'INTO A WOMANNYS LYCKENES':
Bale's personification of Idolatry
A response to Alan Stewart

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> 'Vita, you're not a queen because you rule people or sit on a throne, baby. You're a queen 'cause you couldn't cut it as a man, so you had to put on a dress — that's why'.
>
> Chi Chi in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*)[1]

In the autumn of 1995, I proposed a paper with the current title for a session on cross-dressing in early English drama, sponsored by the Medieval and Renaissance Drama Society, at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo MI. This is not the paper I set out to write, although it is, with minor alterations, the paper I delivered at Kalamazoo. Between the actual Congress and the original submission of my abstract, two things happened in my obviously exciting life. The first was seeing the film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, the relevance of which only recently and slowly dawned on me (and you'll have to wait for it here). The second was the publication of a paper on my chosen topic — an occurrence more akin to a 6'2" transvestite dominatrix in black vinyl with whips and chains and boots with 6" stiletto heels barging into my office. I could not ignore it, and am willing to engage with it, but have refused to submit entirely.

This paper, then, is largely a response to Alan Stewart's '"Ydolatricall Sodometrye": John Bale's Allegory', published in *Medieval English Theatre* 15 (1995, for 1993) 3–20.[2] In that paper, Stewart argues that John Bale's interlude of *Three Laws* very much reflects the time in which it was written, but 'transcends this historically specific context to attempt a radically new consideration of what sodomy might mean, making productive use of allegory to draw on connections made in Paul's first Letter to the Romans'.[3] This seems a curious assertion, and not just because Paul only wrote one known Letter to the Romans. What most interests Stewart is that Bale's Sodomy is not a 'discrete character', but one that represents a relation between persons, and specifically 'the interaction of men within the monastic institutions'.[4] However, none of this is new. In the first place, few if any characters in moral interludes, or in the whole of medieval allegorical fiction, could be seen as 'discrete' characters: for example, the

eponymous protagonist of *Mankind* with his spade represents farmers, but also Adam, and all humankind ... or at least all men; a Vice figure might have an allegorically specific name — Mischief, or Pride — but will represent a full range of vicious activities and relations. A character named Sodomy, in particular, could hardly do otherwise. Until the nineteenth century, as Foucault and others have repeatedly pointed out, sodomy was usually conceived of in terms of relations or specific acts between men and others — other men, or women, or beasts. And, often enough, sodomy was associated with religious orders — as, for instance, in Chaucer's memorable image of friars swarming like bees 'Out of the develes ers' in the prologue to the *Summoner's Tale*.[5]

Stewart refers to, but mostly ignores, the nearly contemporary article by Donald N. Mager entitled 'John Bale and Early Tudor Sodomy Discourse' — an article that demonstrates how Bale's personification of Sodomy reflects a full range of the meanings that belong to what Foucault has infamously termed 'that utterly confused category'.[6] Bale's Sodomy signifies, among other things, bestiality, masturbation, pederasty, heterosexual promiscuity, and even clerical celibacy.[7] In contrast, Stewart seems to assume that, in Bale's work, *sodomy* more simply means anal intercourse between men. He makes this assumption despite his own emphasis upon Sodomy's consort, Idolatry — a character who appears in 'a womannys lyckenes' (437), who indeed is said to be a woman, but one who 'sumtyme... wert an he' (425). Idolatry, in herself and through her association with the character Sodomy, embodies the categorical confusion of dissident sexuality and gender roles.

Neither Stewart nor Mager deals adequately with the problem of Idolatry's gender, and this has repercussions upon their understanding of Sodomy — both as character and as concept — in the interlude. Bale's full title makes the point of the play clear enough: the interlude was printed in 1548 as *A Comedy concernynge thre lawes, of Nature, Moses, and Christ, corrupted by the Sodomytes, Pharisees & Papystes most wycked. Compiled by Johan Bale. Anno M.D.XXXVIII.* The parallelism of the title even makes it clear as to what will be opposed to what within the play, although dialogue and costume alike make it clear that, for Bale, 'Sodomytes, Pharisees & Papystes' all represent Catholicism. Like Stewart and Mager, I am concerned here only with the second of Bale's five acts, in which the Law of Nature is opposed by Sodomy, or rather by Sodomy and Idolatry. The Colophon to the play specifies that Idolatry is to 'be decked lyke an olde wytche, Sodomy lyke a monke of all sectes'. As Stewart demonstrates,

both of these costumes carry both sexual and spiritual implications,[8] but it is only the sexual implications of Idolatry's cross-dressing that interest me here.

These two characters are always and only seen together. In the colourful phrase of the chief Vice, Infidelity, 'Ranke love ... full of heate' (487) makes Sodomy and Idolatry act on-stage like 'hungry dogges' that 'wyll durty puddynges eate / For want of befe and conye' (490). Puddings — bags or entrails stuffed with something else — are referred to with similar sexual innuendo in a slightly later interlude, *Lusty Juventus*;[9] in any case, these 'durty puddynges', much like the dirty vessels in the account of Belshazzar's Feast in the poem, *Cleanness*, provide an obvious contrast to the 'clennes of life' (53) that Bale deems necessary to 'preserve... our godly symylytude' (56). As Mager has pointed out, Bale's Sodomy more or less signifies any sexual expression that involves or encourages the planting of man's seed in any 'improper vessel'.[10] Idolatry signifies, in part, the improper vessel, the dirty pudding.

As Stewart argues, Paul's Letter to the Romans is the basis of the pairing of Idolatry and Sodomy. This is acknowledged within the play itself:

> As Paule to the Romanes testyfye,
> The gentyles after Idolatrye
> Fell to soch bestyall Sodomye
> That God ded them forsake. 603–6

The text to which Bale refers, Romans 1:23–27, remains a central text in modern anti-sodomitical posturing, and is worth quoting again, here, in full:

> And [they] changed the glory of the vncorruptible God, into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birdes, and foure footed beasts, and creeping things:
>
> Wherefore God also gaue them vp to vncleanness, through the lusts of their owne hearts, to dishonour their owne bodies betweene themselues:
>
> Who changed the trueth of God into a lye, and worshipped and serued the creature more then the Creatour, who is blessed for euer. Amen.
>
> For this cause God gaue them vp vnto vile affections: for euen their women did change the naturall vse into that which is against nature:

> And likewise also the men, leauing the naturall vse of the women, burned in their lust one towards another, men with men working that which is vnseemely, and receiuing in themselues that recompense of their error which was meet.
>
> Authorised Version

These days the 'meet recompense' is most often considered to be AIDS in Bale's play it is leprosy (757–58), or perhaps syphilis, a disease that was sometimes confused with leprosy. But it would also appear to be a matter of gender: for Bale, as for others, then and now, the man who is 'used' by another, in vicious substitution for 'the naturall vse of the[ir] women', effectively becomes one; a proper man cannot be an improper vessel, because he cannot be a vessel at all.

It is primarily at this point that my view of the gender issue in this play departs from that of Stewart, who sees Sodomy not only as being 'figured as inextricably idolatrous' — which seems obvious enough — but also as being 'problematically not-quite-male through the association with Idolatry'.[11] In his anxiousness to prove that 'these two 'characters' are a single concept',[12] he builds his argument on that assumption. However, Idolatry is not Sodomy; they are inseparable partners, but not the same thing. Idolatry explicitly affects the heart and soul, Sodomy the flesh (687–88, 707–8), and each character is differently gendered.

Sodomy is specifically male, an active force signifying illicit fleshly sexual activity. This might at first glance appear at odds with the all–too–common association between woman and flesh, but only if we, like Stewart, insist upon reading Sodomy as signifying homosexuality. The stated sexual objects of Sodomy are women, and boys, and beasts — that is, non-men. Sodomy is thus the pursuit, by men, of illicit flesh, of improper vessels; Sodomy himself is very much male, if, in his refusal to conform to a proper 'godly symylytude', never properly masculine.

Idolatry, on the other hand, signifies a worldly, effeminate and effeminating desire that substitutes flesh for God, serving 'the creature more then the Creatour'. In *The Gothic Idol*, Michael Camille refers at some length to 'the traditional doctrine that associates women with idols and lusting after them as a form of idolatry'.[13] Equally traditional up to the nineteenth century is the association of effeminacy with such lust. This association seems clear enough in Bale's play. Shortly after the first mention of Idolatry's gender status (lines 425–26: 'What, sumtyme thu wert an he!' / 'Yea, but now ych am a she, / And a good mydwyfe per De'), Infidelity states,

Then art thu lyke to Clisthenes,
To Clodius and Euclides,
Sardinapalus and Hercules,
Whych themselves oft transfourmed

Into a womannys lyckenes,
With agylyte and quycknes,
But they had Venus syckenes,
As writers have declared. 433–40

'Venus syckenes' here seems to be, primarily at least, a disease affecting heterosexual men that leads to the acquisition of 'a womannys lyckenes' — here signified by the wearing of women's clothing — which marks one, not as being a woman, but as being an effeminate male.

Still, Idolatry is explicitly Sodomy's sexual partner — an effeminate man, but not one who lusts after women, not Sodomy, but a sodomite. As I have argued elsewhere,[14] effeminacy is never quite dissociated from homosexual desire and activity: much as in Paul's Letter to the Romans, an effeminate servitude to the flesh is often characterised as a slippery slope that leads, in the end, to sodomy — or to being sodomised. The slippage between Bale's narrated examples of effeminate heterosexual lust and the singular, on-stage example of effeminate homosexuality relies in part on the still common assumption that one partner in a sexual coupling must play the male role, the other, the female, regardless of the biological sex (or indeed the species) of each. Both are associated with effeminacy, but only one role is effeminate, or feminine. By characterising Idolatry as a man in a dress, Bale can retain an allegorical reference to woman or flesh as idol, while emphasising the feminising effect on men both of idolatry and of sodomy. However, in mapping multiple gender constructs over a single character, Bale effectively allows Idolatry to embody what Foucault has stated to be the basic quality of homosexuality at its supposed 'birth' in the late nineteenth century, namely, 'a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself ... a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul'.[15] In Bale's sixteenth-century play, this interior quality, like others, is exteriorised, made visible.

Stewart rightly makes much of this cross-gendered casting, but with perhaps the wrong emphasis. The appearances of God and all three Law figures in the first and last acts means that four of the five actors required to cast the interlude — including, in its first performances, Bale himself — must play both Vices and godly characters. That one of those actors plays

both a man and a woman is hardly unusual — most Tudor interludes include one female rôle, and she usually represents lust. What is different here is that Bale specifically draws our attention to the cross-dressing, making it signify something in itself. And that something is specifically sexual, much as when Shakespeare more playfully has the boy actor playing Rosalind playing a boy called Ganymede — the improper vessel of a sodomitical god — playing Rosalind. Furthermore, the part of Idolatry would seem to be played, not by an androgynous boy, but by an adult male actor.[16] Bale thus emphasises gender dissidence and its sodomitical implications on a purely visual level, even aside from the anti-sodomitical polemics of the play's dialogue.

It is at the visual level that Bale's portrayal of sodomitical sin most clearly deviates from what might be deemed the contemporary dramatic norm. Much as in later sixteenth-century anti-theatrical writing, the chief visual signifier of sodomy on the early English stage is effeminate fashion, particularly as personified in characters such New Guise in *Mankind* and Nichol Newfangle in *Like Will to Like*. Both, like Idolatry, play the submissive partner in sodomitical relationships; both are fashion victims, enthralled by superficial fleshly delights. In contrast, Idolatry is emphatically not an attractive woman in a stylish dress, or a fop, but a man 'decked lyke an olde wytche'. Yet even Bale, his satire clearly aimed at religious institutions more than at any more general social foibles, is not willing to bypass entirely an association between fashion and both idolatry and sodomitical effeminacy that dates back at least to Tertullian. As Sodomy and Idolatry leave to pervert human souls, Infidelity exhorts, 'Spare non abhomynacyon, / Nor detestable fashion' (691–92). Deviation from the norm is only apparent.

The deviation I will now make from my topic is likewise only apparent. Fashion and homosexuality and men in dresses are inextricably entwined in the far more recent work, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*: 'When a gay man has *way* too much fashion sense for one gender, he is a drag queen'. However, apart from denunciations by a drunken sheriff, the only hint of homosexual desire occurs between Chi Chi Rodriguez, the youngest and prettiest of the central trio of drag queens (they always come in threes), and Bobby Ray, a young man who lives in the small town in which they get stranded. This very innocent young man apparently has no idea that the objection of his affection is also a man; once the other queens convince Chi Chi to back off, Bobby Ray's affection is painlessly transferred to Bobby Lee, the shy young woman who has long

loved him, herself now transformed, like most of the townsfolk, into something more glamorous. It is the dress that matters, not the body underneath — style, not substance.[17] And that style is explicitly derived, in the film, from what for Bale and others would amount to an idolatrous imitation of female film stars. Young Bobby Lee is remade in the image of Anne Baxter in *The Ten Commandments*, and is told, 'You just take her strength, her mystery, her moves, and you find your own'. Noxeema, in her own inspirational moment at the end of the film, states, 'You know, what the hell, I'm not going to worry about if people accept me or not. I'm going to make Hollywood wherever I am at'.

Even in this brief retelling, one can see the basic premise of Bale's play being replayed, albeit in a context that, quite unlike Bale's work, purports to be anti-homophobic. Chi Chi, along with her comrades-in-drag, stands in for Idolatry. Although we are not to question that she is indeed a man, she is never seen except in 'a womannys lyckenes'. Indeed, beyond the opening minutes of the film, and the brief loss of a wig, later, neither of the other queens is ever seen out of drag, which would normally classify them as transvestites. Despite Noxeema's specific classification of a transvestite as 'a straight man [who] puts on a dress and gets his sexual kicks', the audience of *To Wong Foo ...* is apparently expected to assume that any man in a dress — or at least a stylish dress — is always gay.[18]

On the other hand, unlike Idolatry, these men in dresses are not always available to Sodomy. This is a Hollywood comedy, aimed at a straight audience, in which drag queens just happen to be the heroes — not, as in Bale, the object of ridicule. Sodomy must thus remain invisible. If Bobby Ray had persisted in his affection for her — and we must assume that, but for her own intervention, he would have been — then he would have been led into sodomy. That he is not, that no one is, is itself inherently homophobic; he is a good boy, and good boys don't do that sort of thing in this wholesome film. Otherwise, strictly in gender terms, the pair resemble Bale's vices: neither Bobby Ray's masculinity nor his heterosexuality is ever questioned, whereas the possibility of Chi Chi's masculinity, as opposed to mere biological maleness, is never even suggested; Bobby Ray idolises Chi Chi as the epitome of the feminine, whereas Chi Chi needs a man. As the androgynous Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics sings, 'there's just one thing that I'm looking for, / and he don't wear a dress'.[19]

The only suggestion in the film that sexual activity can occur between two men, as gender equals, is given over to the comically villainous Sheriff Dollard. His drunken denunciation of gay sex provides the film's sole erotic

moment: 'Manly hands ... touching swirls of chest hair ... the occasional whiff of a rugged aftershave. Their low baritone voices sighing, grunting ... they hold one another, in manly masculine arms'. Yet this moment is wasted: no one even reacts to the speech, much less threatens to engage in any such actions. Much like, say, the author of the Middle English *Cleanness* or, earlier still, Alain of Lille in his anti-sodomitical *De planctu Naturae*,[20] Dollard initially refers to such actions as 'Men acting like women'. However, the only way in which any man acts like a woman in the film is by wearing high heels and a dress.

In *To Wong Foo ...*, dressing as a woman both signifies homosexuality, and hides it, so that the audience will not be offended. Bale is more explicit in his references to sexual activity, precisely because the denunciations in his play are meant as such. He *wants* his audience to be offended by the notion of a man engaging in sexual activity with another man — or indeed with anyone or anything other than his wife — and likely could not conceive of homosexuality as something one could somehow possess without engaging in actual sexual activity. Nor could he likely have conceived of gay sex as reciprocal activity between equals. The makers of *To Wong Foo ...* apparently thought this a possibility, but one not worth pursuing. The signifier of homosexual desire remains a man in a dress, looking for a real man. In both cases, the dress is like the *integumentum* of allegory itself — the fleshly, worldly, literal husk that the idolater is supposedly incapable of looking beyond. Bale tells us we must look beyond it; the makers of *To Wong Foo ...* tell us that we're better off not doing so — that the man in the dress, sexually at least, really couldn't 'cut it as a man'.

In conclusion, then, what I find most startling in my reading of Bale's play is not that Bale has reconceptualised sodomy — *pace* Alan Stewart, he has done no such thing — but that the same, complex knot that in the sixteenth century tied homosexual activity together with an abandonment of gender roles, sexual with gender dissidence, remains all too present now. It is not that Bale has advanced anything new or useful, but that, as a society, *we* have not.

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NOTES

1. *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* directed by Beeban Kidron and produced by G. Mac Brown (Universal Studios / Amblin Entertainment 1995).

2. Much like Stewart's, my own paper is part of a wider project on sodomy, effeminacy, and early English drama. I am grateful to Meg Twycross, with whom I sadly did not dance at Kalamazoo, and to the other editors of *METh* for furthering what I hope will prove a useful and informative dialogue between our two projects with their different approaches and emphases.
3. Stewart 4. All references to Bale's *Three Laws* are to *The Complete Plays of John Bale* Volume 2 edited Peter Happé (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1986) 64–124, and will be given parenthetically by line number.
4. Stewart 11, 16.
5. Geoffrey Chaucer *The Canterbury Tales 3*.1693–95.
6. Donald N. Mager 'John Bale and Early Tudor Sodomy Discourse' in *Queering the Renaissance* edited Jonathan Goldberg (Duke UP, Durham and London, 1994) 141–61. On Foucault's phrase itself, in relation both to modern and early modern definitions of the term 'sodomy', see Janet E. Halley '*Bowers v. Hardwick* in the Renaissance' in Goldberg 15–39 (and especially 16–17).
7. Mager 150.
8. Stewart 9–10, 13–15.
9. *Lusty Juventus* lines 707–8, in *Four Tudor Interludes* edited J.A.B. Somerset (Athlone Press, London, 1974) 115–116.
10. Mager 151, citing Thomas Aquinas as a source for the notion of 'the proper vessel'.
11. Stewart 13.
12. Stewart 13.
13. Michael Camille *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge UP, 1989) 298.
14. This work has not yet appeared in print, however. Conference papers include: 'Vicious Company: Homosexual Representation in *Mankind*' at the 28th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, 6 May 1993; 'Sodomizing Authority: Homosexuality and Tudor Drama', at the 29th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo MI, 7 May 1994; 'Changing Places: Sodomy and Performance in Early English Drama', at the conference of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, San Francisco, 6 November 1994; and '*Like Will to Like* and the Control of Sodomy' at the conference on 'Suppression and Unorthodoxy in the Middle Ages', Centre for Medieval Studies, Toronto, 17 February 1995.

15. Michael Foucault 'The Perverse Implantation' in *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy* edited by Edward Stein (Routledge, New York and London, 1992) 18. Other essays included in Stein's anthology take up Foucault's ideas in general, and this particular statement in particular, in relation to notions of a trans-historical sexual identity. Stein's own conclusion quotes a relevant statement by Gore Vidal: 'trust a nitwit society like this one to think that there are only two categories [for men] — fag and straight and if you are the first, you want to be a woman and if you're the second, you're a pretty damned wonderful guy' (342). These are not medieval or early modern categories, I would argue, largely because of the difference in the way the concept of effeminacy — and of gender difference itself — was understood and deployed; however, Vidal's 'fag' has more than a little in common with Bale's Idolatry. The boundaries of the category of the sodomite are less clear, more fluid, than those of its modern descendant, but the category exists nonetheless, and it seems to have passed on some key characteristics.
16. There appears to be no evidence of a boy in Bale's troupe, and no obvious rôles for a boy actor According to the Colophon to *Three Laws*, the actor playing Idolatry also plays The Law of Moses and Hypocrisy — 'the Popes owne vycar' and 'brother' to False Doctrine (1439, 1426).
17. Indeed, the film makes this point explicit, when Vita comments on the choice between two used cars, a Coupe de Ville Cadillac and the Toyota Corolla expressly recommended to them by the lot owner: 'Well, pumpkins, it looks like it comes down to the age-old decision: style... or substance'. They do, of course, take the Cadillac.
18. It is interesting to note that the same two characters initially seen out of drag — Vita and Noxeema, played by Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes, actors strongly associated with machismo and heterosexuality through previous roles — do assert their masculinity in a very physical, but specifically non-sexual manner, by fighting men who threaten women. Much as in *Tootsie*, yet another modern film that centres upon a cross-dressed male character, but one who is ostensibly heterosexual, a man in a dress solves problems for women. In effect, both films assert that men make better women than women do, an assertion that to me seems uncomfortably reminiscent of an Aristotelian one-sex model, in which women are simply imperfect versions of men.
19. 'I Need a Man' by Annie Lennox and David A. Stewart (DnA Ltd. / BMG Music Publishing 1987).
20. See especially *metrum* 1 of *De planctu Naturae*, edited by Nikolaus M. Häring in *Studi Medievali, serie terza 19.2* (1978) 797–879, with its variations on the theme

of 'man turned woman' (*Femina uir factus* line 17); and lines 693–96 of *Cleanness*, edited Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (U of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978). On the latter, see also Allen J. Frantzen 'The Disclosure of Sodomy in *Cleanness*' *PMLA* 111 (1996) 451–64; Frantzen deals at some length with the implications of the poem's characterisation of homosexual activity as men joining together 'on femmalez wyse' (line 696) — see especially 456.