with the simultaneously alluring and repelling tendencies of the comic-demonic figure. Both Falstaff and Volpone participate in the ambiguities and confusion in forms of the underworld realm. Like Falstaff, Volpone is an old man who possesses the physical vigor and mental agility of youth; like Volpone, Falstaff cannot be bound by the rigid categories of male and female. Similarly, both men are identified with both the forces of
disease and those of regeneration. Volpone plays the role of a sick and
dying old man who has lost the senses of sight and hearing as well as
the potency of his sexual powers. As Kernan has observed, the magnifico's
symptoms, although dissimulated, function symbolically to suggest the
disease and deformity of his soul, his moral blindness and deafness as
well as his spiritual sterility.\(^{21}\) When the metaphor of sickness and
impotency is, however, juxtaposed with the remarkable gusto and vibrance
of the man, his embodiment of the indomitable vitality of the sensual
passions, then we again must behold yet another double-visaged manifes-
tation of a character in whom the forces of both comedy and evil converge.

Although a state of unresolved tension, a sense of strained con-
tradiction, is integral to both *Volpone* and *Henry IV*, it is particularly
heightened in Jonson's play, and is dramatically magnified to an almost
intolerable intensity as the action progresses. Both Barish and Bonamy
Dobree have commented on this atmosphere of perilous equilibrium in
*Volpone*, both of them articulating the uneasy quality of the play in
similar terms. According to Barish, "*Volpone* comes nearer to tragedy
than any of Jonson's comedies and contains more bitter and unpleasant
scenes. Jonson asks us to walk a very narrow edge between laughter and
disgust, and if we or the actors lose our balance, some scenes may become
unbearable."\(^{22}\) And Dobree, comparing *Volpone* with *Le Misanthrope*, like-
wise describes the play as a kind of comedy "perilously near tragedy,
in which the balance is so fine that it seems sometimes as if it would
topple over into the other form."\(^{23}\)

In both *Henry IV* and *Volpone*, we are, in fact, called upon to
walk the tightrope of moral ambiguity; in the latter, however, our state of dramatic suspension is a more precarious one. This foreboding sense of loss of balance is caused by the anxiety which is provoked in face of the threatening aspects of saturnalian licence. Although all three plays are, in many respects, representative of a kind of literary Saturnalia, a comic-demonic overturning of the traditional systems of value, the comic release engendered by the "breaking up of all restraints" is, in Volpone, carried to such an extreme that the comedy is, at any point, in danger of yielding to the demonic forces which are also set free within the symbolic context of the dramatic action. We have only to look at the manifestations of this comic-demonic release submerged within the latent meanings of the play's imagery and structure, in order to realize that the underworld realm of Volpone unveils the grossest forms of spiritual, moral, and physical degeneracy. Religious blasphemy, bestiality, physical deformity, hermaphroditism, rape, incest, sadism, cannibalism, coprophilia—all of these fearsome and forbidden tendencies are liberated within the ambiguous darkness of Volpone's "den of villainy."

In the first chapter we noted that comedy often provides a "disarming mechanism," an effect of psychological distancing through which the audience is able to detach itself from the threatening aspects of the demonic forces, thereby obtaining relief from anxiety and fear. While this disarming mechanism clearly functions in both Volpone and Henry IV, its efficacy as a safety-providing outlet in Jonson's play is stretched to its furthest limits. In Henry IV, the unresolved tension
centering around Falstaff's moral ambiguity is sustained in perfect balance throughout the play. In *Volpone*, however, the ambiguity of the comic-demonic realm is constantly on the verge of collapsing and revealing itself in its full unambiguous horror; and, similarly, the comic response is continuously on the verge of being overwhelmed by the fear, outrage, and disgust that are called forth whenever the unmitigated images of Saturnalian excess unleash the perverse, demonic impulses always at work within the underworld of man's consciousness.
Notes for Chapter VI


15. Herford and Simpson, IX, 704.


17. Ian Donaldson, The World Upside-Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 15-16, discusses the transvestism which often takes place during festivals, and cites Naogeorgus (Kirchmeyer), The Popish Kingdom of Antichrist (1570), a document which describes the Elizabethan custom at the Shrovetide holiday as follows: "Both men and women chaunge their weede, the men in maydes array, / And
wanton wenches drest like men, doe travel by the way." Also, see Frazer, The Golden Bough; Chambers, The Medieval Stage; Welsford, The Fool; Willeford, The Fool and His Scepter; Cornford, The Origins of Attic Comedy.

18 Herford and Simpson, IX.
21 Ibid., pp. 21-24.
Chapter VII

"FLEXIBLE IN THE JOINTS AND LIVELY ON THE WIRE"--
THE DEMONIC COMIC-HEROINE IN VANTY FAIR

Although the form of Vanity Fair unquestionably falls within the
category of the novel, there are several thematic and tonal qualities
discernible within the work which suggest its affinity with aspects of
the dramatic genre, and particularly with the morality tradition. In the
first place, Thackeray's introduction to the novel, which is entitled
"Before the Curtain," clearly resembles a dramatic Prologue; in it the
omniscient author refers to himself as "the manager of the Performance,"
and to his readers as "patrons" who are sitting before the curtain wait­
ing for the "show" to begin. Thackeray speaks of the Wicked Nobleman
figure, one of the major characters of the novel, whom, we learn, "old
Nick will fetch away at the end of the performance" (p. 6)--a reference
to a dramatic convention extremely popular in both the miracles and later,
the morality, in which the devil customarily ascends from Hell to cart
off the evil characters at the end of the play. Moreover, the homiletic
nature of the authorial commentary which is pervasive throughout Vanity
Fair, and which most modern critics have found so objectionable,is also
sharply reminiscent of the overt didacticism of morality drama which, as
we have seen, originated, at least in part, in the pulpit sermon. At one
point in the novel, Thackeray refers to himself as a "moralist" and to
the reader as "his congregation" (p. 80). And although he "professes to
wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same livery in which his
congregation is arrayed" (p. 80), the author's sermonizing disposition is unmistakable. Furthermore, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, to which Thackeray was indebted for both the title of the novel and, indeed, its central metaphor, is largely within the allegorical tradition of the *Psychomachia*, the morality play, and the homiletic sermon. And finally, there are, as well, similarities between the method of characterization in *Vanity Fair* and that of Jonsonian comedy, which as previously indicated was, in many respects, derived from the allegorical representation of character in the morality play. In support of this point, Arnold Kettle has observed that the characters in Thackeray's novel "are presented to us, by and large, in the tradition of the comedy of humours; that is to say, each has particular characteristics somewhat exaggerated and simplified by which they are easily comprehensible."\(^2\)

More significant than these evident correspondencies between the world of *Vanity Fair* and that of medieval and Tudor drama, however, is Thackeray's creation of Becky Sharp, whose role within the context of the novel is remarkably like that of the morality Vice. Just as the Vice was the favourite of the audience, and the most important character in each of the plays in which he appeared, so the central performance in *Vanity Fair* belongs to "the famous little Becky puppet" (p. 6) who, we might observe, was so popular that she had become "famous" before the novel had been published in its entirety.\(^3\) The vital spark of *Vanity Fair* derives largely from Becky's irrepressible energy--the novel tends to pall whenever she is absent for any extended period of time. Similarly, it is her comic-demonic progression which makes her, again like the Vice, the
main propelling vehicle of the action in Thackeray's "Novel Without a Hero."

It is interesting that when C. S. Lewis, in his analysis of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, attempts to account for the essential attractiveness of the evil character in literature, Becky is one of the examples he chooses to consider:

In all but a few writers the "good" characters are the least successful. . . . To make a character worse than oneself, it is only necessary to release imaginatively from control some of the bad passions which in real life are always straining at the leash; the Satan, the Iago, the Becky Sharp, within each of us, is always there and only too ready the moment the leash is slipped, to come out and have in our books that holiday we try to deny them in our lives. . . . We do not really know what it feels like to be a man much better than ourselves. His whole inner landscape is one we have never seen, and when we guess it we blunder. . . . To project ourselves into a wicked character, we only have to stop doing something, and something that we are already tired of doing; to project ourselves into a good one, we have to do what we cannot and become what we are not.4

Becky, as Lewis' passage would indicate, is one of the most notorious of the successful wicked characters in English literary history. As she declares to Amelia after her initial, dramatic "act of insubordination" (p. 18) which occurs near the beginning of the novel, "I'm no angel" (p. 19)—a powerfully understated acknowledgement of her moral position, one irrefutably affiliated with the demonic realm. The terms which Lewis has employed to describe these wicked characters, are, however, strikingly evocative of those we have been examining in our discussion of the demonic aspects of comedy.5 For example, Lewis' description of the tendency of these characters to permit us "to release imaginatively from control some of the bad passions which, in real life, are always straining at the leash" is, in fact, a restatement of the concept of "freedom from
restraint," the vicarious release of the baser instinctual passions, which is characteristic of the comic catharsis. And his use of the term "holiday" is also suggestive of the pattern of festive celebration which, as we have seen, distinguishes the comic-demonic figure's progress--his temporary ascendency during a period of topsyturvy licence, and his final subjugation, signifying the end of the merry-making and the return to the "leash," a restoration of the restraints of the work-a-day world.

Like Falstaff and Volpone, Becky Sharp is an embodiment of the carnival spirit of comedy. Both the title and the most prominent motif of the novel indicate that a thematic rendering of the metaphor of "the Fair" was one of Thackeray's central concerns. The opening passage of the prologue directly evokes a carnival-like atmosphere:

As the Manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards, and looks into the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in his survey of the bustling place. There is a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling: there are bullies pushing about, bucks ogling the women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the lookout, quacks (other quacks, plague take them!) bawling in front of their booths, and yokels looking up at the tinselled dancers and poor old rouged tumblers, while the light-fingered folk are operating upon their pockets behind. (p. 5)

Conspicuous in this passage are the images of excess--the eating, drinking, the merriment, aggression and sexual sport--all of them suggesting the release of all restraints and inhibitions, the celebration of the instinctual passions which is permitted to take place within the confines of the Fair.

Throughout the novel, Becky fulfills a role analogous to that of Queen of the Carnival. She is an inveterate enemy to both moral and
social restraints, and her progress from the bottom rungs of English society to the culmination of her career when she is presented to the court is representative of the ruling principle of comic topsyturvydom, or the "inversion of Status" which is integral to the spirit of festivity. Moreover, the direction of her comedy is one which reflects a kind of profanation of the sacred, a flouting defamation of the precepts, authorities, and institutions of the social order she is attempting to subvert.

Becky's comedy, from the very beginning to the final page of the novel, is a comedy of aggression--one in which laughter is provoked as a result of the discomfiture of another character (usually one of eminent social position) or through a subversive attack on the ethical principles of the status quo. When, in the first, and most memorable comic scene of the novel, she defiantly hurls Dr. Johnson's dictionary out the coach window, she is thumbing her nose in derision not only at Miss Pinkerton's pedantic airs and Miss Jemima's tender-hearted nature, but also at the entire system of education to which she has been exposed at Chiswick Mall. Becky, Thackeray asserts on several occasions, "had the keenest sense of humour" (p. 299); and from an early age, she demonstrates a natural capacity to keep those around her "laughing with her fun and mimicry" (p. 182). The laughter she provokes, however, is clearly the Hobbesian laughter of superiority. Like Volpone, she is constantly attuned to the possibility of finding a target for her mocking humour; she too is always searching "for any device . . . of rare ingenious knavery" that would afford her "a violent laughter" (Volpone, V.I.14-15). The
"devices" she discovers within the context of the novel are numerous, and include such scenes as when she caricatures both Miss Jemmy and Miss Pinkerton to the great delight of her father and his friends; when she gleefully revels in the humiliation of Lady Bareacres, refusing to sell the Countess her horses during the evacuation of Brussels; when she performs a splendid imitation of Lady Southdown's ridiculous fanaticism towards her all-healing medicines and zealous religious tracts; or when she is presented to the King, brazenly attired in stolen lace. Moreover, her comedy, like that of the Vice, is not only aggressively subversive but often demonically sacrilegious as well. Thackeray describes her at one point laughing in Miss Pinkerton's face "with a horrid sarcastic demoniacal laughter" (p. 23); and after she throws the dictionary out the window proclaiming "Vive la France! Vive l'Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!" Thackeray's remarks once more associate Becky's humour with the profanations of the demonic realm: "This was the greatest blasphemy Rebecca had as yet uttered; and in those days, in England to say 'Long live Bonaparte!' was as much as to say 'Long live Lucifer!'" (p. 19). Similarly, her mocking advice to Rawdon that if he is left out of his aunt's will, he should, in the tradition of the younger son of an aristocratic family, "sell out and go into the Church" (p. 285), is surely sacrilegious in its implication that a reprobate such as Colonel Crawley could find a place as a member of the supposedly sacrosanct clergy. And finally, Becky's last appearance in Vanity Fair provides an example of demonic humour which, in some respects, balances the perfection of her salient "act of insubordination" at the beginning of the novel. Here we
see the woman who has been previously described as "the godless little Rebecca" (p. 327) and one of the "Faithless, Hopeless, Charityless" (p. 81), now living a life which is an embodiment of Christian probity and benevolence:

She has her enemies. Who has not? Her life is her answer to them. She busies herself in works of piety. She goes to church, and never without a footman. Her name is in all the Charity Lists. The Destitute Orange-girl, the Neglected Washerwoman, the Distressed Muffin Man, find in her a fast and generous friend. She is always having stalls at Fancy Fairs for the benefit of these hapless beings. (p. 666)

If there are any doubts in the reader's mind as to the sincerity of Becky's moral transformation, Thackeray distinctly undercuts its authenticity by referring again in the last sentence of the passage to the metaphor of the "Fair." Becky's pseudo-conversion is, of course, her last joke in the novel; her assumption of a pious life of charity is the ultimate affirmation of the profanation of the sacred which underlies both the iconoclastic tendency of the carnival and the spirit of comedy which, as Sypher states, "desecrates what it seeks to sanctify."

Unlike the other comic-demonic characters we have previously examined, Becky Sharp is, however, a woman—a fact which heightens significantly the quality of both the comedy and the evil she reflects. Although she is explicitly associated with such male representatives of villainy as the diabolical Napoleon, "the wretched upstart and swindler" (p. 253), and the devil himself, Becky is more often represented through allusions to traditional feminine evil and deceit. Compared at various points in the novel to Delilah (p. 158), Clytemnestra (p. 494), Circe (p. 640), and the legendary sirens (p. 617), Becky emerges as a kind of
femme fatale—an archetype of the destructive feminine principle who bewitches and then betrays all the men whom she has entrapped in her deadly snares. In her relationships with Rawdon, Jos. Sedley, and even George Osborne, she makes use of the weapons of her sex—flattery, deceit, and her female attractiveness—in order first to seduce and then to manipulate each man for her own selfish ends. If Becky's role in *Vanity Fair* is comparable to that of the traditional Vice, then surely it is her sexuality which functions as her "dagger of lathe." It is also relevant that all of the traditionally deceitful women with whom Becky is associated are, in fact, guilty of sexual crimes against the male sex. Delilah's is the symbolic crime of castration as she deprives Sampson of his strength and virility when she cuts his hair; Clytemnestra's is the two-fold sin of adultery and murder as she is unfaithful to Agamemnon and then plots with her lover to kill him; both Circe and the sirens are perpetrators of the evil of sexual enchantment, as Circe casts a spell over her lovers transforming them into beasts, and the sirens entice the unsuspecting traveller with the sweetness of their songs and physical beauty, only to devour him. In her relationship with Rawdon she plays the roles of both Delilah and Clytemnestra, depriving her husband of his manhood, as she commands and controls the course of his life, and betraying him in her liaison with Lord Steyne. In her relationship with Joseph Sedley she again functions like Clytemnestra, not so much in an adulterous manner but in the almost certain implication that she murders him after having seductively contrived to deplete his estate of the greatest portion of his wealth. With George Osborne she fulfills the role of the enchantress,
Circe, rendering him swine-like in his ridiculous professions of love to her when he has been married to Amelia for only a few weeks.

Moreover, it is also significant that in the two most pervasive creation myths of Western culture—the Biblical Paradise myth and the myth of Pandora's box—it is a woman who is held responsible for bringing about the ruin of mankind. In *The Dangerous Sex: The Myth of Feminine Evil*, H. R. Hays, commenting upon the symbolic parallels between Pandora's "box," and Eve's "snake" and "apple" observes that both the myth of the Fall and the Pandora myth are part of a tradition which connects women, sex, and sin, and which condemns the female as dangerous because of her sexuality. In this sense, Becky Sharp's sexuality which, in some ways, is the most definitive quality of her role in *Vanity Fair*, concretely places her in the tradition of female evil. The fact that she is a woman has, as well, some bearing upon the other side of her comic-demonic nature, for just as there is a tradition of feminine evil, so there is a tradition of the comic heroine to which Becky also belongs.

From the time of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, it has been conventional for the female role in comedy to bring about the redemption of a corrupt and diseased society. Armed with their chastity and their virtue, such comic heroines as Viola, Rosalind, and Helena in Shakespearean comedy, Millamant in *The Way of the World*, Kate Hardcastle in *She Stoops to Conquer*, Pamela in Richardson's novel, and Sophia in *Tom Jones*, through a balance of sentiment, self-awareness, and good sense, manage to educate and regenerate the male protagonist in each work, ultimately bringing him and the comic society to the point of clarification and integration.
Frye's comments on the comic heroine in Shakespearean comedy and romance are, in fact, applicable to all the representatives of this role: "it is usually the activity of the heroine, or in some cases, her passivity, that brings about the birth of the new society and the reconciliation of the older one with it." In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray examines the traditional role of the comic heroine by dividing it between Becky and Amelia Sedley, one active and the other passive.

Amelia Sedley is, of course, the paradigm of passive female constancy. While Becky reflects the traits of common sense and self-awareness, both of which are sadly lacking in Amelia, the latter exhibits the quality of profuse sentiment. It is, however, because of Amelia's lack of awareness, her self-deception, and her over-abundance of insipid feeling that Thackeray disqualifies her as heroine of his novel. Amelia neither educates nor regenerates; rather, she herself is in need of both education and regeneration. Becky, on the other hand, while she lacks sentiment of any kind, is both clever and quite cognizant of her own capacities--she may be hard-hearted and shrewdly calculating, but she is not self-deceived. While Amelia's empty-headed devotion toward her ne'er-do-well husband and her over-protective smothering of her son undercut the viability of her role as comic heroine, Becky's inability to love anyone but herself makes her a similarly unacceptable candidate for this role. Thackeray, however, uses Becky's comic-demonic nature to advantage here. Amelia--beautiful, virtuous, and chaste--is, in a sense, a representative of the passive romantic heroine who, as a result of her self-indulgent sentimentality, unfortunately fails to fulfill the role. On the other
hand, Becky—heartless, actively self-seeking and sexually promiscuous—represents a direct antithesis of the role. She is, to a large extent, an anti-comic heroine, or rather, a "demonic" comic heroine, and her inversion of the traditional role only serves to heighten the topsyturvy, carnival spirit of her comedy.

Unlike the conventional comic heroine who leads her society to a state of integrated harmony, Becky, more like the Vice, generally breeds dissension and strife. Her relationship with both Sir Pitt and Rawdon results in a hostility between father and son; and she totally subverts the domestic concord between husband and wife not only through her sportive seduction of Amelia's husband, but in her own marriage as well through her immoral conduct with Lord Steyne. She admits very early in the novel that she is "no angel" (p. 19); moreover, unlike the traditional comic heroine, she is certainly no virgin either. In view of the repressive nature of Victorian morality, Thackeray is understandably oblique in dealing with Becky's sexual conduct both before and after her marriage. The latent suggestions of her promiscuity are, however, numerous. Becky, we are told, "had never been a girl . . . she had been a woman since she was eight years old" (p. 21). We learn of her affair with Reverend Crisp while she is still at Miss Pinkerton's academy—an affair which Thackeray implies was not a completely innocent one. As Becky and Amelia prepare to leave Chiswick Hall, Thackeray observes:

Thus the world began for these two young ladies. For Amelia it was quite a new, fresh, brilliant world, with all the bloom upon it. It was not quite a new one for Rebecca—(indeed, if the truth must be told with respect to the Crisp affair, the tart-woman hinted to somebody, who took an affidavit of the fact to somebody else, that there
was a great deal more than was made public regarding Mr. Crisp and Miss Sharp . . .). But who can tell you the real truth of the matter? At all events, if Rebecca was not beginning the world, she was beginning it over again. (pp. 23-24)

And if the above passage were not sufficiently pointed in its innuendo, Thackeray some four hundred pages later has Becky reflect upon "her own youth and the dark secrets of those early tainted days" (p. 403).

About her sexual career after the dissolution of her marriage, there is even less ambiguity. Becky, we learn, "was very respectable and orderly at first, but the life of humdrum virtue grew utterly tedious to her before long" (p. 622). Although Thackeray is again reluctant to report the graphic details of Becky's moral descent, we see her gambling and drinking, and on unpleasantly familiar terms with the male guests in the various boarding-houses at which she stops during her restless journey through continental Europe. Becky, we are told at one point, "was a boarding-house queen" (p. 624); and Thackeray later declares that "her distaste for respectability grew more and more remarkable. She became a perfect Bohemian ere long, herding with people whom it would make your hair stand on end to meet" (p. 625).

Becky's female sexuality, then, functions as a pivotal focus for both the comic and demonic aspects of her characterization. As an embodiment of the destructive feminine principle which sexually entices and then devours, Becky is an evil woman. Her wickedness is, however, not entirely unjustifiable. Thackeray suggests time and time again that Becky is not completely blameworthy. Because she is a woman who has neither wealth nor social position, she is forced to use both her intellect and her sexual attractiveness to survive in a world that values the
appearances of social prominence and affluence above all else. And it is her skill at making use of her native resources that allows her to play the game of appearances so admirably. In other words, Becky's manifestation of the wiles of feminine evil generates an ambivalent reader-response toward her—a response which Kettle has perceptively elucidated:

Becky, like Moll and Clarissa and Sophia (each after her own fashion) before her, rebels. She will not submit to perpetual slavery and humiliation within the governess trade. And so she uses consciously and systematically all the men's weapons plus her one natural material asset, her sex, to storm the men's world. And the consequence is of course morally degrading and she is a bad woman all right. But she gains our sympathy nevertheless... and she too gains it not in spite but because of her rebellion.[1]

Similarly, Becky in her role as comic heroine again evokes a contradictory set of responses. She is both regenerative and deleterious toward human relationships; she reconciles as well as destroys. Despite her respective betrayals of both Rawdon and Amelia, she has ultimately a regenerative effect on both characters. As a result of his marriage to Becky, Rawdon undergoes a radical transformation from an unprincipled gambler and coarse braggart to a generous, selfless, and tender-hearted husband and father. Similarly, although she has been selfishly cruel, spiteful and manipulative toward Amelia, she is also capable of educating her by revealing George's infidelity and deceit, thereby shattering Amelia's self-indulgent illusions. Moreover, it is Becky's presence in Pumpernickel near the end of the novel which provokes the altercation between Dobbin and Amelia, a dramatic confrontation which ultimately leads each of them to a sense of clarification and a loss of self-deception, and paves the way for their eventual reconciliation. In this way, then, it is Becky's unconventional fulfillment of the role of comic heroine
that is responsible for bringing about the marriage of the two protagon­ists, a union symbolic of the comic forces of fertility, concord, and re­integration.

Becky's sexual conduct, the area in which both the forces of comedy and evil are intertwined, also provokes mixed feelings in the reader. On the one hand, her seductiveness is deliberately calculated and devoid of feeling—as Barbara Hardy observes: "She is the kind of utterly self-controlled courtesan who feigns passion rather than feels it." Paradoxically, however, her promiscuity, especially after the dissolution of her marriage, transcends a purely social ambition and re­flects instead the \textit{élan vital} of a woman giving free rein to the expres­sion of her sensual appetites. In this sense, then, although Becky's loose sexual conduct is odious, especially in the light of Victorian morality, there is another aspect of her character reflected here that is in keeping with the ambiguous quality of demonic comedy. Like that of the Vice, described by Cushman as "the embodiment of worldliness and sensuality" who is concerned "that humanity shall give free rein to his inclinations," Becky's sexuality is indicative of a kind of \textit{joie de vivre}, a celebration of the natural life of the instincts.

Perhaps Becky's sexual vitality is most dramatically rendered in the brief but significant scene which takes place between her and Joseph Sedley at the Elephant Hotel, an establishment of decidedly low repute. Joseph has been searching for Becky's room when he observes a young dissolute student "bawling through the keyhole supplications to the person within." As soon as Becky hears Joseph's voice, she opens the door:
Becky's little head peeped out, full of archness and mischief. She lighted on Jos. "It's you," she said, coming out. "How I have been waiting for you! Stop! not yet--in one minute you shall come in." In that instant she put a rouge-pot, a brandy bottle, and a plate of broken meat into the bed, gave one smooth to her hair, and finally let in her visitor. (p. 631)

In this scene the carnival images of instinctual release--the eating and drinking and love-making which the Master of the Performance has promised in his description of the "Fair" in the Prologue--come together in the symbolic overtones of the plate of cold meat, the brandy bottle, and, of course, the bed. Becky begins to tell Joseph her tale of woe and is so overcome with grief and despair that she buries her face in the bedclothes.

The brandy-bottle inside clinked up against the plate which held the cold sausage. And she began forthwith to tell her story--a tale so neat, simple, and artless, that it was quite evident, from hearing her, that if ever there was a white-robed angel escaped from heaven to be subject to the infernal machinations and villany of fiends here below, that spotless being--that miserable, unsullied martyr--was present on the bed before Jos--on the bed, sitting on the brandy-bottle. (p. 633)

Apparent in the above passage is a condensation of a number of the patterns we have encountered before in our examination of the distinguishing characteristics of the comic-demonic figure. In the first place, the comedy of the situation derives from the topsyturvy spirit of inversion. The scene functions upon two levels--the appearance, that is, what Joseph Sedley perceives to be Becky's condition, and the reality, which is, in fact, a direct inversion of what Becky appears to be. Far from being "a white-robed angel" or an "unsullied martyr" victimized by the "infernal machinations" of the fiends of hell, Becky herself is a member of the devil's party who is about to lure another victim into the snares of hell. Moreover, the re-appearance of the images of the brandy bottle, the plate
of meat and the ubiquitous bed (to which Thackeray emphatically refers twice in the final line) not only undercuts Becky's professions of untainted virtue and innocence, but also re-affirms the festive celebration of the sensual appetites inherent in the Vice-role. And finally, the entire scene is at once reprehensibly sordid and supremely funny, again inviting in the reader an uneasy ambivalent response.

Although Becky's comic-demonic ambiguity is enhanced by the fact that she is a woman, she reflects the double-visaged temperament of the Vice figure in several other respects. Throughout the novel she manifests the characteristic Vice-like attribute of indifference. Devoid of the capacity to love any other human being but herself, Becky is "by no means so much interested about anybody's welfare as about her own" (p. 650). Like Volpone, she is not morally committed to the bonds of marriage, children, or friends. She cruelly flirts with George in order to spite Amelia who has always been a generous friend toward her. She connives to leave her devoted husband in the spunging-house rather than use her ample funds to release him, so that she can spend the evening in a tête-à-tête with Lord Steyne. And perhaps the most powerful example of her lack of feeling is her cold-hearted insensitivity toward children, including a display of "the most utmost indifference" (p. 502) toward her own son: "She spurned children and children-lovers. 'I have no taste for bread and butter,' she would say" (p. 442).

Concomitant with this attitude of indifference is her manifestation of the amorality of the comic-demonic figure. As previously suggested, Becky's wicked machinations are combined with actions which are,
in some respects, beneficent as well. Like that of the Vice, Becky's essential amorality is represented in the fact that she does both good and evil haphazardly. We are reminded in particular of the Vices Haphazard in *Appius and Virginia* and Courage in *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, both of whom are fortuitous agents of good as well as evil, both of whose actions are extraneous to the laws of any moral code. It is interesting that Courage's description of his own amorality can be applied with equal precision to the character of Becky Sharp:

Now may you see how Courage can work
And how he can encourage both to good and bad

Thus you may see Courage contagious
And eke contrarious--both in me do rest.
For I, of kind, am always various
And change as to my mind seemeth best.

*(Schell and Shuchter, p. 331)*

Becky, too, is both "contagious" and "contrarious," attractive and subversive, an arbitrary proponent of either good or bad. Similarly, like Courage and several other of the morality Vices, and Falstaff and Volpone as well, Becky is "always various"; she reflects the Protean ability to change her appearance when it is to her own advantage. Through her inordinate skill at dissimulation, she manages to insinuate herself into the good graces of almost everyone with whom she comes in contact, including both the elder and younger Sir Pitt, Lady Crawley, Briggs, Joseph, Lord Steyne and anyone else who can be of service to her. Like Volpone, Becky is a magnificent artificer: she is "an artist herself" (p. 488), a "splendid actress" (p. 506), a "comedian," a "consummate tragedian" (p. 639) who has a tremendous flair for dramatic performance. That Thackeray continually portrays her posing and miming, effortlessly moving from one
"Charade" to another, is an indication of both her chameleon-like ability to change shapes and her essential ambiguity which makes it impossible ever to pin her down or define her.

Moreover, Becky's talent for acting and performing provides another link with the metaphor of the fair which underlies the novel. At one point she admits to the boredom and stifling monotony she experiences in her life of social respectability: "'I wish I were out of it,' she said to herself... 'Oh how much gayer it would be to wear spangles and trowsers and dance before a booth at a fair'" (p. 487). Although she professes a feeling of ennui at this point, dancing before a booth at the fair is exactly what Becky does throughout the novel. Her dancing, singing, miming, and charades serve to transport the topsyturvy carnival realm to the world of fashionable London society. Like Falstaff, she functions as a kind of monarch of misrule—both characters bring the forces of comic-demonic release to the court, Falstaff when he dons his mock-crown and scepter at the Boar's Head Tavern, and Becky when she is presented to the King derisively bedecked in stolen lace and brocade. It is also significant that the culmination of Becky's acting career is achieved in her portrayal of the role of Queen Clytemnestra, who as murderess and adulteress is certainly a fitting embodiment of demonic misrule. The comic overtones of Becky's misrule, although not directly discernible in the actual performance, are reflected in Lord Steyne's pun at the conclusion of the charade—"Mrs. Rawdon Crawley was quite killing in the part" (p. 494)—a pun which reverberates both comically and demonically at later points in the novel when Becky's adulterous liaison with Lord Steyne and
her murder of Joseph Sedley are rather pointedly insinuated.

The fact that Becky voices the desire to wear trousers as well as spangles during her performance at the fair is also relevant to the comic-demonic overtones of the carnival. It has been previously indicated that during a period of ritualized festivity, the donning of the clothes of the opposite sex has often been licenced as representative of the breaking of all traditional boundaries, including those which generally separate the sexual categories of male and female. Becky's comic-demonic overturning of the traditional order of respectability involves, at some level, the reversal of conventional sexual roles. Just as Falstaff and Volpone ultimately cannot be bound by the customary demarcations between male and female, so Becky symbolically dons trousers during her carnival dance through *Vanity Fair*. Her shrewd intelligence is repeatedly compared to that of a man—she is complimented "upon the brilliant way in which she did business . . . [T]here was no professional man who could beat her" (p. 357). And on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo, Thackeray professes so much admiration for Becky's man-like self-sufficiency that he claims her as heroine of his novel:

If this is a novel without a hero, at least let us lay claim to a heroine. No man in the British army which has marched away, not the great Duke himself, could be more cool or collected in the presence of doubts and difficulties, than the indomitable little aide-de-camp's wife. (p. 288)

Becky also drinks and gambles like a man. We learn how she began drinking gin with her father at an early age, a habit she never completely suppresses even during the period of her life when she moves in the highest social circles. And when she takes up the Bohemian life after her fall
from respectability, her appreciation of the bottle is even further en-
hanced by her exhilarated passion for gambling:

Here [in Brussels], as at Paris, Becky was a boarding-house queen and
ruled in select pensions. She never refused the champagne, or the
bouquets or the private boxes, but, what she preferred was the écarte
at night,--and she played audaciously. First she played only for a
little, then for Napoleons, then for notes: then she would not be
able to pay her month's pension: then she borrowed from the young
gentlemen: then she got into cash again . . . and would once more take
the cards against Monsieur Rossignal, or the Chevalier de Raff. (p. 624)

During this period in Becky's life, we are reminded of the traditional
role of the Vice who, as sensual man given over to the unbridled expres-
sion of the sensual passions, is often represented indulging his baser
instincts in dining, drinking, dicing, and whoring in the underworld realm
of the taverns and stews. The fact that Becky is, however, a woman who
is participating in the debauchery of the underworld heightens the
demonic aspects of the situation as well as the possibility for comic re-
lease it provides.

When Becky is banished from high society, the carnival is not over
for her. It is significant that the underworld realm which is portrayed
in the description of Becky's Bohemian life is almost an exact represent-
tion of what the Master of the Performance has promised his audience dur-
ing the Prologue to the novel--"a great quantity of eating and drinking,
making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating,
fighting, dancing, and fiddling" (p. 5). And it is, of course, Thackeray's
purpose in the novel to reveal that the depravity of the Fair is contained
beneath the hypocritical posturings of so-called respectable society.
Thus, when Lord David Cecil comments that after Becky loses her social
position, "she sinks to the underworld of society," he is, perhaps, oversimplifying the situation. Becky is of the underworld—the carnival realm is her spawning ground, she being the daughter of a Bohemian artist and French opera-girl. In other words, she never leaves the underworld; she merely exposes the reality of the life of the Fair which underlies the world of appearances of fashionable London. Becky's easy mobility is, in some respects, like that of Falstaff who is comfortable both in the tavern and at a council of war with the King and highest noblemen of the land. Both characters fulfill an intermediary role similar to that of the Vice, who often serves as a commentator on the weakness and corruption of the traditional social order. Becky, as well as Falstaff, functions like a mirror, a reflector of the vice which lies hidden beneath the appearances of virtue. Dorothy Van Ghent, in her chapter on *Vanity Fair*, perceptively describes Becky's function as a micro-cosmic mirror of the morality of the macro-cosmic world. According to Van Ghent, Becky "is at once all the imperatively aggressive, insanely euphoric impulses of a morally sick civilization, and an individual condemnation of that civilization."  

In a remarkable passage which takes place toward the end of the novel, Thackeray draws together many of the motifs we have just been considering—the underworld, the carnival, the aggressive and euphoric impulses which lie beneath the surface of appearances, and the interfusion of masculine and feminine sexuality. The passage begins with the author's explanation of why he is unable to relate the sordid details of Becky's Bohemian life:
We must pass over a part of Mrs. Rebecca Crawley's biography with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands. I defy any one to say that our Becky, who has certainly some vices, has not been presented to the public in a perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner. In describing this syren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all around, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling around corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous. When, however, the syren disappears and dives below, down among the dead men, the water of course grows turbid over her, and it is labour lost to look into it ever so curiously. They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims. And so, when Becky is out of the way, be sure that she is not particularly well employed, and that the less that is said about her doings is in fact the better. (p. 617-18)

This passage is striking for its coalescence of several of the most significant strands of imagery in the novel. The demonic overtones of Becky's role are focused in the description of her as an infernal siren, half-male and half-female, whose "tail" is "diabolically hideous"; she is represented as "a fiendish marine cannibal" whose bewitching sexual attractiveness tempts her victims to self-destruction in the murky depths of the underworld. Similarly, the contrast between the siren's beautiful appearance and the grotesque reality of what lies beneath the water's surface is powerfully rendered, and the evil and horror of female sexuality is reiterated in a graphic image which again connects woman, sex, and her aggressive destruction of the male. There is also a suggestion of the equation of the euphoric carnival realm and the underworld in Thackeray's description of the primitive cannibalistic "revelling and feasting" which takes place in the "turbid" depths of the waters below. It is particularly
significant that the traditional "looking-glass" of the siren is men­tioned, saliently pointing towards Becky's role as reflector; within the context of the novel, she holds the mirror and alluringly beckons the rest of the world to come and glimpse the shocking reality that both she and all others externally project.

The passage is also striking for Thackeray's unveiled expression of moral condemnation directed towards Becky. The feeling it conveys is one of unmitigated abhorrence and disgust. Becky is represented as a hideous and diabolical monster, a repulsive image of evil. Yet in juxta­position with this powerful statement of repugnance are the author's previous professions of admiration for Becky, his implied enjoyment of her marvellous sense of humour which includes the ability to laugh even at herself, and the fact that some thirty chapters earlier, he has pro­claimed her the heroine of the novel.

Behind Thackeray's obvious ambivalence towards Becky, we once more perceive the sense of moral ambiguity evoked by the double-sided countenance of the Vice figure, the "two faces in one hood" which embody the converging forces of comedy and evil. And again, as with Falstaff and Volpone, this attitude of ambivalence is reflected in a body of critical commentary which is divided in its estimation of the validity of the final disposition of Becky Sharp. Some of Vanity Fair's critics vehemently support Becky's fall from social grace, some protest that Thackeray was not hard enough on her, that he "was of Becky's party with­out knowing it,"19 and still others feel that her punishment is too severe, that "she is treated to something more than just deserts."20 It
can be argued, however, that Becky's final disposition is neither too stringent nor too lenient; it is, rather, effectively ambiguous in keeping with the contradictory attitudes that are called forth in response to the outcome of the comic-demonic figure. We want Becky to be punished for the evil she has perpetrated; yet, on the other hand, we want her to escape for allowing us to participate in the period of comic licence she has provided us.

After her betrayal of her husband, Becky is cast out from eminent society very much in the tradition of the Vice who is usually banished, hanged, or carted off to Hell at the end of the morality drama. We follow the successive humiliations of her travels abroad through the sordid boarding-house scene of continental Europe, her every attempt to regain some vestige of respectability doomed to failure:

Whenever Becky made a little circle for herself with incredible toils and labour, someone came and swept it down rudely and she had all her work to begin over again. It was very hard, lonely and disheartening. (p. 622)

And a few pages later, Thackeray writes:

She was, in fact, no better than a vagabond upon the earth. When she got her money she gambled; when she had gambled it she was put to shifts to live; who knows how or by what means she succeeded? (p. 626)

Becky's life is portrayed as one fraught with hardship and degradation; nevertheless, she is able to remain emotionally unaffected by her ill circumstances. At the same time we learn that "she was happy enough at the period of her boarding-house life" (p. 623), and that, in fact, "she was not worse now than she had been in the days of her prosperity--only a little down on her luck" (p. 634). Moreover, there are indications that not only is Becky little affected by her vagabond life, but also she
actually thrives upon it. We are given a sense of her irrepressible vitality as she wines and dines and gambles her way from one boarding house to the next; she is, after all, in her "native element":

Becky liked the life. She was at home with everybody in the place, pedlars, punters, students, and all. She was of a wild, roving nature, inherited from father and mother, who were both Bohemians by taste and circumstance . . . and the general buzz and hum of the place had pleased and tickled the little woman, even when her luck was down. (p. 631)

Finally, Thackeray's description of Becky at the conclusion of the novel suggests that she has risen considerably in social stature since the death of Joseph Sedley, and although she is now only on the periphery of respectability, there is an implication that her upward mobility is once more in progress. In this sense then, Becky is both punished and reprieved. Although she is doomed to be forever beginning anew, her essential resiliency and indomitable spirit permit her to rise again cheerfully whenever she is cast down. Like Natural Inclination, the Vice in The Trial of Treasure, she may be temporarily bridled, but never completely suppressed.

And lest we think that the similarities between the role of Becky Sharp in Vanity Fair and that of the Vice in morality drama are merely coincidental, the last line of the novel and Thackeray's accompanying pencil sketch quite powerfully dispell any such thoughts. The author returns once more to the puppet-metaphor introduced in the Prologue to the novel: "Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our own play is played out" (p. 666). The adjacent illustration depicts two children about to close the lid of the puppet-box in which, amidst a mass of indistinguishable figures, the Amelia and Dobbin puppets stand firmly
upright, the former holding a child in her arms. Tossed outside the box is the Lord Steyne puppet, who, according to the Master of the Performance, was to be fetched away at the end of the show by Old Nick, in true morality fashion. Significantly, Becky is also depicted lying outside the box, forcibly restrained in the arms of a grinning devil-puppet. It seems clear that both Becky and Lord Steyne have been excluded from the new morally redeemed society which has crystallized around Dobbin, Amelia and their children. Like Nichol Newfangle, the Vice in Like Will to Like, both have been presumably carted off to Hell on the back of the devil. The fact that the devil-puppet is grinning not only provides a graphic image of the confluent forces of comedy and evil, but his leer carries implicit sexual overtones as well, once more reinforcing the connection between female sexuality and the demonic realm. Moreover, the implication is that while it has been relatively easy to subdue the kind of depravity represented by the wicked nobleman-puppet, the bridling of Becky's special kind of wickedness requires a far greater amount of exertion, for her comic villainy is as attractive as it is reprehensible. "Flexible in the joints and lively on the wire" (p. 6), Becky reflects both an essential autonomy and a resilient vitality which ultimately transcend the controlling strings of the puppet-master, and perhaps, even those of Thackeray, himself. We are left with the impression that her subjugation at the end of the novel, like that of the Vice, can only be a temporary one, and that it will not be long before Becky is once more adorned with spangles and clad in trousers, enticingly performing her comic-demonic dance before a booth at yet another fair.
Notes for Chapter VII


3 "Before the Curtain," in which this reference to Becky Sharp occurs, was written along with the last number of the serial publication and then placed at the beginning of the novel when it was published as a volume.


5 Although the diabolical element is unquestionably the most pervasive in the characterization of both Satan and Iago, it is significant that neither role is devoid of comic overtones. See Spivack's chapters on Iago in The Allegory of Evil (pp. 3-27, 415-53) for an excellent analysis of both the evil and the gleeful merriment reflected by this character.

6 Chambers uses this term to describe the predominant idea of the Feast of Fools (The Medieval Stage, I, 325; also see pp. 15-17 above).


8 For an excellent summary of the parallels between Becky and Napoleon, see Russell A. Fraser, "Pernicious Casuistry: A Study of Character in Vanity Fair," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XII (1957), 145 ff.


13 Cushman, p. 91.

14 It is also significant that Thackeray uses the metaphor of the Fair in his description of the top floor of the Elephant Hotel, "where among students, bagmen, small tradesmen, and country folks, come in for the
festival [Prince Polonia's renowned evening entertainments], Becky had found a little nest" (p. 630).

15 Practically the only character of significance who is not deceived by Becky's dissimulation is Dobbin. Her attitude toward Dobbin is, however, illustrative of her amoral indifference to the categories of good or evil. Although she recognizes him as an enemy, she openly admires him and, according to Thackeray "bore him no rancour for the part he had taken against her" (p. 648). In fact, she goes out of her way to commend him to Amelia, even though in this case her attitude is surely one of disinterest since she has nothing to gain.


18 Hays in *The Dangerous Sex* explains that the male fear of female sexuality is often dramatized in fantasies of the menacing phallic woman "whose organ contains the snake which may bite and castrate" (p. 94). One of the literary examples Hays cites is Milton's description in *Paradise Lost* of the female figure named Sin who sits at the gates of Hell. This figure--a beautiful woman from the waist up, the lower half of her body in the form of a serpent endowed with a lethal sting--is in many respects similar to Thackeray's female siren-demon.


20 Russell A. Fraser, "Pernicious Casuistry: A Study of Character in *Vanity Fair,*" *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, XII (1957), 141.
Chapter VIII

THE CHILD AND THE CLOWN-DEMON--FATHERS AND CHILDREN

IN OLIVER TWIST AND THE OLD CURIOsITY SHOP

Almost everyone who has written about either Oliver Twist or The Old Curiosity Shop has observed that the most interesting and vital parts of each novel are those which depict the hidden and private world of evil, darkness, criminality, and dream. According to Arnold Kettle, the power of Oliver Twist "proceeds from the wonderful evocation of the underworld and the engagement of our sympathies on behalf of the inhabitants of that world,"¹ while Mark Spilka, describing Quilp in The Old Curiosity Shop as Dickens' "greatest comic villain," not only finds this character "more appealing, in his repulsiveness, than his victim in her goodness," but also observes that "it is Quilp who has survived the nineteenth century as the novel's great attraction."² Certainly, both Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop originated in a similar purpose, that which Dickens expressed in a passage subsequently cut from the Preface to the earlier novel; there he explains that in Oliver he "wished to show . . . the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last."³ A similar objective is suggested in the first chapter of The Old Curiosity Shop, as Master Humphrey speculates upon little Nell's "future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of grotesque companions; the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng"⁴ (p. 13). Both novels reflect the dramatization of the progression of the child, the symbol of natural Good, moving through a world that is thoroughly
evil and corrupt in nature.

The contrast of two worlds, one of darkness and evil, the other of virtue and light, is intrinsic to the central atmosphere of each novel, and this contrast is, in several respects, commensurate with a kind of Manichean vision of the universe. As Donald Fanger has indicated, the works of several nineteenth-century novelists are informed by a "Manichean world view" which examines each man's struggle, however obscure, in the light of the ultimate contest between good and evil; and it dramatizes this framework by incarnating the opposed principles through the introduction of purely good characters (most often women and children) and, more important, characters clearly identified as diabolical surrogates. The former tend often to be sentimentalized portraits; they tend almost always to be victims, beatified by Christian passivity and resignation. The latter are active, aggressive, predatory; and they tend to appear suprahuman, surrounded with a demonic aura and seemingly possessed of at least quasi-demonic powers.5

This world view, although not so relevant to Vanity Fair, strikingly corresponds to the fictional metaphor of both Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop; and we might also observe that an almost identical contention between the forces of good and evil is represented in the Psychomachia which underlies the structure of the morality play. It is also significant that the Vice of the morality tradition, as well as the chief "diabolical surrogates" of Dickens' two novels, Fagin and Quilp, respectively, are invested with distinctly comic overtones. As we are again about to discover, it is not necessarily a far cry from the world of medieval drama to the fictional world of the nineteenth century.

Although it is unlikely that Dickens was consciously employing the old morality framework in either Oliver Twist or The Old Curiosity Shop, there are in both novels echoes of Pilgrim's Progress, the same
allegorical work of prose fiction which informs so much of *Vanity Fair*, and which, as previously indicated, was itself influenced by the morality tradition. The original subtitle of *Oliver Twist*, "The Parish Boy's Progress," is a direct allusion to Bunyan's work; and in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Nell and her grandfather are at one point described as "the two pilgrims" (p. 114), an implicit reference that is made quite pointed a few pages later. As Nell looks back towards the industrial labyrinth of London which she has left behind, she is reminded of her "old copy of the Pilgrim's Progress," and turning to her grandfather, she says: "I feel as if we were both Christian, and laid down on this grass all the cares and troubles we brought with us; never to take them up again" (p. 116). Both Oliver and Nell are, in many respects, on a pilgrimage towards salvation, and during the course of their individual journeys, each child is surrounded by the secularized diabolic forces of nineteenth-century urban society. In this sense then, it is not only Nell, but also Oliver, who "seem[s] to exist in a kind of allegory" (*OCS*, p. 13). Both child-characters are representative of the qualities of virtue, purity, and incorruptible innocence; and both are, in Fanger's words, "beatified by Christian passivity and resignation," as a result of their victimization by "active, aggressive, predatory" and, moreover, saliently comic figures who, despite their secularized formalization are, nevertheless, imbued with supernaturally demonic powers.

Furthermore, as the critical commentary would indicate, it is from the underworld realms of these demonic characters that the vitality of each novel springs. As in medieval drama, comic vice in *Oliver Twist*
and The Old Curiosity Shop is irrepressible. While the virtuous characters are static and colourless in their purity and passivity, Fagin and Quilp and their respective henchmen, the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates, the Brasses and the dwarf's acrobatic boy, are all vividly animated and exuberant as they conduct their evil intrigues. And once again the implication is obvious that although the path of virtue and suffering may be the way to moral salvation, the course of vice, from the perspective of the readers' aesthetic sensibilities, is without question the more attractive and sustaining one. Keeping this fact in mind, we shall now turn to the underworld realms of Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop, first surveying the prototypical comic-demonic attributes embodied in both Fagin and Quilp, and then suggesting how the ambiguity which governs our double-sided response to each of these clown-demons may possibly reveal some additional insights concerning Dickens' attempt to confront the ambivalences of the parent-child relationship—an area of psychological conflict crucial in his own personal life, and a central concern in almost every one of his novels.

We know from a letter he wrote to Forster in 1837, that while Dickens was working on the nineteenth chapter of Oliver Twist, he was simultaneously engrossed in reading Defoe's History of the Devil:

I have had great difficulty in keeping my hands off Fagin and the rest of them in the evenings, but as I came down for rest, I resisted the temptation ... Did you ever read (of course you have, though) Defoe's History of the Devil? What a capital thing it is! I bought it for a couple of shillings yesterday morning, and have been quite absorbed in it ever since.

While there is some critical disagreement in determining the extent to which Dickens was influenced by his recent reading of Defoe and the
extent to which he was spontaneously drawing upon the tradition of devil-lore which permeates Western culture, his letter to Forster suggests that during the composition of *Oliver Twist*, the image of the devil was clearly fixed in his mind. Certainly, Fagin is associated with the demonic realm at numerous points throughout the novel. Often pictured hovering over a fire, the Jew is repetitively referred to as either "the old 'un" or "the old gentleman," both terms frequently employed in allusion to the devil. Dickens' concentration on the details of Fagin's physiognomy also suggests this character's diabolic nature. Fagin's face is "villainous-looking and repulsive" (p. 56); his features, which are often distorted in a "hideous" or "ghastly grin" (pp. 59, 145), are at one point marked by an attitude of "devilish anticipation" (p. 358), and at another, "wrinkled into an expression of villainy perfectly demoniacal" (p. 138). Sikes shrinks away from the Jew's conciliatory pat on the shoulder, declaring, "Reminds me of being nabbed by the devil . . . There never was another man with such a face as yours" (p. 338). And when Fagin knocks at Sikes' door, the latter demands of the growling dog: "Don't you know the devil when he's got a great-coat on?" (p. 136). In Nancy's words, Fagin is "devil . . . and worse than devil as he's been to me" (p. 351), and it is Sikes' conjecture that the Jew "came straight from the old 'un without any father at all betwixt"8 (p. 338).

Although Quilp is not explicitly identified with the Father of Evil as frequently as Fagin is, the demonic aspects of the dwarf's character are, nevertheless, emphasized again and again in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Acknowledged at one point as "the prime mover of the whole
diabolic device" (p. 604) which gives rise to the main action of the novel, Quilp, as the chief embodiment of malevolent energy, is constantly "driving people about like an evil spirit" (p. 159). "I really don't believe he's human," exclaims Mrs. Nubbles, in reference to the dwarf's seemingly supernatural demonic powers; and Dick Swiveller, after suggesting to Quilp that the latter is "not a choice spirit," then speculatively adds: "Devil a bit, sir . . . If you're any spirit at all, sir, you're an evil spirit" (p. 239). Also described as "the sly little fiend" (p. 391) and "some familiar demon" (p. 454), Quilp, like Fagin, is often represented "grinning like a devil" (p. 145), "with a ghastly smile" (p. 68) on his lips. His typical attitude is one of "gloating maliciousness" (p. 81), an attitude which is particularly ostensible during the times he diabolically mocks his wife and mother-in-law, and during the incident in which he tauntingly performs "a kind of demon-like dance" (p. 228) around the kennel of a ferocious dog.

Both Fagin and Quilp reflect as well several attributes characteristic of the traditional Vice-role. Like the morality Vice, both are tempters and schemers, and in their respective relationships to Oliver and Nell, Fagin and Quilp function within the traditional pattern of acting as aged corrupters towards youthful innocence. The first words Dickens employs to introduce each villain suggest an advancement in years --Fagin is described "as a very old shrivelled Jew" (p. 57), while Quilp is presented as "an elderly man of remarkably hard features and forbidding aspect" (p. 65). Similarly, the temptation aspects of each role revolve around what Spivack calls an "act of seduction." For Spivack,
the characteristic stratagem whereby the Vice achieves his purpose is a vivid stage metaphor for the sly insinuation of moral evil into the human breast. For its consummation he displays himself as an artist in persuasion who deftly manipulates his victim out of his virtuous inclination and turns him about in the direction of his ruin.\footnote{9}

Fagin attempts to lure Oliver into the realm of evil by offering him food, shelter, and a sense of community within the thieves' den. Fagin's "act of seduction" is centered upon his perception of Oliver's existential isolation, his being cut off from the nurturing guidance, protection, and companionship of both family and friends. As the Jew remarks to Sikes: "Once let him feel that he is one of us; once fill his mind that he has been a thief, and he's ours! Ours for life" (p. 141). It is not enough for Fagin to capture and imprison Oliver; it is rather his purpose to remove from the boy any chance of salvation. In fact, Dickens' use within the novel of an identifiable "metaphor for the sly insinuation of moral evil into the human breast" makes Fagin's Vice-like role quite explicit: "In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils. Having prepared his mind, by solitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place, he was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it and change its hue forever" (p. 134).

Quilp functions in a similar manner towards both little Nell and Dick Swiveller in The Old Curiosity Shop. With his offer of drink, friendship, parental protection, and a potential fortune in gold and silver, Quilp is successful in his attempt "to insinuate himself into Richard Swiveller's confidence" (p. 173). With Nell, his act of seduction does not succeed as well. While Fagin's role of tempter in his
desire to corrupt Oliver may be seen as somewhat analogous to the relationship between Falstaff and Hal in *Henry IV*, Quilp's temptation of little Nell is more along the lines of Volpone's seduction of Celia in Jonson's play or Becky's attempt to ensnare Joseph Sedley in *Vanity Fair*. In fact, although the sexual overtones in *The Old Curiosity Shop* are latent and symbolic in accordance with the proscriptions of Victorian morality, they are, nevertheless, as heavily charged as the direct statement of sexual appetite manifested in *Volpone*. From Quilp's wife and mother-in-law, we learn of the dwarf's seductive magnetism, his "captivating qualities" and "powers of insinuation" (p. 132) in his relations with the female sex. Mrs. Quilp advises her friends that her husband "has such a way with him when he likes, that the best looking woman here couldn't refuse him if I was dead and she was free and he chose to make love to her" (p. 32). An acclaimed "lady's man" (p. 36), Quilp is identified from the very beginning of the novel as an incarnation of diabolical sexual energy, and his overtures towards Nell are openly lascivious in nature. He proposes marriage to her, offering to make her his "number two" as soon as his present wife should die:

"To be Mrs. Quilp the second, when Mrs. Quilp the first is dead, sweet Nell," said Quilp wrinkling up his eyes and luring her towards him with his bent forefinger, "to be my wife, my little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife. Say that Mrs. Quilp lives five years, or only four, you'll be just the proper age for me. Ha, ha. Be a good girl, Nelly, a very good girl, and see if one of these days you don't come to be Mrs. Quilp of Tower Hill." (p. 45)

The seductive quality of Quilp's proposal is quite obvious here as he invitingly "lures" Nell toward him, and as he lecherously dwells on the physical details of her beauty. While almost all of the other men in the
novel react to Nell exclusively on the basis of her spiritual purity, Quilp is the only one who acknowledges the fact that she has a body. He constantly refers to her in immodestly sensual terms, describing her as "chubby, rosy, cosy little Nell" and "a fresh, blooming, modest little bud," his suggestive words of endearment becoming even more prurient as he simultaneously "nurs[es] his short leg" in a latently obscene manner (p. 73). Quilp's demonic eroticism is, in fact, the propelling force behind little Nell's flight from the inferno of the city, and we will return to a more detailed examination of the sexual overtones of that flight when we discuss Dickens' portrayal of the comic-demonic figure in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as a lecherous father-figure. It is sufficient at this point to observe that Quilp's Vice-like temptation of Nell moves in the direction of sexual seduction, and that it has a purpose similar to Fagin's role as tempter in *Oliver Twist*; both characters attempt to poison and corrupt the purity and innocence of the youthful representative of virtue in each novel.

It is also significant that both Fagin and Quilp dwell in the demonic underworld regions; they are both represented as subterranean and reptilian creatures--Fagin is described as a "loathsome reptile" (*OT*, p. 135), Quilp, as a "Salamander" (*OCS*, p. 173)--and both have a "den of villainy" comparable to that of the magnifico in *Volpone*. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens portrays an underworld in many respects similar to that of the secularized version of hell in the moralities. It is the world of the tavern and the stews, of criminality and the gallows. We learn that Nancy's life "had been squandered in the streets and among the most
noisome of the stews and dens of London" (p. 301). The latter are the dens which harbour the thieves' society in the depths of London's slums, "the foul and frowsy dens" where, as Dickens explains in the Preface, "vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn" (p. xvi). These dens are only accessible through "a labyrinth of dark narrow courts" (p. 108), and at the center of the labyrinth we find Fagin, perpetually "brooding over a dull smokey fire" (p. 178). Fagin moves more than once during the course of the novel in order to dodge either the law or the vengeful criminal element, but wherever he sets up his "infernal den" (p. 194), it is in a series of squalid, dark rooms which have a distinctly subterranean quality even though they are always situated at the top of winding flights of dimly-lit stairs. The atmosphere of the infernal underworld crystallized around Fagin is most graphically rendered in a passage in which Dickens describes the Jew "emerg[ing] from his den":

The mud lay thick upon the stones and a black mist hung over the streets: the rain fell sluggishly down, and everything felt cold and clammy to the touch. It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal. (p. 135)

Just as Fagin seems "engendered in the slime and darkness" of the demonic subterranean regions, Quilp is described as "looking like the evil genius of the cellars come from underground upon some work of mischief" (OCS, p. 356). Like Fagin, he too has an "infernal den" (p. 497) where he sleeps "amidst the congenial accompaniments of rain, mud, dirt, damp, fog and rats" (p. 379). Bachelor Hall, as it is called, is similarly associated with images of infernal fire. The chimney is erected so as to prevent
the smoke from the fire-place from leaving the inside of the den: "in
the midst of this atmosphere, which must have infallibly smothered any
other man," Quilp, we are told, passed his evenings with great cheerfulness, smoking his pipe "until nothing of him was visible through the
mist but a pair of red and highly inflamed eyes" (p. 377). He also
finds solace in Bachelor Hall by drinking what he refers to as "melted
lead and brimstone" (p. 463)--a powerful whiskey, the effect of which is
to make him even "more fiery and furious, and [to] heat his malice and
mischievousness till they boil" (p. 459).

The sinister, demonic qualities of Fagin and Quilp's dens of
villainy are, however, somewhat mitigated by an irrepressible comic
vitality which is also contained within the walls of their respective
abodes. Not only is Oliver abundantly fed for the first time in the
novel when he enters Fagin's den, but it is here that he laughs for the
first time as well. Juxtaposed to Fagin's representation as a "loathsome
reptile" is his role as the "pleasant," "playful," and "merry" old
gentleman (pp. 61-63). Oliver is quite captivated by the spirit of con-
viviality and camaraderie which informs the relationship between Fagin
and his boys, and he is convulsed with laughter as he watches the
"curious and uncommon game" which they play. The game involves Fagin's
trotting back and forth "in imitation of the manner in which old gentle-
men walk about the streets," while two of the boys stealthily follow him
and attempt to divest him of his valuables. Fagin performs his part "in
such a very funny and natural manner that Oliver laughed till the tears
ran down his face" (p. 62). The comedy of this scene is demonically
subversive of traditional morality at the same time as it is regenerative. Oliver and the reader participate in a Hobbesian expression of amused superiority toward the rich class made to look ridiculous and ineffectual through Fagin's clever parody. And by joining in the thieves' aggressive laughter directed against the honest old gentleman, we, as well as Oliver, become momentarily identified with the criminal forces of the underworld. At the same time, the laughter which is called forth in Oliver is indicative of a resurgent feeling of community; for almost the first time in his life, the orphan has experienced a sense of belonging, security, and freedom from oppression. It is, therefore, not surprising that later on in the novel, even after he has been recaptured by Fagin and confined in a dark, solitary room, Oliver again cannot prevent himself from laughing at the Jew's waggish sense of humour: Fagin tells the boy stories of past robberies "mixed up with so much that was droll and curious, that Oliver could not help laughing heartily, and showing that he was amused in spite of all his better feelings" (p. 134). Despite the repulsive appearance of the old man and the insidious quality of the evil he perpetuates, Fagin is an exceedingly attractive character. As Spilka has indicated, it is the Jew's comic brilliance, his "revelation of life where life can scarcely flourish," that determines our lasting impression of him:

Here in the dark, foul den of thieves and prostitutes, a greasy Jew is dancing! This is what remains with us, long after we have forgotten Fagin's bestiality. The life, the imagination, the cleverness of the old man, shines forth from beneath his matted hair; and like so many of Dickens' villains, he captivates us.10

Quilp is another one of Dickens' captivating villains, and like
Fagin, he is attractive as a result of what Brass calls "a most amazing vein of comicality" (OCS, p. 460). It is significant that Brass chooses thus to describe the dwarf's sense of humour after being greeted by a powerful stream of invective upon knocking at the door of Bachelor Hall --Quilp's comicality is "amazing" particularly with respect to its violently aggressive disposition. Fagin's comedy of aggression is mild in comparison with that of his comic-demonic counterpart in The Old Curiosity Shop. Like the conventional Vice, Quilp delights in torturing his victims; he derives malicious glee from keeping all those around him "in a constant state of restlessness and agitation" (p. 377). He torments his mother-in-law to distraction, and he never passes up the opportunity either to bite his wife or to inflict pinches on her arms which, as we learn, "were seldom free from the impressions of his fingers in black and blue colours" (p. 156). When Mrs. Quilp at one point asks him how he could be so cruel, he derisively mocks her:

"How could I be so cruel! cruel!" cried the dwarf. "Because I was in the humour. I'm in the humour now. I shall be cruel when I like." (p. 371)

Quilp's comic forte is unequivocally the humour of cruelty. On his way home after having been inexplicably absent for three days, he entertains himself with visions of his wife's fears for his safety. Deciding that she is probably fainting constantly in grief and terror, he expresses his pleasure in shrieks of demonic mirth:

This facetious possibility was so congenial to the dwarf's humour, and so exquisitely amusing to him, that he laughed as he went along until the tears ran down his cheeks; and more than once . . . vented his delight in a shrill scream, which greatly terrifying any lonely passenger, who happened to be walking on before him expecting nothing so little, increased his mirth, and made him remarkably cheerful and lighthearted. (p. 364)
Quilp, moreover, is always represented as being engaged in some form of sensual gratification. As an embodiment of the sensual man given over to the expression of the baser life of the instincts, the dwarf takes this aspect of the Vice-role to its most exuberant and violent extreme. Described as a "fire-proof man" (p. 173), he smokes odious tobacco and drinks alcohol of an intolerably fiery intensity, and "in the uproarious hospitality" of his den, he forces Dick and the Brasses on separate occasions to join him, their comic discomfiture only serving to enhance his "boisterous merriment" (p. 382). His dining habits are no less sensually riotous:

He ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till they bent again. (p. 40)

The dwarf's expression of his sexual appetite is also aggressively comic as in the scene where he forces Mrs. Quilp to remain awake, seated beside him for the entire night in case he wants her. Gabriel Pearson has pointed out the phallic symbolism of the "deep fiery red" end of Quilp's cigar in this scene in which the dwarf informs his wife that he is "in a smoking humour and shall probably blaze away all night" (p. 37). Similarly, there is also a scene in the novel which reflects quite saliently Quilp's malevolent desire to defile little Nell, a scene which is brilliant in its condensation of the precarious balance between horrified outrage and laughter which characterizes our response to demonic comedy at its best. It takes place after Quilp has appropriated the Curiosity Shop and, accompanied by Brass, his legal advisor, has set up his quarters in little Nell's room. When Nell enters to gather up a few of her
possessions, the dwarf addresses her in an offensively salacious manner:

"What a pretty little Nell!" cried Quilp.
"Oh beautiful, sir, beautiful indeed," said Brass. "Quite charming."
"Has she come to sit upon Quilp's knee," said the dwarf in what he meant to be a soothing tone, "or is she going to bed in her own little room inside here—which is poor Nelly going to do?"
"What a remarkably pleasant way he has with children!" muttered Brass, as if in confidence between himself and the ceiling, "upon my word, it's quite a treat to hear him!" (p. 86)

The distancing mechanism provided by Brass' offhand remark serves to explode the heightened anxiety evoked in the reader by Quilp's asking Nell to choose between two equally opprobrious options, and the tension is discharged in the response of laughter. Brass' comment is funny for two reasons: in the first place, his apprehension of the meaning of the situation is a comic inversion of its reality—Quilp, rather than having a pleasant way with children, has revealed himself to be a perverse, lecherous old man—and secondly, it reflects Brass' dim-witted stupidity which makes him unable to distinguish the innocent form of Quilp's invitation from its latent, lascivious content. Our laughter at Brass' stupidity also serves to camouflage the laughter of vicarious sexual liberation that we are allowed to express in face of the threatened violation of Nell's purity. In other words, Dickens here lets us off the hook, so to speak, and, as a result, we do not experience the guilt we would otherwise feel for condoning Quilp's morally subversive proposal.

Both Fagin and Quilp, then, are invested with comic as well as demonic overtones, and it is interesting that both figures, in many respects, recall the exuberant vitality manifested by the comic-demonic characters in medieval drama. Quilp, according to G. K. Chesterton, "is
precisely the devil of the Middle Ages; he belongs to that amazingly healthy period when even lost spirits were hilarious." Chesterton's observations are supported by a number of passages in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The dwarf's roars of malevolent delight--the "ha, ha, ha!" which pervades the novel--are evocative of the infernal bellows of laughter of both the devil and the Vice of the miracles and the moralities, and Dickens, at one point, specifically associates this roaring with "laughing like a fiend" (p. 414). Similarly, Quilp's synthesis of the forces of comedy and evil is particularly evident in the scene in which Mrs. Nubbles is victimized by the dwarf's uproarious series of "ingenious tortures" during the coach ride back to London:

[Mrs. Nubbles'] solitary condition enabled him to terrify her with many extraordinary annoyances; such as hanging over the side of the coach at the risk of his life, and staring in with his great goggle eyes, which seemed in hers the more horrible from his face being upside down; dodging her in this way from one window to another; getting nimbly down whenever they changed horses and thrusting his head in at the window with a dismal squint: which ingenious tortures had such an effect upon Mrs. Nubbles, that she was quite unable for the time to resist the belief that Mr. Quilp did in his own person represent that Evil Power, who was so vigorously attacked at Little Bethel, and who . . . was now frolicsome and rampant. (p. 361)

Fagin, as well, is associated with the frolicsome and rampant quality of the evil personages in medieval drama. The Jew's "matted red hair" (p. 57) identifies him with the devil as well as the Jewish character of the miracles, both of whom characteristically wore a fiery red wig. According to M. F. Modder, the drama of the Middle Ages represented the Jewish characters as "comic types to be derided, hissed at and generally ridiculed" in much the same way as the devil was mockingly vilified. This process can be seen particularly in the treatment of Judas, the chief
Jewish character of the miracles, who is an early representative of the comic-demonic figure, and like Fagin, is also distinguished by a massive quantity of red hair. Modder also points to a tradition in English drama in which characters "resort to Jewish disguises to supply comic relief or to further some villainous scheme," and it is clearly out of this tradition that Dickens' comic-demonic conceptualization of Fagin emanates.

At the end of the novels, Fagin and Quilp suffer the conventional expulsion of the comic-demonic figure from the morally cleansed society which crystallizes around the hero or heroine. Quilp dies by drowning and, even in death, his appearance reflects the characteristic Vice-like attitude of indifference towards the powers of extinction. His end is at once comic and frightful in its implication. The final description of the dwarf dwells upon his corpse floating down the river, dragged through the mud and the slime and finally flung upon the banks of a swamp. Dickens then focuses his attention upon the hair of the "deserted carcass":

"The hair, stirred by the damp breeze, played in a kind of mockery of death--such a mockery as the dead man would have revelled in when alive--about its head, and its dress fluttered idly in the night wind." (p. 510)

This is precisely the same kind of "mockery of death" which often characterizes the stage exit of the morality Vice, a mockery which undercuts both the seriousness and the finality of his dissolution.

One of the most pervasive qualities displayed by both Fagin and Quilp is their irrepressible ubiquity. Neither character is confined to the subterranean depths of the underworld; both of them turn up suddenly and unexpectedly in the most unlikely places and situations. Like the
morality Vice, both are great travellers, and the insidious, mocking presence of both dwarf and Jew permeates both the urban and rural regions of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Oliver Twist*, respectively. In this way then, Dickens' description of Quilp's drowning paradoxically affirms the dwarf's ubiquitous, comic vitality, a vitality which cannot be extinguished even by the powers of death. This quality of irrepressibility is further intensified by the fact that Quilp has, symbolically, outwitted death at an earlier point in the novel. Like Volpone and Falstaff, the dwarf feigns death—he allows his wife, mother-in-law, and legal advisor to maintain the illusion that he has drowned so that he can gauge their reactions to the fact of his demise. The scene is particularly rich in humour as Quilp's tenacious self-love ultimately forces him out of his hiding place when he discovers that his nose is going to be designated as "flat" on his death-certificate:

"Aquiline!" cried Quilp, thrusting in his head, and striking the feature with his fist. "Aquiline, you hag. Do you see it? Do you call this flat? Do you? Eh?"

"Oh capital, capital!" shouted Brass, from the mere force of habit. "Excellent! How very good he is! He's a most remarkable man--so extremely whimsical! Such an amazing power of taking people by surprise!" (p. 368)

In much the same way, Quilp's actual death tends to take us by surprise in its unexpected element of defiant humour; and Brass' subsequent remark concerning the dwarf's first bout with the forces of extinction is equally applicable to the comic-demonic ambiguity of his final expiration --"Oh exceedingly good! There's not another man alive who could carry it off like that" (p. 462).

Fagin, like Quilp, becomes paradoxically most alive in his
confrontation with death. In Oliver Twist, Dickens' representation of the final disposition of the comic-demonic figure is divided into two parts, one examining the trial of the Artful Dodger, and the other focusing upon the subjugation of the Jew himself. The comic overtones of the conventional casting out of the Vice are exclusively restricted to the Dodger's trial, first as Fagin tries to console Charley Bates by helping him to imagine a triumphant picture of the Dodger's appearance in court --a "regular game" in which the latter appears not at all as the victim but rather as "the chief actor in a scene of most uncommon and exquisite humour" (p. 331). The topsy-turvy spirit of comic inversion is evident here as Fagin persuades Charley to believe that the Dodger's imprisonment is an honour rather than a tragedy: "Think how young he is too! What a distinction, Charley, to be lagged at his time of life!" (p. 330). And this process of topsyturvydom is again apparent in the actual trial itself in which the Dodger literally reflects one of Bergson's examples of comic inversion by fulfilling the role of "the prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate," thereby provoking the hearty laughter of the spectators. The Dodger's comically defiant demeanor at his trial also reflects elements of verbal humour characteristic of the Vice--he complains, for example, that his is a case of "deformation of character" (p. 334). Moreover, in the last line of the scene--"the Dodger was doing full justice to his bringing up and establishing for himself a glorious reputation" (p. 336)--Dickens makes use of a Falstaffian pun which serves as an example of gallows humour in Henry IV, Part I. There Falstaff expresses his indifference towards the threat of hanging by exclaiming: "If
I become not a cart as well as another man, a plague upon my bringing up" (II.iv.490)--suggesting, in other words, that his "upbringing" has been such that it would be fitting for him to be "brought up" before a court and sentenced to the gallows-cart.

Fagin's death sentence, however, does far less credit to his comic-demonic upbringing than that of his henchman. While the Dodger's expulsion is triumphantly comic, the end of the Jew almost verges on tragedy as the condemned man becomes painfully humanized through Dickens' portrayal of the agonized torment and suffering with which Fagin confronts "the oppressive overwhelming sense of the grave" (p. 405). The results of Dickens' terrifying yet sensitive treatment of Fagin's anguish in the face of death serves, in many respects, to heighten the reader's sense of ambivalence towards the Jew. While the evil of the old man distances us from him, the desperate tenacity of his life force draws us sympathetically closer toward him, and again generates our characteristic response of moral ambiguity towards the final disposition of the comic-demonic figure.

Both Fagin and Quilp then fulfill the common scapegoat role of the Vice--they are both ultimately destroyed not only in order to uphold the moral precept that the path of virtue is inevitably triumphant over that of evil and corruption, but also to provide the reader with a sense of expiation from participating vicariously in what Rossiter calls a "stirring debauch of wish-fulfillment . . . in the glorious life in the company of the Devil's disciples." Our response is, however, one of ambivalence towards the deaths of both men, for the comic vitality with
which Fagin and Quilp invest the worlds of *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* is as attractive as the evil they reflect is morally repellent. There is as well another thematic pattern manifest in both novels which has some bearing upon our sustained sense of moral ambiguity towards both Fagin and Quilp. This pattern emanates from Dickens' attempt to confront the conflicting feelings engendered in the parent-child relationship. In their transactions with Oliver and Nell, both Fagin and Quilp symbolically operate as both negative and positive father-figures, and their comic-demonic heritage can, perhaps, point us towards a deeper understanding of this central configuration in all of Dickens' works.

Probably no other novelist has so consistently or directly drawn upon the past experiences of his personal life as Dickens. Almost everyone who has commented upon Dickens' fiction has observed that the novels are all, in some form or another, reworkings of the psychologically crucial events and experiences of the author's past. Jack Lindsay clearly summarizes this process in his biographical study of the novelist:

> There is scarcely any gap between [Dickens'] experience and the creative image. That is why the industrious commentators have been able to link almost every person, however unimportant, in Dickens' work with a person he met or heard of; every place with some place which he saw or heard of. The names of the people in his books are almost always woven out of names which for some reason or other assume an emotional significance for him. The slow process of absorption and redefinition which is usually found in a novelist has little relevance to his method. All the while he is consciously or unconsciously moving over the narrow ground of certain key experiences in childhood... All the weaknesses and strengths of Dickens reside in this fact.17

Lindsay's comments explain why it is difficult to interpret any of the
thematic patterns in Dickens' work without resorting to some biographical mention of the events of the novelist's personal life. We have been able up to this point to isolate the prototypical comic-demonic characteristics manifested by Quilp and Fagin without alluding to biographical detail, but so far this has led only to the identification of a pattern—a pattern similar to one we have encountered previously in the other literary works we have examined. If, however, we are to delve into the particular way in which this pattern is contextually meaningful within the fictional worlds of *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, some brief mention of Dickens' contradictory attitudes both towards his own father and towards his personal fulfillment of the male parental role is required.

In "Who is Fagin?" an appended chapter to *Dickens: from Dombey to Pickwick*, Stephen Marcus attempts to account for the enigmatic character of the old Jew. Marcus quotes at length from the autobiographical fragment Dickens wrote in 1847; in this fragment, the novelist relates the details of his experiences at the blacking warehouse where he was sent to work at twelve years of age when his father was imprisoned for debt. There the young Dickens met an older boy named Bob Fagin, whose name was given to the infernal humorist of *Oliver Twist*. Bob Fagin was extremely kind to Dickens and served somewhat as a tutor, instructing him in the arts of wrapping the blacking pots and tying them with string. He also served as Dickens' protector against the other boys, and solicitously took care of young Charles when the latter suffered the recurrence of his old malady—spasmic attacks centered in his side. The despair
Dickens felt as a result of being abandoned by his family, having his education abruptly cut off, and being forced to suffer the humiliation and social disgrace of working in a factory, has been extremely well-documented. This traumatic experience had a profound influence upon Dickens' later life, and it is the propelling force which underlies his imaginative portrayal of the motif of the lost child which functions so prominently in his fiction. It is, therefore, conceivable to suggest that while Bob Fagin provided a positive force of comfort for the young novelist, the repugnance Dickens felt towards the degrading circumstances of his life at this time were projected upon the fictional Fagin who, as a result, is portrayed in Oliver Twist as a figure of insidious evil.

According to Marcus, Dickens experienced a powerful feeling of ambivalence towards Bob Fagin—he felt grateful for the kindness and generosity the latter demonstrated, but at the same time he was humiliated by the implicit identification of himself with the uncouth company of the boys at the blacking factory. As Dickens himself explained in his autobiographical paper:

It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me that . . . no one had compassion enough on me—a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt bodily or mentally—to suggest that something might have been spared . . . My father and mother were quite satisfied. They could have hardly been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school, and going to Cambridge . . .

I know that I worked, from morning to night with common men and boys, a shabby child . . . I know that I have lounged about the streets, insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond.

It is not difficult to perceive that Dickens' attitude of intense resentment toward his own parents for having abandoned him, as well as his
contradictory feelings of attraction and repugnance towards Bob Fagin, became crystallized in his creation of the fictional Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. In one respect then, both Fagins can be seen as menacing figures --both can be perceived as attempting to deprive a young boy of his natural birthright: Fagin tries to prevent Oliver from becoming a gentleman, and Bob Fagin is also representative, in Dickens' mind, of an obstacle to his gaining the position of social and intellectual eminence that he believed should be rightfully his. Moreover, the anger that Dickens felt toward his own father's rejection of him is also projected upon the fictional Fagin. It is apparent from the above passage that Dickens unconsciously believed that his father attempted to make him into "a little vagabond or a little robber," in a manner similar to the way in which the Jew attempts to corrupt the abandoned hero of *Oliver Twist*.

On the other hand, both Bob Fagin and the Jew fulfill the fatherly roles of tutor and protector. While Bob teaches the young Dickens the skills of the blacking warehouse, the Jew instructs Oliver in the art of pick-pocketing; while the former protects Dickens from the rougher boys and nurses him in his ailments, the Jew fulfills a similarly nurturing function towards Oliver, providing him with food, shelter, a vocation and a sense of camaraderie. The sense of attraction which accompanies Dickens' negative portrayal of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* can also be associated with the novelist's ambivalent feelings towards his own father. As previously mentioned, Fagin is represented not only as a "loathsome reptile" but also as a delightful "merry old gentleman"; and the Jew's exuberant sense of humour probably is a reflection of John
Dickens' similar comic talent. According to reports from those who knew him, John Dickens was a "chatty, pleasant companion, possessing a varied fund of anecdotes, and a genuine vein of humour," and it was probably from his father that the novelist derived his own profound comic vision. In this respect then, Dickens' ambivalent feelings toward both his own father and Bob Fagin (who also fulfilled a surrogate parental role in the novelist's life) are reflected in the portrayal of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, who is at once protector and destroyer, joker and betrayer, comic genius and diabolical corruptor. Marcus, however, questions how we can account for the power of the fictional Fagin as an imaginative creation, since the biographical resemblances do not explain "why this demonic, disgusting and monstrous old man should be so fascinating, so comic, even so winning in his abominable wickedness." The answer to this question is not so difficult when considered in light of Fagin's comic-demonic attributes. All of Dickens' personal feelings of ambivalence towards his father and Bob Fagin found an extremely suitable imaginative vehicle in a figure whose double-visaged features transcend the purely autobiographical and, instead, flow out of a more archetypal mainstream--Fagin is a powerful, artistic embodiment of the Vice.

Just as it is no new observation to point to the resemblance between Dickens' childhood experiences in the blacking warehouse and the events that befall the young hero of *Oliver Twist*, so the striking similarities between Quilp and his creator have also been frequently recorded. Dickens shared with the dwarf a devilish delight in tormenting both his
wife and her mother, and the novelist also enjoyed a reputation for being something of a mischievous, practical joker. As one critic has suggested, Dickens' "mingling of cruelty, playfulness, and deadly accuracy is decidedly Quilpish," at the same time as "the dwarf's macabre imagination is so Dickensian."23 Furthermore, commentators have frequently observed that the personal crisis in Dickens' life which informs so much of his conceptualization of little Nell's flight from the city towards death, was the novelist's inability to deal with his ambivalent feelings towards his wife's seventeen-year-old sister, Mary Hogarth, who died in his arms about a year after Dickens' marriage. According to Mark Spilka, "Quilp's marvelous comic antics are ... an honest release of Dickens' sexual frustrations" emanating from his relationship with his sister-in-law. Spilka argues quite convincingly that Dickens' feelings towards Mary Hogarth were unconsciously incestuous, and "when he enshrined her in idealized heroines like little Nell and a host of sexless saints, he was trying to disguise those feelings."24 In other words, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens set two powerful and contradictory sets of psychological forces in motion. The malevolent, comic energy of Quilp's violent eroticism towards little Nell is a projection of Dickens' own obsessive sexual desire for Mary Hogarth with whom he played the father-role in a sublimated Oedipal relationship. And, conversely, the excessive, self-indulgent sentiment with which so much of Dickens' treatment of Nell is invested reflects the other, complementary side of his mixed feelings for his sister-in-law—his need to repress his sexual desire and to worship her as a spiritual embodiment of pre-sexual purity and
innocence. Although the central motif of Nell's flight from the demonic eroticism latently manifested by Daniel Quilp stands by itself within its own imaginative framework, Dickens' personal relationship with Mary Hogarth explains, to some extent, the profound ambivalence with which this motif is treated. Quilp functions within the novel largely in symbolic terms as a sexual father towards little Nell, and Dickens' examination of this role draws, to a great extent, upon the comic-demonic ambiguity of the dwarf's sexuality which is attractive at the same time as it is threatening.

Certainly, Nell's attitude toward Quilp reflects this sense of ambivalence. We are told near the beginning of the novel that "while she entertained some fear and distrust of the little man, she was much inclined to laugh at his uncouth appearance and grotesque attitude" (p. 44). Even later, after she has been victimized by Quilp's lascivious overtures, the dwarf still retains a kind of magnetic force over her. One evening as she is returning to Mrs. Jarley's caravan, she finds herself mysteriously drawn towards the gateway of the town "with a mingled sensation of curiosity and fear" (p. 207); there she unexpectedly beholds Quilp who suddenly emerges from the shadows. Dickens' use of the word "curiosity" at this point to describe one aspect of Nell's contradictory feelings towards the dwarf is significant. The word, which forms part of the title of the novel, occurs on several occasions and in most instances it can be interpreted to refer to a kind of curiosity which is implicitly sexual in nature. Very early in the novel, Master Humphrey speculates upon Nell's "future life holding her solitary way among a
crowd of wild grotesque companions, the only pure fresh, youthful object in the throng." Humphrey continues: "It would be curious to find . . .," but then, perplexingly, he blocks off any further conjecture:

I checked myself here for the theme was carrying me along with it at a great pace, and I already saw before me a region on which I was little disposed to enter. (p. 13)

It seems reasonable to assume that the region which Humphrey refuses to permit himself to enter involves further conjecture upon the men or, perhaps, a man in Nell's "future life," upon her experiences of love, or her possible marriage; but he is unable to confront such a possibility. His "curiosity" is aroused, but then suppressed in favour of keeping her in a fantasized state of perpetual youth and innocence. With the exception of Quilp, all of the other men in the novel appear to share Humphrey's idealization of Nell's virginity. Any "curiosity" they might feel towards her female sexuality is sublimated into sentiment regarding her spiritual purity. In this sense then, the "fatherly" men surrounding Nell—her grandfather, the schoolmaster, Kit, Humphrey (and indirectly, the single gentleman)—are responsible for preventing Nell from experiencing the natural course of maturation; her development into full-bodied womanhood is thus denied.

In striking contrast to Nell's asexual father surrogates is Quilp, whose inflamed sense of curiosity pervades the novel. Described at one point as "burning with curiosity" (p. 359)—the implicit eroticism of this phrase heightened by our recollections of the sexual overtones of the dwarf's "smoking humour"—Quilp is typically represented in a pose of voyeurism, peering through key-holes, peeking in windows, eavesdropping
on conversations from behind partly opened doors, and generally attempting to gratify an obsessive desire to discover the secrets inherent in the lives of other people. Within the context of the sexual undercurrents of the dwarf's voyeuristic curiosity, Nell's covert witnessing of Quilp's obscenely phallic presence defiling her bed takes on even wider implications. Having crept into her own room while the dwarf is sleeping in order to steal his "key" (in itself an obvious sexual symbol), Nell stands "for a few minutes quite transfixed with terror at the sight of Mr. Quilp who was hanging so far out of bed that he almost seemed to be standing on his head and who . . . was gasping and growling with his mouth wide open, and the whites (or rather the dirty yellows) of his eyes distinctly visible" (p. 150). This scene is remarkably similar in mood and feeling to the one which takes place in Oliver Twist when Oliver accidentally wakes up and observes Fagin surveying and caressing with obvious pleasure several precious articles of jewelry, "a hideous grin" (OT, p. 59) upon his lips. In this scene the sexual symbolism of both the small "box" of jewels and the "knife" which Fagin carries are counterparts to the dwarf's phallic appearance and his appropriation of Nell's "bed"; but even more significant is the fact that in both novels, it is the adult, parental world which is portrayed as being in control of the secrets of sexuality, while the child finds him/ or herself forced into a position of voyeurism in order to catch a glimpse of this hidden, private world.

The concept of the secret plays an integral role in both novels, and it is the adult, parental world that has in its possession a secret
of illicit sexual desire which has some vital bearing upon the fate of
the child in each work. The secret in Oliver Twist is that of Oliver's
identity and it revolves around the illicit love between Oliver's parents
who were never married to each other. Fagin discovers the secret of
Oliver's parentage and the provision in the boy's father's will, and sees
in this situation an opportunity for personal gain. The secret in The
Old Curiosity Shop also revolves around a situation of illicit love, but
in this case, the love is incestuous and is represented through symbolic
implication rather than direct statement.

The motif of the secret in The Old Curiosity Shop links the dwarf,
Nell, and her grandfather in a web of latent sexuality. On her way home
from visiting Quilp on an errand for her grandfather, Nell informs Master
Humphrey that she must not tell him what she has been doing. She then
adds that "there was no harm in what she had been doing, but it was a
great secret--a secret which she did not even know herself" (p. 3). Simi­
larly, Quilp admits to Nell's brother, Fred Trent, that he has some
influence with the latter's grandfather, and that he is "in a few of [the
grandfather's] mysteries and secrets" (p. 23). Quilp forces his wife to
trick Nell, to get the child "to tell her secret" (p. 51)--a secret
which involves her grandfather's late-night adventures. Moreover, there
is a significant conversation which takes place at one point during the
novel which gives some focus to the relationship between secrets and
sexual desire in The Old Curiosity Shop. Quilp has been describing Nell's
physical attributes, dwelling upon them with lascivious emphasis and
"nursing his short leg" at the same time, when he suddenly spies the
grandfather's nervous agitation:

"--but bless me, you're nervous. Why neighbour, what's the matter? I swear to you," continued the dwarf... "I swear to you that I had no idea old blood ran so fast or kept so warm. I thought it was sluggish in its course, and cool, quite cool. I am pretty sure it ought to be. Yours must be out of order, neighbour."

"I believe it is," groaned the old man, clasping his head with both hands. "There's a burning fever here, and something now and then to which I fear to give a name." (p. 73)

The conversation concludes with the grandfather admitting to Quilp that he has lost all the money that he has borrowed from the dwarf at gambling. To this admission, Quilp significantly twice replies: "You have no secret from me now" (p. 73). In this scene we witness a progression of sexual images and implications—from the dwarf's lecherous allusions to Nell's sexuality, to the riotous effect it has on the old man, to the association of the heat of passion with the grandfather's "old blood," to the "burning fever" he articulates, and a fear, similar to that of Master Humphrey, to acknowledge the fact that the source of his passion lies in Nell herself. Spilka has pointed out the psychoanalytic interpretation of the relationship between gambling and sexual desire, but even without recourse to Freud, it is obvious that in this highly charged scene, the grandfather's "secret"—his late-night sin of gambling—functions as an unconscious, sublimated release for his feelings of incestuous desire for his granddaughter. Such an interpretation is re-enforced not only by the fact that he swears that he gambles only for the sake of little Nell and that he obsessively whispers her name "at every piece [he] staked" (p. 74), but also in light of Master Humphrey's earlier suspicions that old Trent's "affection for the child might not be inconsistent with villainy of the worst kind: even that very affection was in itself an extraordinary contradiction" (p. 12).
Also significant in this scene is the tacit identification of grandfather and dwarf. Both share an illicit desire for little Nell; both evoke in the child a contradictory set of responses. Although Nell is devoted in her love toward her grandfather, she dreams very early in the novel of his blood "creeping; creeping on the ground to her own bedroom door" (pp. 69-70), the serpentine image of blood in Nell's dream quite obviously the same hot "blood" associated with Trent's guilty secret. Quilp and the grandfather are associated at other points in the novel as well. Not only are they both connected with images of reptiles and the heat of sexual desire, but also they are both described in terms of wax-work. After she is almost discovered by the dwarf at the gates of the town to which she has come with Mrs. Jarley's caravan, Nell is unable to sleep at night because Quilp "throughout her uneasy dreams was somehow connected with wax-work, or was wax-work himself" (p. 209); and two pages later Dickens consciously associates Nell's grandfather with the dwarf by describing the reaction of the children of the town towards old Trent, "fully impressed with the belief that [he] was a cunning device in wax" (p. 211). Even Quilp's comic-demonic features are mirrored to some degree in old Trent. Juxtaposed with the "villainy of the worst kind" (p. 12) which Humphrey perceives as underlying the old man's affection for Nell, is the fact that Dick Swiveller refers to him at one point as "the jolly old grandfather" (p. 64)--a reference that also points back to Fagin's representation as the "merry old gentleman" in **Oliver Twist**.

Moreover, the scene in which Nell is forced to witness Quilp's
symbolic sexual defilement of her bed, has a counterpart in the scene in
which Nell is impelled by "a movement of timid curiosity" (p. 312) to spy
upon her grandfather who is plotting with two other men to rob Mrs.
Jarley of her gold. Not only do the motifs of "curiosity" and the
child's voyeuristic witnessing of a parental secret carry latent sexual
overtones here, but during this scene one of the gamblers mockingly
admires the grandfather's "young blood" (p. 316), another implicit refer­
ence to the erotic undercurrents of the parent-child relationship.

Trent's decision to rob Mrs. Jarley functions in some respects
as a parallel to his earlier, more successful attempt to rob his grand­
daughter, and again in this latter situation, he is thematically identi­
fied with Quilp. While Trent robs Nell of her gold, the dwarf robs the
child of "her own little room" and her bed, both the images of bed and
gold carrying symbolic sexual associations. When Nell and her grandfather
flee from the demonic, industrial realm of the city to find solace in the
peace and purity of the country-side, the child secretly sews a piece of
gold inside her dress. On one level, the piece of gold--"her little
hoard" which "she felt the necessity of concealing . . . from her grand­
father" (p. 226) and which her grandfather steals from her as she lies
trembling with terror in her bed--represents, on a symbolic level, Nell's
virginity; it is, in effect, the central secret of the novel which the
male, parental world desperately desires to possess. Within this con­
text, Kincaid's description of the structural momentum of the novel's
plot requires some qualification--"Quilp is chasing the old man for the
non-existent gold the old man is also chasing."28 Rather than being
non-existent, however, the gold that both men are obsessively pursuing is
embodied in Nell herself.

The symbolic association of gold with Nell's virginity is also
related to another motif which is significant to our understanding of
the parental role of Fagin as well as that of Quilp. Like many of the
morality Vices, both men are associated with the possession of money.
Fagin is a professional poacher and fence, while Quilp is a wealthy land­
lord and loan-shark; and both dwarf and Jew are portrayed at various
points counting their gold. Similarly, old Trent is also associated with
this pattern as we witness him shortly after he has stolen Nell's gold,
"his white face pinched and sharpened by the greediness which made his
eyes unnaturally bright, counting the money of which his hands had
robbed her" (p. 229). In one sense, the possession of wealth in the two
novels can be interpreted as a source of parental power. Both the posi­
tive and benevolent, as well as the negative and malevolent, father
figures--Mr. Brownlow and the single gentleman, Fagin and Quilp--are
represented as being extremely wealthy. The menacing, demonic father­
surrogates, however, view children as pieces of property. To Fagin,
Oliver represents a considerable fortune "worth hundreds of pounds" (OT,
p. 189) and to Mr. Bumble and the Board, the boy is worth the price of
five pounds to be "paid to anyone who would take possession of him" (OT,
p. 21); similarly, to Quilp, Nell is his "duck of diamonds" (OCS, p. 85),
and he assumes the role of landlord over her virginity, in much the same
way as he assumes ownership of the curiosity shop.

According to one commentator, Dickens' representation of Quilp's
role in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is both inconsistent and ill-conceived: "[Quilp] is quite incapable of bearing the weight Dickens loads on to him. This is partly because his role of financial shark has little to do with his role as sexual aggressor." In view of the implied relationship between money, sexuality, and paternal power in the novel, however, the dwarf's combination of these two roles is quite justified. Moreover, the identification of these roles becomes even more thematically appropriate in conjunction with Dickens' moral condemnation of nineteenth-century industrial, urban society. In both *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens vents his moral indignation at the paternalistic materialism of a society in which the greatest value one can place on a human attribute is a financial one. In such a society, boys such as the Artful Dodger are assessed for their comparable value in silver snuff boxes, and the charms of child-women such as Mrs. Quilp are enumerated in the manner of taking inventory at the counting-house--"such a jewel, such a golden casket set with gems of all sorts! She's such a treasure! I'm so fond of her" (p. 36).

Both Fagin and Quilp are, in many respects, microcosmic representations of Dickens' London, the infernal city whose destructive yet compelling energy is at once fascinating and malevolent. Throughout both novels the city's dark, oppressive atmosphere and satanic landscapes find an opposite polarity in the peace and promise of freedom from confinement in the country-side. In much the same way, the parental figures in each novel are thematically polarized. The schoolmaster and the Garlands in
The Old Curiosity Shop and the Maylies and Mr. Brownlow in Oliver Twist, who are depicted as benevolent, nurturant, and protective parental surrogates, are associated with the purity and light of an Arcadian rural setting, just as Fagin and Quilp reflect the menacing and diabolic father-role emanating from the industrial subterranean depths of the urban scene. Northrop Frye in his paper on Dickens' comedy observes that the parental role in most of the novels may be categorized according to three major constellations:

There are often three sets of parental figures attached to a central character, with several doubles of each. First are the actual parents. These are often dead before the story begins ... or are mysterious and emerge at the end, sometimes as bare names unrelated to the story, like Oliver Twist's father or the parents of little Nell ... Next come the parental figures of the obstructing society, generally cruel or foolish, and often descended from the harsh step-parents of folktale ... Finally we have the parental or avuncular figures of the congenial society itself, those who take on a protective relation to the central characters as the story approaches its conclusion.30

It is obvious that in Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop, the congenial parental figures of Frye's third category are those associated with the restorative, rural landscape, one which carries celestial overtones: Nell both seeks and finds "asylum in some remote and primitive places, where ... her late sorrows and distresses could have no place" (OCS, p. 344), and Oliver, too, ultimately finds solace in the green world as a member of "a little society whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world" (OT, 412-13). Similarly, the obstructing parental figures which correspond to Frye's second category are identified with the surrealistic, demonic realm of the industrial city--the murky fog of London, the sordid
squalor and filthy rooms, the labyrinthine streets, and the muddy Stygian river flowing through the urban abyss.

Yet, Dickens' attitude toward both sets of antithetical landscapes and parental figures reflects an element of ambiguity. One of the distinguishing features of Dickens' fiction is his use of the technique of doubling; perhaps more than that of any other novelist, Dickens' creative power resides in his ability to present almost everything—landscape, character, thematic content—from two opposed points of view.

"Everything in our lives, whether of good or evil, affects most by contrast," he observes in the fifty-third chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and this dualistic world-view even transcends what is ostensibly a Manichean conceptualization of the universe. In both novels, Dickens creates a fictional world in which the realms of good and evil are clearly demarcated. At the same time, however, the representation of both realms is invested with a profound ambivalence that serves to obscure the clarity of the lines of demarcation. Dickens' attitude towards the city reflects a curious synthesis of moral disapprobation and imaginative fervor; he portrays its insidious and monstrous aspects, yet his creative powers are drawn to its boundless vitality. Alternately, his attitude towards the rural landscape is informed with an underlying sense of its illusory and dream-like quality. Both the scenes and the characters who are represented as embodiments of the peace and virtue of country-life—the Maylies, Mr. Brownlow, the schoolmaster, and the Garlands—are distinguished, or rather, indistinguishable, as a result of their essential lack of vitality or colour. The socially approved characters in both
novels appear to exist in Kincaid's words, "at the edge of the grave" indulging what "might be called the tombstone imagination." Nell spends her time in the countryside visiting graveyards and old churches, while Rose Maylie and Oliver repeatedly shed tears in memory of "the friends whom they had so sadly lost" (OT, p. 415). In striking contrast to the pallid characters of the so-called congenial country is the intrinsic spontaneity and ebullience with which Dickens endows the figures of the demonic urban scene.

Most commentators who have written about either novel have emphasized the predominantly grim and distressing mood of each work, a mood which is largely enhanced by the moribund quality of the divinized rural setting, and its essential separation from the well-springs of life. At this point, however, we must confront the question of the degree of conscious control Dickens maintained over his artistic creation. Was he consciously criticizing the idyllic world of the countryside and the humble embodiments of virtue that he portrays residing therein, or is it our twentieth-century prejudice which grasps at any vestige of implication that may signify that Dickens could not, in all earnestness, invest his rural landscapes and beatific characters with so much that is offensively sentimental to our modern tastes? And conversely, is it only a result of our modern predilection for iconoclasm that we find the vital source in each novel to lie in such morally reprehensible characters as Fagin and Quilp? In answer to these questions, it is reasonable to suggest that in both novels, Dickens attempts to confront the ambiguities inherent in his Manichean world view, but not with complete control. The
lack of total discipline over his imaginative energy is, perhaps, more apparent in *The Old Curiosity Shop* than it is in *Oliver Twist*, but, nevertheless, in both works Dickens was almost certainly compelled to invest an abundance of compensatory energy in his creation of the active, predatory demonic realm, in the same way as he was driven to provide a counter-balancing force of sentiment in his representation of the divinized rural world of Christian passivity and virtue.

The sense of moral ambiguity generated by Dickens' conceptualization of two antithetical worlds, each of which he condones and condemns at the same time, is remarkably similar to the feeling of profound ambivalence evoked by what Rossiter describes as the simultaneous presence of two rituals in medieval drama:

We are left to wrestle with the uncombinable antimonies of the medieval mind: for these immiscible juxtapositions constantly imply two contradictory systems of values, two diverse spirits; one standing for reverence, awe, nobility, pathos, sympathy; the other for mockery, blasphemy, baseness, meanness or spite, Schadenfreude, and derision. Above all, it is the fact that the "other spirit" is comic that compels reflection and analysis, for the evaluated effect of the ambivalence reaches out towards a searching irony.32

In a similar manner, the ambivalence which informs the Manichean world views of *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* causes us "to wrestle with the uncombinable antimonies" of Dickens' mind, and ultimately forces us to confront once more the final and most pervasive ambivalence of all --that reflected on the double-sided countenance of the comic-demonic figure. Although both Fagin and Quilp function as obstructing, demonic father-figures, the paternal roles they symbolically fulfill reflect aspects which we have observed to be congenially comic as well. Moreover, as previously indicated, the comic vice they perpetrate is as
irrepressible in both Dickens' novels as it is in medieval drama; and
the imaginative power of each novel springs largely from the diabolically
humorous overtones which surround them. Again, as in medieval drama,
juxtaposed to the demonic merriment of the comic villains is the human
anguish and suffering of their passive victims. It is true that the
poignancy of Oliver and Nell's suffering is heightened as a result of
their victimization by their predatory aggressors; it is, however, also
ture that neither child escapes totally untainted as a result of the
comic desecrations initiated by the demonic characters. Like Christ and
Mary in the Mysteries, neither Oliver nor Nell is totally inviolate,
and the passive heroism of both is, in the final analysis, rendered
somewhat insipid in comparison with the active, boisterous vitality of
their infernal tormentors.

Because Fagin and Quilp draw upon so much of Dickens' own
"demonic imagination," we have the sense that they, like Becky Sharp,
Volpone and Falstaff, have a tendency to elude their creator's moral
controls. This is the "searching irony" to which Rossiter refers--that
the artistic representation of the comic aspects of the demonic realm
taps some archetypal power which transcends the boundaries between two
contradictory value systems. Essentially amoral, both attractive and
repulsive, destructive and regenerative, the comic-demonic figure iron-
ically can only be defined by an obstinate non-conformist tendency to
evade ethical categorization. This tendency to defy either classifica-
tion or restraint gives rise to the sense of moral ambiguity which char-
acterizes our simultaneously engaged and distanced response to the
converging forces of comedy and evil; and it is this tenuous balance between engagement and detachment which underlies the diabolical mirth evoked by each incarnation of "that reverend Vice" wherever he or she appears.
Notes for Chapter VIII

1 Oliver Twist, An Introduction to the English Novel, I, 13.


4 Page references in the text are to the Oxford Illustrated ed. of both The Old Curiosity Shop (London, 1951) and Oliver Twist (London, 1949).


6 Letter of November 3, 1837. Quotations from Dickens' letters are from the Nonesuch edition of The Letters of Charles Dickens (Bloomsbury, 1938).

7 Marie Law uses this recent familiarity with Defoe "to account for the satanic quality--unique in Dickens' writing--which invests Fagin and some of the other characters in Oliver Twist" ("The Indebtedness of Oliver Twist to Defoe's History of the Devil," PMLA, XL [1925], 897). Lauriat Lane, however, has more accurately observed that a great number of the references associating Fagin and the devil had previously appeared in the portions of the novel prior to Dickens' reading of Defoe, and that the satanic quality of Oliver Twist, far from being unique in Dickens' writing, "can be apprehended to some extent in all the novels he wrote." According to Lane, "It would be fairest to say that Dickens found in the History of the Devil an organised treatment of material which had hitherto rested in his mind in a more or less confused state, and that this organised treatment may have further stimulated his interest" ("The Devil in Oliver Twist," The Dickensian, LII [1956], 132-33).

8 For a more detailed account of Fagin's identification with the devil, see Lane, "The Devil in Oliver Twist."

9 The Allegory of Evil, p. 152.


14 Ibid., p. 123.


16 *English Drama from early times to the Elizabethans*, p. 127.


19 Marcus, pp. 366-69.


21 Quoted in Lindsay, *Charles Dickens*, p. 12.

22 Marcus, p. 378.


25 For a more detailed examination of the relationship between the Mary Hogarth episode and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, see Spilka, "Little Nell--Revisited," pp. 430-33; Marcus, pp. 151-59; and Lindsay, pp. 121-23, 131-35, 191-93.

26 Marcus suggests that the elements of this scene are symbolically evocative of what Freud calls the primal scene (*Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey*, p. 373).

27 "Little Nell--Revisited," n. 6, p. 430.


30 "Dickens and the Comedy of Humours," in *Experience in the Novel: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Roy Harvey Pierce

31 Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter, pp. 51, 72.

32 English Drama from early times, p. 72.
Conclusion

BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND DETACHMENT

In his attempt to account for the nature of the comedy of evil represented in the morality tradition, Spivack remarks: "It is easier to observe than explain the comic portrayal of evil everywhere visible in medieval art and letters." By far, the greatest part of this dissertation has been concerned with observing the comic portrayal of evil, not only in medieval and Tudor drama, but also in selected works of four major writers; and again the problem of explication remains a difficult one to confront. The task of providing an explanation for the relationship between the forces of comedy and evil is, however, possibly more surmountable within the context of this study essentially for two reasons. In the first place, my own investigation to a large extent builds upon the insights contained within Spivack's exhaustive work of criticism, and secondly, it has been my basic assumption that the representation of comic diablerie is, in fact, visible everywhere and not confined to any one period in history. In other words, by exploring in depth the historical and cultural factors which contributed to the association of comedy and evil in early English drama, I have found it possible to generalize my findings to include examples of the convergence of these two forces in other centuries. And conversely, a critical observation of the relationship between these two forces in works from other periods in history has provided me with a wider perspective from which to view the subject of medieval comic vice.
We have seen, in our discussion of the intrusion of the comic element into the early liturgical drama of the Middle Ages, how the comic representation of evil served at once the interests of two widely different sociological groups—the clergy and the unlettered masses. The clerical endeavour to increase the attractiveness of homiletic doctrine gave rise to a more extensive use of comedy in the religious drama, and the targets of laughter were, understandably, the demonic characters whose evil and unregenerate natures were satirically represented. At the same time, the element of comedy not only fulfilled the entertainment requirements of the members of the audience, but also allowed them to identify with the transgressions of the evil character, thus providing through laughter a momentary liberation from the rigid confines of the Christian moral code. This simultaneous presence of two rituals—one sacred, the other profane—which emerges from a consideration of some of the earliest examples of comedy in English literature is similarly evident in all of the works we have examined. The combination of the forces of comedy and evil reflects the tension between the external values of the prevailing social institutions and the internal need of those bound by those values to subvert the traditional moral order. The process of internal subversion is responsible for the temporary "freedom from constraint," definitive of both the comic and demonic realms. And it is this tension—emanating from what Rossiter refers to as "two contradictory systems of value, two diverse spirits"—which underlies the moral ambiguity embodied by the comic-demonic figure in all of his (or her) representations.
Nowhere is the quality of moral ambiguity more evident than in our response to the final disposition of this figure. An essential requirement of the role of the comic-demonic character, as I have defined it, is the fact that his period of subversive revelry is short-lived. All of the figures we have been discussing inevitably lose in the end. Mak's crime is discovered and he is roughly tossed in a blanket; Cain is doomed to a life of eternal exile; the morality Vice is generally executed, jailed, or banished to Hell; both Falstaff and Volpone are imprisoned; Becky falls from the top rungs of the ladder of social respectability; Fagin is hanged and Quilp dies by drowning. The unfortunate end of this figure, as we have remarked, serves to re-assert the authority of the prevailing system of morality, to affirm that the path of virtue is more tenable than that of vice. Moreover, this final disposition also functions as a scape-goat mechanism so as to allow us a measure of expiation from the guilt we experience as a result of participating in the licentious subversion of order among the ranks of the devil's party. Yet at the same time, we are uncomfortable with the punishment meted out, and we at least partially wish the comic-demonic figure might escape, for the nature of this character is as engaging as it is morally reprehensible.

The psychological aspects of our double-sided response towards comic-demonic ambiguity can, perhaps, be further comprehended through a closer scrutiny of the reciprocal relationship between comedy and evil. Both forces, in themselves, contain contradictory elements which offer the potentiality for generating an ambivalent response. Everyone who is acquainted with Paradise Lost is well aware that the apprehension of
evil can be as inviting an experience as it is menacing. In one sense, evil is a fearsome power which threatens to subsume the individual within its anarchic blackness; on the other hand, the violation of moral taboo and the freedom from super-imposed control this force represents can be, at the same time, "damned" attractive. As it turns out, comedy as a vehicle is well-suited to conveying both the attractive and menacing components of evil, for comedy functions both as an instrument of engagement and a distancing device.

This apparent paradox is elucidated by the fact that it is possible to laugh "with" as well as to laugh "at" an individual or a situation. As an instrument of engagement, comedy invites our identification with the infernally humorous machinations of the demonic character directed against the authority of the value-system or institution which he attempts to overthrow or call into question. We enjoy the subversive antics of the comic-demonic figure—we laugh with Mak and his blasphemous parody of the nativity scene; with Cain who tells God to go look for Abel in Hell; with Titivillus whose comic burlesque of the sacred corrupts the soul of Mankind; with Neither Lover nor Loved who plays a nasty hoax on his opponent in the debate; and with Natural Inclination whose comic horseplay permits him to elude Just's attempts to bridle him. Similarly, we are engaged by Falstaff's comic mockery of the king, Volpone's outrageous voluptuousness, Fagin's infernal "pick-pocket" dance, Quilp's violently exuberant eroticism, and Becky's brazen audacity. Laughing with them, we participate in their profanation, debauchery, violation of moral principle, and their liberation. Alternately, however, we also laugh at
them—at Falstaff's monstrously distended belly, at the grotesque sexuality of both Volpone and Quilp, at Avarice who is sentenced to be squeezed like a sponge until he yields up all his stolen goods, at Newguise whose "jewels" are battered by the spade of Mankind, and at Becky's ridiculous pretensions of moral respectability at the Elephant Hotel as she receives Joseph Sedley while sitting on a plate of cold meat and a brandy bottle. As a distancing mechanism, comedy permits us to "disarm" the power of evil, for the comic spirit functions, in Spivack's words, as "anodyne . . . applied to fear and pain." Moreover, an integral part of the disarming effect of the comic spirit lies in the scape-goat ritual (represented as well in the festive rites of both modern and primitive cultures) by which the comic-demonic figure is, ultimately, subdued and the holiday from conventional value is brought to a close.

The process of laughing "with" and laughing "at" a particular stimulus can also be extended to account more precisely for the relationship between the forces of external authority and internal subversion which determines our ambivalent response to the comic portrayal of evil. As we laugh with the comic-demonic figure, we are deriding the weaknesses and rigidities of the external moral and social order; and in the laughter of degradation we direct against this figure, we are affirming the traditional systems of value which, at the same time, we internally wish to subvert. Poised precariously between the poles of engagement and detachment, we walk the tightrope of moral ambiguity alongside "that reverend Vice," a character whose double-visaged countenance requires that he be simultaneously venerated and reviled.
Moreover, the fact that the tension between external authority and internal subversion is one which cannot finally be resolved, accounts for the comic-demonic character's vital irrepressibility and his pervasive representation in artistic forms throughout history. Although the Vice can be physically subjugated, the archetypal power of this figure cannot be totally extinguished, for he crystallizes the universal human conflict between anarchy and order, instinct and conscience, freedom and control. In this sense then, Haphazard functions as the mouthpiece of the comic-demonic figure when he knowingly proclaims in Appius and Virginia: "who companies with me will desire me again" (Dodsley, IV:136). Similarly, as Satan in Jonson's The Devil is an Ass recognized, the world will always be in need of "Vices stranger and newer," in order to serve the demonic purposes of comedy. Although the old morality Vice has for several centuries been "defunct," as long as there continues to be a relationship between the comic spirit and the darker hidden impulses of man, the comic-demonic figure will make his appearance in human history, voicing his irrepressible survival with roars of infernal laughter.
Notes for Conclusion

1. The Allegory of Evil, p. 121.
2. English Drama from Early Times, p. 72.
4. The Allegory of Evil, p. 121.
5. Herford and Simpson, VI, I.ii.84-85.
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