



‘By God’s Arse’: Genre, Humour and Religion in William Wager’s Moral Interludes

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In the Wakefield *Second Shepherds’ Pageant*, a mid- to late fifteenth-century English mystery drama, the most profound aspect of Christian faith, the celebration of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is expressed in humorous terms. In a farcical subplot, Mak, a thief, steals a sheep from three shepherds, and, when the suspecting shepherds search his house, hides it in a cradle, pretending it is his and his wife Gill’s newborn baby. Mak and Gill are exposed but let off with a merciful punishment, after which the brief main plot continues with the shepherds visiting the Christ child in Bethlehem. In the play’s comical climax, Gill attempts to convince the searching shepherds of her honesty, drawing an analogy between the actual lamb and the *Agnus Dei*: ‘I pray to God so milde / If ever I you beg[u]ild, / That I ete this childe / That ligys in this credyll’.¹ If the joke is funny, it is so because it is true on several levels, including a theological one: Gill is actually guilty of beguiling the shepherds, the disguised lamb is actually edible, and, according to late medieval Christian doctrine, Christ’s flesh and blood are literally consumed as part of the Eucharist. Ostensibly a somewhat crude and simplistic farce, the play has been recognised for its complex portrayal of its characters, notably Mak, and its crafty combination of comedy and spirituality.² Rather than used as a

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sugar-coat for a serious religious message, humour here is juxtaposed with a religious principle, with a mutually beneficial effect: the humour not only helps the audience to recognise an important Christian tenet, but the same tenet also informs and enhances the joke. Indeed, there is (ironic) humour in the idea that Christians consume the body of Christ and that, if we consider the play at large, it is precisely Mak, a thieving clown, who by means of his vice liberates what Rick Bowers calls the ‘comic truth of salvation’.³

In combining humour with religion on such a serious level, offering a ‘daring comical exploitation of divine flesh’, the *Second Shepherds’ Pageant* is not untypical of the English drama of the late Middle Ages, a period in which the Church (albeit not without discussion) occupied a key role in permitting, sometimes even promoting laughter for the spiritual benefit of the people.⁴ This changed in the course of the Protestant Reformation when Church authorities became increasingly dismissive of festive and carnivalesque celebrations of Christian theology, imposing strictures on joyful religious culture, such as the representation of the Eucharist and other sacraments in theatre and the inclusion of jokes in sermons.⁵ What is more, the Protestant Reformation triggered new questions of soteriology, emphasising the absence of personal agency in obtaining salvation and, more disturbingly, in avoiding the eternal hellfire of damnation: issues that seem to preclude any form of humorous treatment. It is therefore not surprising that modern scholars are inclined to argue that the period witnessed a separation between humour and religion.⁶ As a consequence, interpretations of humour in Reformation drama are sometimes reductive, this humour being regarded as having a secondary and exclusively didactic function to convey a serious religious message.

In this chapter, I will discuss two early Protestant plays, that, like the *Second Shepherds’ Pageant*, complicate the relationship between humour and religion. I will show how humour in these works could also have been appreciated for its own sake and in profound connection with religion, rather than solely as an instructive tool to help teach (Reformed) theology. While humour theory is relevant here, notably that of incongruity, I show that humour theory alone does not suffice to understand the plays’ humour. To do this, we also need knowledge of medieval and Reformation theological history. Offering this information, this case-study is able to speak to the more general issue of how to interpret historical cases of religious humour, as well as of humour in early modern theatrical history.

The two plays in question are William Wager’s *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art* (written between 1559 and 1568) and *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (1560–1570). *The Longer Thou Livest* relates the life of Moros, from the time he is a silly young boy to his downfall as an impious old man. The plot is chiefly devoted to the virtues’ attempts at reforming his character and to the vices’ achievements in keeping him in a state of depravity. *Enough* depicts the conversion of Worldly Man, who, soon afterwards, relapses—much to the delight of the vices—and is eventually carried off to Hell on the back of Satan. Throughout the play, Worldly Man is contrasted with his virtuous foil, Heavenly Man.

Both works have been recognised as precursors to Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1589–1592) in the sense that they feature foolish protagonists who are tempted by vices, fail to repent and are eventually taken to their infernal destinations by the devil. Indeed, the two interludes are exceptional in presenting a protagonist who is unregenerate and not offered salvation.⁷ As such, they seem to be predicated on one of the most crippling questions that arose from Calvinist thought and one that famously agonises Marlowe's Faustus at the end of the tragedy: how to mend your ways if God has already decided on your fate? Yet surprisingly, and unlike Marlowe's work, Wager's interludes present themselves not as tragedies but as inherently humorous comedies. That is to say, they emphasise their 'quality of being amusing' and 'capacity to elicit laughter or amusement'.⁸ Although I use the term 'humour' here in a modern sense, and thus not one familiar to Wager's audiences, the title pages of the plays leave no mistake about this purpose. *The Longer Thou Livest* is a 'very mery and pythic commedie', and *Enough*, a 'comedy or enterlude [...] ful of pleasant mirth'.⁹ In that sense, they differ from, for instance, Nathaniel Woodes's *Conflict of Conscience* (c. 1570), which explores a similar theme, also ending with the damnation of the main character and also calling itself a 'commedie' on the title page, but without the addition that it is pleasant, merry or mirthful.¹⁰ *Enough's* Prologue, furthermore, stresses that the play strives to be 'pleasant in every part / That those which come for recreation / May not be void of their expectation', and reiterates, moments later, that 'now and then we will dally merrily. / So we shall please them that of mirth be desirous'.¹¹

Wager wrote his plays when a fundamental principle of drama was shaken by the Protestant Reformation. Pre-Reformation theatre stimulated audiences to follow the path of godliness, a task that corresponded with the late-medieval view that people are able to contribute to their own salvation by means of repentance. As Robert Potter has it, to the spectators of the medieval morality play, 'and to their consciences, the plays reveal that the fall out of innocence into experience is unavoidable, theologically necessary, and solvable, through the forgiveness of sins'.¹² This solution through divine forgiveness, however, was significantly problematised when, as part of the Protestant Reformation, the Calvinistic doctrine of double predestination became increasingly accepted in England.¹³ This teaching stressed that God, from the beginning of time, had not only chosen the elect, or those who were predestined to go to heaven, but also the reprobate, who were damned. The didactic function of drama, in the form of the positive example of the repenting and eventually redeemed protagonist, was largely precluded by double predestination in the sense that it denied free will in conversion. Martha Tuck Rozett has shown that the unconditional dualism of people's predestined fate had a major impact on drama and must be seen as an important shaping force of the Elizabethan tragedy.¹⁴

There is a critical consensus that *Longer* and *Enough* might most usefully be understood as early tragedies, an idea that is supported by Potter and Rozett, who discuss the plays under the headings of tragedy.¹⁵ By the same token, Francis Guinle notes: 'The Catholic moral interludes offered a comic happy

ending with the redemption and salvation of their protagonists [...]. W. Wager's plays present a tragic vision of the same story with protagonists who cannot or will not see their error and therefore are damned for it'.¹⁶ The editor of the modern edition of the plays, R. Mark Benbow, draws a similar conclusion, noting that 'If the basic metaphor of [*The Longer Thou Livest*] is the traditional spiritual pilgrimage, there is no salvation for the fool and the play is tragic'.¹⁷ Later, he qualifies this point somewhat by acknowledging that the 'tragic and comic implications' are both 'present', with the 'grotesque humour [...] look[ing] ahead to the fortunes of Faustus'.¹⁸ As such, Benbow echoes Bernard Spivack and David Bevington who recognise the comedic parts in the plays, but lean towards a tragic interpretation.¹⁹ Indeed, it is difficult to find scholars who make serious attempts to read Wager's works on their own comedic terms and do not dismiss their humour as external or secondary to what these scholars intimate is the superior theme of religion.

As a matter of fact, the mutual relationship between humour and religion in the two plays is rich. In one of the rare studies that offers an in-depth analysis of Wager's humour, Elisabetta Tarantino draws attention to the religious importance of humorous language abuse, notably in the form of nonsense, as an 'indication of moral depravity', that finds its ground in Matthew 12.33–37.²⁰ Examples abound in both *Longer* and *Enough* and seem to have been included by Wager, as Tarantino notes, with 'obvious relish'.²¹ Thus, in *Longer*, the incorrigible fool who literally lives up to his Latin-derived name Moros, gives new nonsense names to the Virtues who are trying to correct his behaviour: Exercitation becomes 'Arse-out-of-Fashion', Discipline: 'Diricke Quintine' and Piety: 'Pine-nut-tee'.²² Perhaps more tellingly, when Moros is given an instructive school book containing the ABC of the catechism, he, recognising it, enthusiastically relates which terms and concepts he has already covered, but in so doing ironically and unwittingly exposes his lack of understanding of the terms as well as the reality of his depraved condition:

I may tell you I am past all my crossrows,
I have learned beyond the ten commandments.
Two years ago, doubtless, I was past grace;
I am in the midst of God's judgments.
I trust to be as wise as he within short space.²³

Likewise, when Moros mocks the Virtues, he cannot help but betray his sinfulness. When instructed by them to repeat after them the lines of a confession of faith, appealing to God to give Moros 'sapience' and 'open [his] intelligence', Moros seems to comply with this at first, but he turns out to be ridiculing them when he continues to parrot the virtues after the last line, repeating phrases like 'well said' and 'You may say no more as he did say'.²⁴ In a second attempt, Moros gives his own nonsense interpretation of the lines; 'I will love and fear God above all' thus becomes 'I will love porridge, when they be sod, beef and all'.²⁵ In *Enough* it is not so much the protagonist, Worldly

Man, as the Vice characters who provide most of the humour. Their jokes are coarse and blasphemous and emphasise their wickedness, such as when they swear 'by God's arse' and 'God's mother'.²⁶ At times, they are satirical and nonsensical, for instance when Ignorance pretends to 'expound a piece of scripture' like a 'bishop' in an untranslatable and comical mishmash of Latin and English: '*Magistorum clericium inkepe miorum / Totus perus altus, yongus et oldus / Multus knavoribus et quoque fasorum / Pickpursus omnius argentus shavus et polus*'.²⁷ Indeed, as Tarantino argues, both plays are deeply concerned with language—and, more specifically, its abuse in the form of nonsense—which she sees as the 'outward sign of the state of a soul, and an indication of what the ultimate fate of that soul will be'.²⁸

Yet I part ways with Tarantino in interpreting the plays' humour in exclusively negative terms, that is, in recognising the 'fun' as 'unwholesome', as concomitant with reprobation, and as counterproductive to didacticism.²⁹ As such, Tarantino recognises in the plays the ground for the development of Protestant, especially Puritan antitheatricalism; that is to say, Wager's plays'

strict religious doctrine and relish for the comic and the dramatic were soon to become irreconcilable. Above and beyond the denunciation of the theatre on the part of Puritan writers and city and church authorities, what may have begun to emerge was a contradiction, not simply of a moral but of a theological nature, between the time-honoured comical representation of evil characters, and the fundamental tenets of Protestantism.³⁰

This view privileges a post-Reformation point of view, one that arguably still informs the perception of the relationship between humour and religion today, and that renders the two phenomena as mutually exclusive. That is to say, today, the term 'puritan' has become a byword for a member of any religion or organisation who strives after purity of practice or doctrine, and present-day denotations of puritans as humourless killjoys are rooted notably in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century satirical depictions of puritans, an idea that manifests itself in, and is perpetuated by, for instance, Shakespeare's portrayal of the puritan character Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, one of his most often performed works today. Yet Tarantino's claim does not help us understand how, for William Wager and his contemporaries (including the bookseller who may have come up with the title) the plays make sense *as comedies* while featuring a protagonist who is damned. To come to grips with this paradox, we need to pay more heed to the play's root tradition, that of late medieval drama, and to the endings of the plays themselves.

While Wager's plays push a reformist and anti-Catholic agenda, its comedy is still firmly rooted in the late medieval appreciation of comedy as a weapon against evil. It is precisely its coarse, boisterous humour that we also find in, for instance, the Corpus Christi drama, which sought, in the words of A. A. Kolve, 'the vulgar, guffaw, the laugh from the belly rather than the smile'.³¹ It is worth noting that this drama was an 'institution of central importance to the English

Middle Ages precisely because it triumphantly united man's need for festival and mirth with instruction in the story that most seriously concerned his immortal soul'.³² It was not uncommon for drama to provoke mocking laughter at the expense of evil or vice characters and to present their exit to hell in humorous terms. In fact, in the plays of York and Wakefield, the very crucifixion of Christ was probably performed with comical effect, for instance in the form of clumsy craftsmen who were in charge of the crucifixion.³³ This laughter 'took the sting out of evil and reduced the champions of wickedness into raving and raging fools'.³⁴ This attitude similarly appears in the works of late-medieval humanists, notably the Catholics Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More. The latter was famous for his explicit and dark religious jokes and his understanding of humour as offering solace and comfort in times of religious tribulation. Yet it also appears on the other side of the religious divide, in Martin Luther, who joked about farting to expel the devil and recognised in this type of humour a 'freeing response to the terrors of earthly life' and a way to 'highlight the paradoxes of a Christian's simultaneously saintly and sinful existence'.³⁵

It is worth considering in closer detail the late-medieval bawdy sense of humour, because it is so far removed from modern ideas of what is appropriate in humour and religion, and because it can also be found in Wager. Not based on scriptural narratives and not featuring Christ as a character, Wager's plays certainly belong to a dramatic tradition that started with the Reformation, but its scurrilous humour is still part of the grotesque, physical comedy of medieval drama. Examples are the fart jokes in *Longer*, Moros's mutilation of Exercitation's name into 'arse out of fashion', the later part meaning 'out of shape'; his frequently used expletive 'by God's body' when he receives physical punishments; and, perhaps most interestingly, the oath 'by' and 'for' 'God's arse', articulated by the vice characters in *Enough*. While the latter utterance seems to be a prime example of a profanity, alert members of the play's audiences would have been reminded of what can be appreciated as a humorous passage in the Bible, in which it is none other than God himself who conjures up this image: in *Exodus* 33:18–23 the Lord promises a curious Moses to reveal himself, but, refusing to show his face, only offers Moses a glimpse of his 'back parts'.³⁶ I will return to this issue below.

Equally important to our understanding of Wager's works as religious comedies is their ending, specifically their depiction of the deaths of the main characters Moros in *Longer* and Worldly Man in *Enough*. While they eventually meet with their expected demise, like Marlowe's Faustus, there is reason to believe that Wager's audiences would have appreciated these as both funny and comedic, rather than tragic endings. When the middle-aged Moros, in *Longer*, is nearing his end and the character of God's Judgment has struck him with his 'sword of vengeance', God's Judgment appears to give Moros a final opportunity to reform himself, telling him to 'call' if he has 'grace for mercy'.³⁷ Moros does not make the least effort, which leads God's Judgment to the conclusion that 'indurate wretches cannot convert / But die in their filthiness like swine'.³⁸ Moments later, Confusion tells Moros that he will carry him to the devil to

which Moros, strikingly and comically unfazed, responds: 'A due to the devil? God send us good speed. / Another while with the devil I must go to school'.³⁹ By contrast, Worldly Man's death in *Enough* is preceded by his suffering from sickness and pain as a result of his being struck by God's Plague. Yet the potential pathos of this moment is lost by the humorous quality of the scene. When attempting to dictate his will to the vices Covetous and Ignorance in order to arrange the repayment of all of his creditors, Ignorance first comically struggles to spell out the words. Then, when Worldly Man has finally dictated the first four words of the will, a 'common opening formula [...]: *in the name of God. Amen*', Worldly Man suddenly collapses, never to wake up again.⁴⁰ As Ignorance suggests, 'God would not suffer him to name Him in his will', possibly, and, considering the name of this Vice unwittingly, punning on the word 'will' as the omnipotent will of the Calvinistic God.⁴¹ The play's ending thus has a serious message, warning against trust in deathbed conversion, but the abruptness of Worldly Man's demise, and Ignorance's clumsy execution of his task, simultaneously lend it a comical edge.

Yet how should we interpret these comical twists in relation to the seriousness of Moros's and Worldly Man's damnations? One way of looking at it is through the lens of ridicule, a concept mentioned above in relation to the medieval tradition of pious laughter at evil. Deeply rooted in Christian tradition, ridicule was one of the most common forms of laughter found in the Bible, especially on God's part. In Psalm 2.4, for instance, we find the notion of God and others 'that dwelleth in the heaven [who] shall laugh': the Lord having those who oppose him 'in derision'. Christopher Marlowe offers a chilling manifestation of this image in *Doctor Faustus*, when the Old Man, having given up on Faustus and menaced by devils, reminds them of his own election and of God's utter and sardonic contempt for them: 'Ambitious fiends, see how the heavens smiles / At your repulse and laughs your state to scorn! Hence, hell, for hence I fly unto my God'.⁴² In *Enough*, Wager's version of Marlowe's Old Man is Heavenly Man, who represents the elect and serves a minor, choric role by commenting on the foolish decisions of Worldly man, highlighting his own moral superiority and blessed status, yet this is not with reference to divine sardonic mockery or with a sense of smugness. What is more, Marlowe, as opposed to Wager, cultivates a sense of godly sarcasm throughout the play by presenting the remark of the Old Man in a series of moments in which the pitiless indifference of God is highlighted, such as when Faustus asks Christ to 'save' his 'distressed [...] soul', upon which it is not Christ, but Lucifer who appears, telling him that Christ's righteousness prevents him from saving Faustus.⁴³ This moment foreshadows what is probably the most unsettling moment of the A-text: Faustus's last outcry of anguish: 'My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!', which is evocative of Christ's own anguished outcry on the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'⁴⁴ This moment of mental torment finds a physical equivalent in the last scene of the B-text, where the scholars contemplate the uniquely 'fearful shrieks

and cries' that were produced by Faustus and discover his 'limbs / All torn asunder by the hand of death'.⁴⁵

Indeed, a crucial difference in the ways in which Faustus on the one hand, and Moros and Worldly Man on the other, are ridiculed lies in the cultivation of pity for the former. The notion that pity and laughter were mutually exclusive goes back to classical antiquity and was maintained by Renaissance thinkers including Laurent Joubert, who wrote an elaborate study on laughter.⁴⁶ As Michael Screech notes, 'Fictional human beings can be laughed at as we witness their destruction, but the slightest feeling of sympathy or pity must first be eliminated. That calls for the well-established tricks and art of the comic writer'.⁴⁷ Dr Faustus might arguably be even more deserving of his damnation, as he willingly sells his soul to the devil, yet it is much easier to stomach Moros and Worldly Man's divine punishments. Whereas Faustus, a power-mad scholar turned pitiful clown, gains in humanity, both Moros and Worldly Man lose their sympathy as unregenerate stock figures. Worldly Man, a wealthy landlord, does undergo a genuine but temporary conversion, but his relapse, renewed avarice and callous rejection of cries for help by his impoverished hireling, tenant and servant just before he dies erode the audience's sympathy for him, or what is left of it. Moros is a funny child but undeserving of our compassion when showing himself utterly incapable *and* unwilling of change as a foolish old man. Indeed, Moros is not the relatable Mankind-figure we know from medieval drama, but, in the words of Spivack, 'a special example of the depravity that afflicts only a fraction of the human race. His name, at the same time that it condemns him from the start, separates him from humanity at large'.⁴⁸ The audience is thus invited to sunder themselves from Wager's protagonist, and, more importantly, distance themselves from his fate, just as their laughing at Moros's puns on the catechism implies that they would have grasped the basic theological essence of the ideas that Moros himself fails to understand.

Yet the comic essence of Wager's moralities lies not so much in their jokes themselves, their grotesque portrayal of vice, or lack of true suffering at the end, but in a more profound Christian conception of the human condition. An explanatory glimpse into this conception is offered by another term that *Enough* uses to classify itself on the title page: in addition to a comedy, it is also an 'enterlude' or interlude. The term is illuminating because it does not only re-emphasise the 'light or humorous character' of the play, but includes the notion of in-betweenness, or, more specifically, its playful positioning between the 'serious, mundane activities of everyday life'.⁴⁹ According to Peter Berger, what this term shares with the comic is that it enables 'the perception of an otherwise disclosed dimension of reality—not just of its own reality (as a player perceives the reality of a game), but of reality as such'.⁵⁰ In a Christian context, this is the reality of 'a world without pain', a world that is experienced during the fleeting moment of laughter.⁵¹ Much of this laughter is generated through surprise. In an appropriately funny illustration, Berger shows how the notions of in-betweenness, comic surprise and religious faith are connected: he argues that humanity is subject to God's 'cosmic game of hide-and seek', or of a

'soteriological [...] jack-in-the-box'.⁵² The latter in particular is a helpful reminder of Christ's resurrection: 'In this imagery, Christ was the first little man who stood up and, as the Apostle Paul explained, this is the basis of our own hope to put the primal pratfall behind us forever'.⁵³ Religious faith is thus a 'childish faith [which] trusts that the clown will always jump up again [...] and that therefore one is free to laugh' in a world outside the game that is lethal and 'not at all trustworthy'.⁵⁴ Wager's interludes serve this role as comic diversions from a world afflicted by religious conflict and doubt. It is perhaps precisely the least appropriate joke, certainly from a current-day perspective, that captures this idea most profoundly: the expletive 'by God's arse' uttered by some of the vice characters in *Enough* and the Biblical passage it refers to, Exodus 33:18–23, in which Moses asks God to show him his 'glory'. God responds by saying:

I will make all my good go before thee, and I will proclaim the Name of the Lord before thee: for I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 20 Furthermore he said, Thou canst not see my face, for there shall no man see me, and live. 21 Also the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock: 22 And while my glory passeth by, I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with mine hand while I pass by. 23 After I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

God is playing an 'adult version' of peekaboo with Moses, not showing his face, but his buttocks.

In this context, even the damnation of Wager's protagonists can become comically comforting. We have already established that their deaths have comical overtones, especially that of Worldly Man and that a humorous perspective is enabled by a lack of pathos in these scenes. As a matter of fact, there is something deeply reassuring about their punishments, as they are entirely predictable and in line with the sinful behaviour of the characters. Indeed, both Moros and Worldly Man may theoretically and according to Calvinistic doctrine be doomed from the start, but the plays still present the divine retributions as logical consequences of their self-chosen behaviour. Robert Potter makes an important point about this when he claims about *Enough* that 'it would be premature to see darkness and doubt in the tragedy of Worldly Man. *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* may best be imagined as the photographic negative of a medieval morality play, a definition of the light by means of its shadows'.⁵⁵ I would argue that this is not only true for *Enough*, but also for *Longer*. The play's point is that if one avoids being like Moros (or Worldly Man), the opposite fate awaits in the form of heaven. This view is confirmed by the last speakers in *Enough*, Rest, Heavenly Man and Enough, who underscore the rewards for the 'heavenly'.

This emphasis on the positive side of predestination can also be found in the very text that defined the Church's conception of predestination. Article 17 of

the *Thirty Nine Articles* (1563), which concerns the doctrine of predestination and election, emphasises its essentially joyful principle:

predestination, and our election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God.⁵⁶

Conversely, ‘for curious and carnal persons, lacking the spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God’s predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation’.⁵⁷ It is telling that the article uses the first person plural in ‘our election in Christ’ and does not refer to the reprobate as such but as those who are ‘curious and carnal’, accentuating their behaviour deserving of divine retribution rather than their status as inherently damned. This is not to deny or mitigate the great spiritual anxiety that the doctrine of election would cause among early modern English men and women. As John Stachniewski has observed, this may even have led to a sharp rise in suicide rates in early seventeenth-century England.⁵⁸ Critics including Martha Rozett, Huston Diehl and more recently Adrian Streete, Jennifer Waldron and Steven Mullaney have, moreover, shown the profound impact Reformed theology had on the drama of the period.⁵⁹ Their focus, however, is on drama that succeeded Wager’s, suggesting that the very early days of Elizabeth’s reign were not marked by the perception of Calvinism as gloomy and uncompromising to the same degree as later.

By eschewing the genre of comedy virtually altogether, scholars who have concerned themselves with the correlation between early modern drama and the English Reformation have suggested that the genre does not take Reformed doctrine seriously, or is not concerned with it. By the same token, those who do consider Wager’s comedies have shown great reluctance to treat them as such, either, as mentioned above, by classifying them as tragedies or by suggesting that they are not fully fledged or flawed comedies; Potter, for instance, maintains that they are ‘hybrid’, ‘awkward’ and, approvingly quoting Philip Sidney, ‘mungrel tragedy-comedy’.⁶⁰ I argue that the plays should be taken seriously as comedies and products of their own specific period, which allowed them to be experienced as fully comedic.

That is not to say that Wager’s works are diametrically opposed to tragedy. Rather, and especially as *Christian* comedies, they are kin to it, a paradox famously explored by Søren Kierkegaard who regarded Christianity as both essentially tragic and comic.⁶¹ According to the philosopher’s speaker Johannes Climacus:

The difference between the tragic and the comic rests in the relation of the contradiction to the idea. The comic grasp brings out the contradiction, or lets it become manifest, by having the way out in mind; that is why the contradiction is painless. The tragic grasp sees the contradiction and despairs over the way out.⁶²

Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic as based on contradiction tallies with the incongruity theory of humour, which holds that humour involves a pleasant experience of a cognitive shift as part of a perception of an incongruity. The painlessness of the contradiction is also a condition for making it pleasant. John Lippitt reminds us, however, that we should be careful not to take this quotation too literally.⁶³ Suffering is an inherent part of religion and the "true comic" must *combine* the comic and pathos, the comic and the tragic. Thus we need to ask: in what *sense* must a contradiction be "painless" if it is to be comic?⁶⁴ The answer, according to Lippitt, lies in the 'way out', which 'certainly does not deny the reality of suffering. But it does diminish the danger of being utterly *overwhelmed* by it. [...] So the Christian can have a certain "legitimate" lightness, because of his belief that despite life's suffering, God (and good) will ultimately prevail'.⁶⁵ The 'way out' thus takes shape in the form of one of the main virtues of Christianity: hope, a theme that Harvey Cox recognises as the essence of Christian comedy:

The comic sensibility can laugh at those who ferment war and perpetuate hunger, at the same time it struggles to dethrone them. It foresees their down fall even when their power seems secure. The comic, more than the tragic, because it ignites hope, leads to more, not less, participation in the struggle for a just world.⁶⁶

If the modern (lack of) appreciation of Wager's plays as comedies teaches us one thing, it is that sense of humour and the understanding of comedy are still taken for granted as universal, and, as such, in opposition to religion, a subject that has, moreover, received far more scholarly attention for historical specificity. Wager's interludes have been dismissed as failed interludes and as tragedies in essence, which have been misunderstood by his own audiences as comedies. This is not entirely surprising as the indicators of humour are notoriously difficult to trace. While the theological content of the play remains largely intact in script, its comedy requires more effort to be recognised when not experienced in performance. Yet even so, newer sensibilities that inform our current-day appreciation of humour, and make us see it as clashing with religiosity, prevent us from recognising earlier forms of understanding. In cases when humour is recognised, it is often understood in instrumental or simplistic terms, such as a tool to deride religious enemies or a didactic device to teach religious doctrine. While these interpretations are not necessarily incorrect—the latter was even part of the humanist tradition of employing humour to disseminate ideals of reason, as well as by many plays themselves, as they take pains to underline their instructive duties throughout the text—they offer only a partial understanding of Wager's humour and prevent us from seeing how it

is precisely in humour that we gain a better understanding of the way in which religion was experienced by Wager and his audiences. In this chapter, I have tried to show that their understanding of faith was not only informed by Protestant doctrine, but also by late medieval theatrical culture that understood humour as an essential element of the religious experience of hope. It would not be long before this hope made its exit, and, as such, fostered the flourishing of Elizabethan tragedy, but that does not imply that Wager's drama was mistaken about the meaning of its comedy.

NOTES

1. Anonymous, 'The Second Shepherds' Pageant from Wakefield', ll. 535–38.
2. See, for instance, the second chapter of Bowers, *Radical Comedy*.
3. Bowers, *Radical Comedy*, 15.
4. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 84, 94.
5. Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter', 79.
6. See, for instance, Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter*, 133; Burke, *Popular Culture*, 295.
7. Grantley, *English Dramatic Interludes*, 91.
8. 'humour', *Oxford English Dictionary*, 9b.
9. Wager, *The Longer Thou Liuest*, sig A1r; Wager, *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*, sig A1r. All further references to these works are to R. Mark Benbow's modern edition. One of the few scholars who have noted the contrast between the plays' endings and descriptions as comedies is Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, 114.
10. Woodes, *The Conflict of Conscience*. Sig. A1r. It is worth noting that this play has two alternative endings, one featuring the damnation of the protagonist and the other his redemptive death-bed conversion.
11. Wager, *Enough*, ll. 34–36, 83–84.
12. Potter, *The English Morality Play*, 57.
13. Streete, *Protestantism and Drama in Early Modern England*, 8; Doran and Durston, *Princes, Pastors, and People*, 25.
14. Rozett, *The Doctrine of Election*, passim.
15. *Ibid.*, 88, 93. Potter, *The English Morality Play*, 117–19.
16. Guinle, 'Where Angels Fear to Tread', 156.
17. Benbow, 'Introduction', xiv.
18. *Ibid.*, xvi.
19. Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, 174, 229, 248; Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe*, 163, 183.
20. Tarantino, 'Between Peterborough and Pentecost', 76.
21. *Ibid.*, 75.
22. Wager, *The Longer Thou Livest*, ll. 409, 501, 504.
23. *Ibid.*, ll. 472–76.
24. *Ibid.*, ll. 341, 345, 347, 356.
25. *Ibid.*, ll. 389, 393.
26. *Ibid.*, ll. 379, 1092, 425.
27. *Ibid.*, ll. 1265–68.
28. Tarantino, 'Between Peterborough and Pentecost', 56.

29. Ibid., 81.
30. Ibid., 79–80.
31. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 139.
32. Ibid., 134.
33. Gillhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 98–102.
34. Ibid., 102.
35. Prescott, 'The Ambivalent Heart', *passim*; Mallinson, 'Humor', 350.
36. Benbow, *The Longer Thou Livest*, 98 n379. All scriptural references are taken from the Geneva Bible.
37. Wager, *The Longer Thou Livest*, l. 1799.
38. Ibid., ll. 1805–6.
39. Ibid., ll. 1857–58.
40. Benbow, *The Longer Thou Livest*, 141 n1401.
41. Wager, *The Longer Thou Livest*, l. 1415.
42. Marlowe, *Dr Faustus* (A-Text) 5.1.116–18.
43. Ibid., 2.3.80.
44. Ibid., 5.2.113. See also Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 46–48. In the B-text, the phrase 'My God, my God' was replaced with 'O mercy, heaven!' According to Nuttall, this 'suggests strongly that contemporaries of Marlowe noticed the biblical echo and were made uncomfortable by it' (46n.).
45. Marlowe, *Dr Faustus* (B-Text), 5.3.4, 6–7.
46. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, 57, 58.
47. Ibid., 307.
48. Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, 248.
49. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 13.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 195.
52. Ibid., 196.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Potter, *The English Morality Play*, 119.
56. Quoted in Cressy and Ferrell (ed.) *Religion and Society in Early Modern England*, 74.
57. Ibid.
58. Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 46.
59. Rozett, *The Doctrine of Election*; Diehl, *Staging Reform*; Streete, *Protestantism and Drama in Early Modern England*; Waldron, *Reformations of the Body*; Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions*.
60. Potter, *The English Morality Play*, 117.
61. Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy and Religion*, 2.
62. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 432–33.
63. Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 130.
64. Ibid., 130.
65. Ibid., 132–33.
66. Cox, *The Feast of Fools*, 150, 153.

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