

THE UNRULY HOUSEHOLD IN JOHN HEYWOOD'S *JOHAN JOHAN*

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ABSTRACT

The very title of John Heywood's interlude *A mery play between Johan Johan, the husband, Tyb his wife, and Sir Johan the priest* (in print by 1533) suggests a fabliaux-like, farcical intrigue, which can be enacted by three characters only: a hen-pecked husband, a shrewish wife and a parish priest, i.e. the wife's lover. The play centres on the motif of eternal triangle, Tyb being at the heart of the whole intrigue and responsible for disrupting order within the household. This paper examines how the official ideology of household is subverted in the play, deals with carnivalesque empowerment of the female character which results from this subversion, shows how female rebellion is counterattacked with misogynist implications of the play, and, finally tries to hint at political implications the interlude might have had despite its entertaining and comic qualities.

Heywood's carnivalesque domestic sphere in *A mery play between Johan Johan, the husband, Tyb his wife, and Sir Johan the priest*, in which the sanctioned order of things is reversed and where no laws which should govern an exemplary family unit apply, challenges the key concepts associated with the household in the late Middle Ages, when it is not so much an architectural as a social structure. At each social level, the household and the family are the main units of economic activity and the chief channels for transmission of wealth; higher up the scale they additionally provide the grounds for political alliances as well as patronage and sponsorship of artistic, dramatic and literary activity. Whatever the social level, however, on top of this hierarchical institution stands an omnipresent, male householder, who is "in control" of household inhabitants, including his wife, as well as responsible for business matters and commodities.<sup>1</sup> The mutual affection between the spouses was not necessarily excluded;

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<sup>1</sup> To support husband's dominion over his wife, all the possible authorities were quoted, including the convenient fragments of the Old and New Testaments, church fathers, and other classical

still, the relations within the family were predominantly seen in economic terms, and as Starkey states: "The wife – with a few reservations – was the property of her husband, while the children were the nearly absolute property of their parents" (1981: 235).

From the very beginning of Heywood's interlude, the audience is aware that Johan and Tyb's household is not a model one. Johan, seething with anger and anti-woman rhetoric, hushes up immediately when Tyb enters. The threats of wife-whipping, in which the word "beat" is used over twenty times, come to nothing; a bragging family tyrant is downgraded to assume the role of a female servant. The figures of a husband performing typically female chores and of a wife assuming the position of a householder point to an inherently carnivalesque reversal of gender roles within the interlude's household. The subsequent development of action reinforces the impression that Johan is anything but a master, and that it is Tyb who, contrary to social expectations, is in control of both the domestic sphere and the plot of the interlude. Tempting Johan with the pie she has brought, the wife manages to convince him to invite her lover for dinner. Paradoxically then, Tyb's rendezvous with Sir Johan, the priest, is to take place in her own house with an assent given by her own husband. The woman-designed intrigue goes even further in its craftiness: Tyb deliberately makes a hole in the pail so that it becomes impossible for Johan to bring water in it and serves as a pretext for sending the husband off to sit by the fire and chaff the wax to stop the leak. In a recently published article, dealing with the issue of male competition in the play, Louis asserts that the play depicts a fight of two male characters in which the possession of the female body is the prize (2002: 135), but this stance seems not to embrace the complexity of the situation fully. The play does feature a contest, but this contest is organized by Tyb, the competitors play accordingly to her rules; she, and neither of two men, is the master of the game.

Sexual allusions are carefully inserted all throughout the play and linked strongly with Johan's overall inability to act. This bond becomes most symbolically potent in the scene in which the lovers eat the pie and Johan, deprived of

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and medieval authors. Just to mention a few examples: the first account of creation in the *Genesis* (1: 27), which states that on the sixth day God created both man and woman in his own image, blessed them both, and commanded them to multiply and subdue the earth, was usually ignored in favour of the second version of the story (*Genesis* 2: 18-22) that states that Eve came into being after Adam as an afterthought. In this narrative woman was made from man's rib as a derivation of and a "help meet" for him and as such she does not exist in her own right. Similarly, St Paul's notion of companionship and love in marriage: "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself" (*Ephesians* 5: 28) was probably less widespread than the idea that a husband is a lord and master of his wife: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body" (*Ephesians* 5:22-3).

his share and removed from the table, complains of the smoke blinding him and bitterly confesses to being unable to see anything. His blindness becomes a source of comedy for Tyb, Sir Johan and the audience:

Loke how the kokold chafyth the wax that is hard  
And for his lyfe / daryth not loke hitherward

(524-525).

The verbal comment on onstage action, with the verb "look" forcing the audience to direct their eyes towards the murmuring, but passively obedient, husband serves to draw attention to the husband's refusal to take action, and together with other references makes it one of the central motifs of the play. Already in the opening speech, Johan, the husband, voices a suspicion that Tyb and Sir Johan are having an illicit affair; still, he manages to dismiss the thought. Furthermore, the phrase "a clyfte large and wyde" (462), denoting the hole in the pail, constitutes a crude reference to Tyb's excessive sexual needs, while Johan's difficulties with clogging the hole are suggestive of his inability to satisfy them. Tyb's comment that "It is pyte to helpe hym or do hym good" (l. 470), combined with the image of Johan, sitting with the candle between his legs and trying to warm it with his hands, symbolic of masturbation, further enhance the impression of a sexually impotent husband, unable to pay off his marital debt, and therefore, useless. If the scene of consuming the pie is read symbolically as the carnal consummation of Tyb and her lover's relationship, which the husband ignores to see, he is as guilty of the whole affair as the lovers are. Unaware of the whole intrigue, he still played an active part in bringing the priest to his household. What is more, it is the priest, who covered the costs of making the pie, and, therefore, has the right to enjoy it. In reference to the affair: it is him, not the husband, who is able to pay off the marital debt and that is why, quite understandably, he manages to win Tyb's favour.

If the context of sexual equality motivates Tyb's choice to seek bodily pleasure outside marriage, it also conforms to negative stereotypes of womanhood which derived from medical and gynaecological knowledge and linked female physiology and sexuality with disorderly behaviour on the grounds that the possession of wombs made women prone to suffer from hysteria (Trillat 1993: 14-15). As if pseudo-scientific explanations of female instability were not enough, they go hand in hand with medieval theology with its cherished belief that of all seven deadly sins, lust is predominantly associated with women, who, as Eve, are to blame for seducing men. If such view excused men from exercising control over their sex-drive, it also indicated a certain fear of women, especially adulterous ones (Karras 1998: 108). Male phobias are not only present in the play but they go to extremes: Tyb symbolizes the man's worst nightmare:

she is the shrew, the harlot, and the gossip; all in one. She harasses her husband verbally and physically, she controls and directs his behaviour, destroys the harmony of the household, and transgresses all there is to be transgressed. She should be punished, reformed, or at least forced to comply with the rules, like Noah's wife, forcefully dragged by her husband and sons to the Ark, a projection of "idealised domestic space in which all the women are wives absolutely enclosed and controlled" (Henderson 1997: 176). She should be saved from her own unruliness; however, quite disturbingly, she is not.

The interlude's central scene of consuming the pie concludes with the efforts undertaken by lovers to talk Johan into admitting that he has had his share of the pie. When the husband bitterly complains about having to go to bed without "mete nor brede" (633), Tyb asks:

Why, were ye not served there as ye are  
Chafyng the waxe / standing by the fyre

(635-636).

Nearly the same question is repeated twice more but Johan shows the first signs of resistance and stubbornly refuses to accept their version of the story. Tyb's reaction to her husband's protest is a violent one. Having grabbed her distaff, a familiar symbol of carnivalesque empowerment of women, she attempts to force his submission, but Johan has already resolved not to harbour the illusions of a happy household any longer and succeeds in driving the lovers out of the house. Realizing that the problem has not been solved, he decides to chase Tyb and Sir Johan to inflict proper punishment on them. Unfortunately for him, the action is belated and instead of re-establishing the order within the household, it takes the domestic crisis out of its walls, transposing private troubles of the couple onto a wider social plane. In this context, Johan's endeavours to demonstrate power prove nothing but his inability to supervise his own household, the harmony of which is not only a symbol of but also a condition for social harmony in general. Such conclusion is strikingly atypical: what we have to face is a misogynist farce with a disturbing finale which suggests of even more chaos and confusion, an ending that does not look like an ending at all.

This is precisely this lack of the resolution of conflict, the absence of restoration of order that leaves the reader, or the spectator, with the feeling that the meaning, or part of it, has not been yet arrived at. In search of meaning, we might pose a hypothesis that it is linked with Tudor politics, a great deal of criticism on sixteenth century drama being devoted to analysing dramatic texts in this light, although not much written on Heywood's Johan Johan in particu-

lar.<sup>2</sup> One of the biggest problems we face is that the play's exact origins are difficult to trace and, in fact, have attracted little attention of the critics. Chambers (1925, II: 455), without any explanation whatsoever, situates the interlude in a rather broad time span of 1521-31; most often the references are simply made to its first print edition by Rastell in 1533. Furthermore, the play is not Heywood's original invention, but a reworking of a French farce; the bond that deserves due attention as it can be the first hint for arriving at an alternative, political reading of the play. Being aware of Henry VIII's desire to match in elegance and splendour the court of Paris, and of the fact that Anne Boleyn spent a considerable portion of her life at Burgundian and French courts (1514-1521), and as one French courtier wrote, "no one would ever have taken her to be English by her manners, but a native born Frenchwoman" (Lindsey 1995: 51), we may hypothesize that Heywood's choice of the play with French origins is a deliberate one: he could have aimed at drawing the audience's attention to the issues preoccupying English courtiers at the time. If such assumptions are right, the interlude becomes a carnivalesque metaphor for the most important household of the country, for the Tudor court itself.

Following the pattern of *De Pernet qui va au vin*, Heywood departs from the original to emphasize certain aspects of his play (Young 1904: 5-10). While in the French farce a male lover is just sketched, in the English version Sir Johan is transformed into a symbol of male sexuality and potency, a virile young man superior to the husband in two respects. First, unlike Tyb's spouse, Sir Johan manages to satisfy her sexually, which is presented as an underlying reason for her infidelity. Second, contrary to Johan, the lover is able to make a woman pregnant, about which he boasts throughout the meal. His ribald tales of "miraculous conception" (557-572, 577-587, 595-602), having no counterpart in French play at all, strongly pinpoint the problem of childlessness in Heywood's play. Another divergence lies in the motivation the husbands are given for the futile task of chaffing the wax. In *Pernet* the activity is quite absurd and treated in the most mechanical fashion; in *Johan Johan*, however, the incident is packed with sexual connotations, once again suggesting the inability to pay off the marital debt and emphasising the absence of children in the household. Finally, the endings differ considerably: the French one reinforces the carnivalesque vision of the world through final submission of the husband, while the English one results in ultimate chaos and disorder.

<sup>2</sup> On the whole, sixteenth century interludes have been successfully interpreted as explorations of the political and social issues by Bevington (1968), as investigating the religious controversies by Walker (1988), as expressing themes of noble interest and noble ideologies by Westfall (1990). Little interest that *Johan* itself arouse was directed at anti-clerical aspects of the play, its purely farcical expression, and, most recently, at establishing male identity and ideology as the dominant ones among the members of the audience (Louis 2002: 135-139).

If we ignore the gender of characters, the topical allusions to the political situation become surprisingly relevant. Firstly, Johan and Tyb's childlessness may correspond to the lack of a male successor to the English throne, which by 1525, with Catherine turning forty and having already suffered from a series of miscarriages and still-births, had become a fact rather than an ominous possibility. Thus, the fear of illegitimate children, expressed by Johan in farcical terms in the play, might relate to a much more solemn anxiety over the problems of succession: it is again in 1525 that the king promoted his out-of-wedlock son, Henry Fitzroy, to the position of the duke of Richmond – a step that could end up in putting a bastard on the English throne. It is also in the period between 1525 and 1527 when Henry's passionate affair with a nineteen-year-old Anne Boleyn began and when the divorce proceedings commenced. The publicly known romance of the ruler and Catherine's maid of honour resembles the nature of a fictional relationship Tyb and Sir Johan enjoyed under the nose of a temporarily blinded husband. Similarly, Johan's inability to act, and his uselessness in the farcical household might symbolically stress Catharine's diminishing position at court, her passivity, and failure to prevent Henry's extramarital adventures. Finally, the husband's stubborn refusal to confirm the false assertion that he has had his share of the pie and the Tyb's insistence on forcing him to do so might be read as corresponding to Henry's obsessive tactics of trying to make the queen admit that her previous marriage with Arthur was consummated – a stance that the queen, like Johan, stubbornly refused.

Having assumed that the divergences from the French story line are a deliberate choice and disregarded the gender of the characters, we end up with an interpretation that hints at the political concerns of the Tudor court and narrows the span of the play's origins to the years of 1525-1530 – the time when the "King's Private Matter" was an open secret, but when the outcome of events had not been yet decided. Still, this reading, inferred from topical rather than verbal references, is possible only if acknowledge the specific nature of actor-spectator transaction taking place in the noble household theatre.

Spectators at household revels, like those at schools and unlike those at church dramas, civic pageants, and public theatres, were a very specific audience. Besides living and working together, they shared particular cultural paradigms, they gathered in a private space for specific reasons, and they understood personal, topical and local allusions. Consequently, a performance could assume a particular audience reception and predict a response, could tailor its contents to a social or religious occasion, like the progress of the monarch or a local saint's day, and could refer specifically to those present

(Westfall 1997: 52, emphasis mine).

Consequently, the meaning of the play is not something given and static but

actively negotiated between the actors and the audience and dependant on the circumstances of performance. More probably than not, extra-textual features of characterization, such as a tone of voice, facial expression, particular gesture, characteristic gait, or catchphrase, could all point to certain individuals known to a particular group of spectators and give the play a new, performance-specific meaning.

For More's fraction of the opponents of Henry's divorce, to whom Johan Johan was most probably addressed, the play could have had a level going beneath the play's farcical plane. The vision of a carnivalesque household, deprived of the rules necessary for social stability and order, might serve as a metaphor for a state whose ruler does not respect these values. This message becomes more vivid if we assume that the interlude plays not only with the concept of gender roles but of the gender identities themselves. If this hypothesis is right, if the male stands for the female, and the female for the male, we may conclude that the figure of Johan, the husband, is a carnivalesque reference to Catherine of Aragon, that the character of sexually attractive and potent Sir Johan is used to bring in the association with Anne Boleyn, and, finally, that ingenious Tyb stands for Henry VIII himself. In such reading, the carnivalesque household in which two men compete for the body of the woman is transformed into the court at which two women try to win the favour of the king, the court of two queens, one of them having an obvious advantage of youth over the other. Heywood's own political preferences are not difficult to decipher. Bearing in mind priests' infamous reputation for lechery, the comparison of Boleyn to a representative of the clergy can evoke only negative connotations. Similarly, Tyb's sexual appetite, her dominance in the play, and the role of onstage director, make her, or the king for whom she stands, the source of all problems. Catherine's, position is a complex one, but no optimistic interpretation seems to be possible. Neither blindness to truth nor an attempt to prove her case have any chance of success; the queen, like Johan, either becomes the object of derision, or she is left alone to chase the run-away lovers, without any hope for victory. Interestingly, both male characters are given exactly the same name; the unprecedented choice which does not seem to be incidental at all. Making the references to Catharine and Anne quite obvious, Heywood christens them both Johan to emphasize their instrumental function in the play of the royal divorce carefully staged by the ruler himself.

The interlude seems to be constantly playing on the binary oppositions of male/female private/public, domestic/political. On its first literal level, Johan Johan is simply a farce with no positive characters at all: a stereotype of a shrewish wife can have no positive connotations for the audience, the clichéd treatment of the figure of priest bears no better associations, a cuckolded husband, finally, is too passive and concerned with appearances to gain the specta-

tor's sympathy. The play is packed with slapstick comedy, crude allusions, and misogynist attacks. It makes excessive use of the carnival mode and, in fact, all the cherished values associated with the household are reversed. A piece of anti-woman entertainment on the first level, this "merry play" does not have a "merry ending". It concludes with a chaotic commotion extending beyond the walls of the fictional abode, a commotion that is bound to happen if royal marital problems are not resolved within the walls of the royal unruly household. If the text, as I suggest, can be read as having political implications as well, the farce, on top of its entertaining function, becomes a weighty play, which shows the most influential affair in English history in a distorting mirror and voices, quite insightfully, great uneasiness, lingering doubts, painful uncertainty and the fear about the future to come. On this second, public level, the play's longish title, featuring two identical male names, might have been transformed by a skilful and politically-oriented spectator into a much more disturbing one: "A merry play between Catherine, the wife, Henry her husband, and Lady Anne, the whore," a surprisingly apt title for the fabliaux-like intrigue being enacted by three publicly known figures in front of the whole nation, and with no happy end in store.

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