

SOME COMMENTS ON MEDIEVAL COMEDY IN
THE FOURE PP AND GAMMAR GURTON'S NEEDLE

Both *The Foure PP* (4PP) and *Gammar Gurton's Needle* (GGN) define a general comic movement from chaos to harmony. The bickering between the Palmer, Pardoner, and Potycary at the opening of *PP* can be compared to the loud turmoil, unlike anything Diccon has seen, in the house of Gammar Gurton — a turmoil which will finally be encompassing the entire stage. For the true comic ending, harmony must be reached out of this turmoil or bickering. Thus Master Baylye and the Pedlar hold similar roles in their comic worlds: they both are vital for the comic reconciliation at the end of the chaotic play.

In *PP*, Heywood underlines the comic change from chaos to order through the Palmer, who addresses the audience at the beginning and end. The Palmer's personal change from boasting pilgrim to repentant humble Christian praying for God's grace «that we may to Lowe . . . his commandementes» (although still a Palmer) mirrors a general change in the entire drama. He is speaking for the Pardoner and for the Potycary. All three men have come to realize their Christian roles in society by recognizing, through the Pedlar's instructions, their occupational similarities. They should not need to bicker. They are all supposed to be trying to save souls; «your walkes come to one ende», as the Pedlar says. The transformation is complete the Potycary wholeheartedly asks the Pedlar to go before «and, as I am true man, I wyll folow as faste as I can». The Pardoner echoes his words: «Reason wolde we shulde folowe hys counsell».

In *GGN*, the transformation from disharmony to harmony is not so strikingly apparent, but it exists. Gammar and Chat are at peace after their epic fight in the middle of the play and Gammar invites everyone to have a drink in *her house*: the center of chaos becomes the center of peace. Chat's Christianity can emerge as soon as Diccon, the Vice, has been controlled: «By my troth, Gossyp Gurton, I am even as glad as though I mine owne selfe as good a turne had!». Doctor Rat can accept Master Bayly's judgement upon Diccon — «Go even to, Master Bayly, — let it be so for mee!». And Hodge can feel satisfied with the symbolic reversal of his swearing scene with Diccon: *he* now demands of kneeling Diccon to swear by placing his hand on Hodge's breeches. Master Bayly seems to have sensed exactly where the solution for perfect harmony lay: when Diccon «lays his hand» on Hodge's breeches, the whole sport of Diccon is purged and the needle is found.

The *PP* contains a similar purgation — almost as visually striking as Diccon's in *GGN*. The Pardoner and the Potycary are permitted to run through their salesman



lines as the Pedlar and the Palmer sarcastically cut their deceit down. Of course, the Pardoner is the Potycary's most severe critic and vice-versa. After they have somewhat purged themselves (the Palmer performed his sales pitch at the opening), the Pedlar completes the purgation by having all three tell the biggest lies they can. The Pedlar allows them to think it is to establish who the leader will be; but after they have admitted that the Palmer's lie was best, the Pedlar a second time (and finally) brings about harmony by requesting the Palmer « to let them lose . . . and so shall ye lyve beste in rest ». The Palmer agrees and the stage is set, with the purgation of pride and deceit, for the harmonious realization of the Christian roles of Palmer, Pardoner, and Potycary. They begin to sense how they all three represent different aspects of Christ's own character. The Pedlar comes close to saying this when he compares the Potycary (and by implication the other two P's), to the church [1215]: « as the church doth judge or take them so do ye receyve or forsake them ». Heywood's title *The Foure PP* takes on final comic significance: the characters are all linked finally by the first letter P: they are all pilgrims « in the fayth of his church universall! » [1236].

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