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## Robert Wild's *The Benefice* as "Country" Dramatic Satire

One motive for writing a commentary on a play no one has read is to encourage reading it. Another may be to unearth its contemporary relevance, especially if it represents the viewpoint of a group of angry white males seldom voiced on stage. Robert Wild's *The Benefice*,<sup>1</sup> almost certainly written in late summer or fall 1641, and neglected by scholars and critics, offers some delightful comedy for the general reader, and even more for those who know something about the religion and politics of the period. The author earned popularity, modest immortality, and some abuse as a verse-writer and satirist in the Restoration era<sup>2</sup>; his sermons were sometimes admired; but his one play did not see print until 1689, ten years after his death. Specialists in Restoration drama have perhaps neglected it as unrelated to the *Zeitgeist*, written for an audience of an earlier time, living in a rural community. In its simplicity the play contrasts with the crowded stage and complex plots of Jonson's comedies (which Wild greatly admired), let alone those of Restoration comedy. Although it is, strictly speaking, "Caroline" comedy, *The Benefice* does not fit in that slot either. The discussion that follows will offer some information on the life of this unusual "puritan" playwright and will attempt to convey some

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appreciation of Wild's play, his message, and his informed sense of comedy and comic tradition as it existed in one of English culture's starkest periods of transition.

Wild, a shoemaker's son from Huntingdonshire, entered St. John's College, Cambridge at age 16 in 1632 as a sizar, a student who supported himself by servile work. Two years later the college gave him a scholarship. He had probably already formed irregular opinions on religion while growing up in St. Ives listening to the puritan vicar, Job Tookey.<sup>3</sup> With BA and MA degrees, he became a priest on 22 December 1639, and was made curate of Aynho in Northamptonshire.<sup>4</sup> He also taught in an unspecified country school, an experience that surfaces in his comedy and verse. He records his frustrations with the clerical job market in a poem of eight stanzas written about 1641, "Alas poor scholar! Whither wilt thou go?" The speaker must say farewell to Cambridge, where he had expectations; he faces a series of humiliating experiences, such as contending with a preaching weaver for a curacy in a country church. Finally:

Ho, ho, ho, I have hit it,  
Peace good-man Fool;  
Thou hast a trade will fit it;  
Draw thy Indenture,  
Be bound at adventure  
An Apprentice at a Free-School;  
There thou mayst command  
By *William Lilly's* Charter;  
There thou mayst whip, strip,  
And hang, and draw, and quarter,  
And commit to the Red Rod  
Both *Will*, and *Tom*, and *Arthur*.  
I, I, 'tis thither, thither will I go.<sup>5</sup>

A speech by a similarly disappointed scholar named Book-Worm appears in act 3 of *The Benefice*. This play represents the playwright himself as a frustrated schoolmaster named Pedanto. By order of the House of Commons, Wild became rector of the church in Aynho, Northamptonshire, in 1646, displacing the incumbent. That incumbent displaced him in 1660, but, because he had expressed

a loathing for Cromwell and praised Monck's success in restoring the monarchy in his most popular poem, *Iter Boreale* ("Northern Journey," 8 eds. 1660–1674), Charles II was pleased to give him another living, at Tatenhill in Staffordshire. Shortly thereafter he was created Doctor of Divinity at Cambridge.<sup>6</sup> Although his refusal to conform lost him that living two years later, the loss only added fuel to his pen.

From this distance Wild looks like a man of contradictions—a puritan playwright, a pro-monarchal parliamentarian. Wild was not yet a Presbyterian, but anyone inclined that way would not have written a play, contrary to the wishes of the Presbyterian Westminster Assembly of Divines and their prohibition of public stage plays, which closed the theaters in 1642. Such seeming inconsistencies bear witness to the complex political and religious ideologies of his time. *Iter Boreale* was followed by other poems defending and praising other Nonconformists, excoriating the tyranny of bishops, the sectarianism of "sectaries" like the Quakers, and, after the 1678 Popish Plot, the plotting of papists. In 1672 he received a license to preach, as a Presbyterian, at his home in Oundle, Northamptonshire, where he had lived since his ejection from Tatenhill. He attracted barbs from many conforming churchmen, including a bishop who, alluding to his obesity, called him "one of the Geneva-Basan Bulls fat breed."<sup>7</sup> He earned his most famous barb from Dryden, it is thought, as one of two poets who Crites says, in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, give him "a mortal apprehension," the other being Richard Flecknoe.<sup>8</sup> Wild wrote verse unstintingly but abandoned drama after *The Benefice*, unless we count a verse monologue attacking Nathaniel Lee as a Presbyterian turncoat, in "The Recantation of a Penitent Proteus, or The Changling; as it was acted with good applause in St. Maries in Cambridge, and St. Pauls in London, 1663. To the Tune of Dr. Faustus." Wild imagines "Proteus in his penal resolution, speaking alone in the Tying-house, before his entering the pulpit."<sup>9</sup> The 1689 date of *The Benefice*, a decade after Wild's death, may indicate that after the Restoration Wild no longer saw himself in the same camp as the young Cambridge wit of 1641. Its anonymous editor, probably the printer Richard Janeway, insists (perhaps too often) that it is published only "for promoting innocent mirth," and that the pages have been "the occasion of so much innocent mirth and

diversion, not only to myself but to all I ever communicated them to." They provide," he adds, "harmless jest" and "true mirth."<sup>10</sup>

### *The Benefice*

The first act of *The Benefice* serves as an induction, featuring: Pedanto (a schoolmaster trying to write a comedy), a schoolboy, Invention, Furor Poeticus, Comaedia (a girl), and Ceres. This part of the play also helps date the composition. Pedanto gives the first hint of the play's occasion: "I am a schoolmaster; and here against *Christmas*." (The pun on "against" – a zealous puritan schoolmaster might mean "opposed to" rather than "before" – is typical of the verbal wit in the play.) Other details, such as the watchman's Christmas gift of capons, also make it likely that the play was written for Christmas (1641), though some references to harvest-time suggest a date several months earlier. Perhaps the harvest date was rained out. All these induction characters are located on or near the stage, watching and commenting when the main play gets underway in act 2. It is about the efforts of Marchurch, a mean-spirited owner of a benefice, or living, to sell it for a high price now that the old rector has died. Wild surely drew Marchurch's name, as Viles has said, from Martin Marprelate, a half-century earlier. A secondary plot concerns his efforts to dispose of a baby he has sired on his kitchen maid, Ursley. His nephew, Mar-Pudding ("a Cotquean"), is an effeminate fellow interested in the art of cooking. Contending for the benefice are: Book-Worm (a young divine), Sir Homily (a curate who served under the deceased rector), Fantastes (a recent graduate who speaks in over-learned language), Goodman Scuttle (a zealous basket-maker just returned from New England), and most comically Hob-Nail (an ignorant farm-worker and bully). Supporting parts are two watchmen, a tinker, and his Gypsy wife. All these parts were to be played by schoolboys, as Invention announces:

This innocent Multitude, that here is set,  
Meet not for Mutiny. They'r no Rebellious Rout.  
But here they'r set to see Children play Men,  
And Boys wear Beards.

(16)

The play exploits its character types somewhat to the exclusion of design in its plot, though it works up to a clever ending. Ursley and Mar-Pudding appear only in act 2, and two of the job-seekers, Fantastes and Scuttle, only in act 4. Book-Worm enters at the start of act 3 with a long speech on the misery of scholars evoking Wild's earlier-quoted poem, "Alas poor scholar." Having spent all his inheritance on books and learning, he has been dismissed from his curacy by Marchurch. "'Tis dear, 'tis dear, the Money I have spent would have bought me Land or Living, House or Wife ... Here's all is left—Some thirteen Shillings. It is vain to grieve—I'll pawn my Clothes and buy some others, and with my little Sum of Mony go trade in Toys and Pamphlets" (29). This monologue occupies all of act 3 scene 1, and exemplifies Wild's dependence on monologue or dialogue-of-two through most of the play. At the start of act 4 Book-Worm returns "like a Ballad-man," declaring (and echoing the author of "Alas, Poor Scholar"), "Yet this is better than the Mill of School, where they grind Grammar Toll-free; and the poor Master turns round in's *Accidence* till his eyes drop out."

Scuttle, the New England puritan, caricatures the hard-wired Calvinist, holier-than-thou, bishop-hating anti-Arminian who was drawn to the American colony. At Marchurch's door he meets up with the word-besotted Fantastes:

*Fantastes.* God save you, Sir.

*Scuttle* [aside]. *God save you?* Ha!—Truly *Popery* at the very first word. These *University Men* are all in some measure corrupted with it. For tho I know I shall be saved, yet he knows not what I am. He might have said the same to some *Reprobate Hell-hound*, and to him it is *Popery*.—I will not answer so vain a Word.

*Fant.* Do you live here I pray you?

*Scut.* Truly, this *Arminian's* business is revealed unto me. He comes about the Living as well as I; and being wicked as he is, I ought to deceive him for the Churches good. I will lye unto him.—Yes, Sir, I do *Inhabit* here.

*Fant.* *Inhabit* here!—Nay, if you can vary the Phrase, have at you.—Is the Regulator of the Domicil segregated from his Negotiations, I pray you, Sir?

*Scut.* Ah Sir! These *Popish* words become you not.—They edifie not.—If I were to write you a Sermon, I have not a Character for such words. I pray you speak teachably and plainly. (41–42)

After the two shoulder each other through the door of the manor house, the tinker enters singing and calling out for work. He speaks to the audience as a plain, honest man, a typical satiric voice, invoking the patron saint of satirists: "Who will buy a brave Candlestick? ... I'll warrant, this was the Candlestick *Diogenes* sought for an Honest Man with" (44). Fantastes promises him free drinks if he will beat the puritan. Already convinced that a basket-maker has no place in the pulpit, the tinker does just that for over a page of text, driving Scuttle to his knees and off the stage ("And will you love good Scholars?" "Ay, indeed" "And pray for Bishops?" "Ay, and Arch-Bishops too.")<sup>11</sup> Act 4 concludes with Marchchurch's boast that he has unloaded Ursley's newborn infant on the Gypsy woman for twenty shillings. Hob-Nail (disguised as a parson) and Sir Homily (as his man) then approach Marchchurch to bargain for the living (*March*. "Was you ever *Fellow* of any House?" *Hob*. "Yea, marry, now and then, *Fellow* of an Ale-House" [50]).

In the fifth act, Homily has slipped a "powder" in Hob's drink and left the would-be rector to sleep it off. The Gypsy slyly exchanges Ursley's baby for Hob's boots and purse, whereupon Hob awakes and imagines his drunkenness has caused him to give birth in his sleep. Despondent also over his loss of the money to buy the benefice, he sets out to hang himself. He intones a song parodying the condemned prisoner ballads of the time: "Good People all give ear a while to me,/And let my End all your Examples be." Homily arrives in time to save him and reveals he has rescued Hob's purse at the nearby tavern. Meanwhile, the two watchmen have hidden a basket containing two capons outside while they drink at the tavern. One of them plans to give the basket to Marchchurch as a Christmas gift. Homily, promised a loan from Hob so he can buy the benefice for himself, slips the baby under the capons. As the play ends, Marchchurch leaves the stage with his Christmas basket, not noticing his Christmas surprise. (Viles notes an echo here of the Gospel lines—the infant Christ "came unto his own and his own received him not.")<sup>12</sup> In a way, in telling its story, before a local audience, of a comical childbirth in the context of the Christian nativity story, *The Benefice* harks back to *The Second Shepherds' Play*, in an age when regional drama, which scarcely survives from the seventeenth century, was alive and well.

Wild's comedy had a brief afterlife. Aside from its printed version, it survives in two manuscripts, one of which, part of BM Lansdowne MS 807, consists of eleven leaves beginning with act 3, scene 4 (enter Sir Homily) and ending with Ceres's final speech. It is signed "ffinis actus Qti/Robert Wild" and contains slight changes by the author that also appear in the printed text.<sup>13</sup> A complete manuscript, now in the Folger Library, was owned and treasured by another, younger, Presbyterian minister, Henry Newcome. Tantalizing but inconclusive links between Newcome and Wild exist. Aside from their shared Presbyterianism, both were born in Huntingdonshire, though Newcome was educated at a free school in Congleton, Cheshire; both were students at St. John's College, Cambridge, though Newcome enrolled in 1645. In his diary entry for 17 December 1662, Newcome, by then settled into a ministerial career in and around Manchester, reports, "After dinner to Mr Illingworth: whither Mr Hayhurst came and we had read ye comedy called *The Benefice*."<sup>14</sup> The two men named seem to have been close friends of Newcome throughout this period. The following February he writes, "I did after dinner begin to write in Wild's comedy of ye *Benefice*." Newcome has been seen as a leading exemplar of those moderate Presbyterians who had supported parliament but favored the return of the king after witnessing the "anarchy" of 1659–60.<sup>15</sup> Although of an earlier generation, Wild would have struck him as a kindred spirit in religion and politics.

### Wild in "the Country"

A remarkable feature of *The Benefice*, fairly rare in Caroline drama, is that it takes on strong political coloring from its country environment, perhaps the region around Aynho in Northamptonshire. The harvest references in the play and the use of a barn for staging indicate a place in the countryside. More important, the text bears strong evidence of a "country" political bias. The word is used here in the sense defined by Perez Zagorin in his influential, if now dated, book, *The Court and the Country*. Historians no longer use Zagorin's categories as freely as

in the 1970s, but the description of a “country” leaning in politics certainly fits Wild and a great many others.<sup>16</sup> Zagorin argued that, during the 1620s, an inchoate political party began to form in much of England outside London, smarting with dissatisfaction over abuses by the court. It consisted of “a loose collaboration or alliance of men in the governing class, peers and gentlemen of assured position and often of substantial fortune, alienated for a variety of reasons from the Court.”<sup>17</sup> By the end of the 1630s it became “the potential rallying point for a mass disaffection from the King’s rule,” and was strongest at the time of Wild’s play, the latter half of 1641. The makeup of country elements would soon be complicated and reshaped with the news of troubles in Ireland, of which Wild’s play bears not a hint. At the end of that fateful year, while some alienated members of the government and of the clergy of the established church took a step back in fear of unrest at home and abroad, others continued to favor abolishing episcopacy and even monarchy.<sup>18</sup> Wild was apparently a lifelong monarchist.

Interpretations of the Civil War era in the last three decades have evolved considerably since Zagorin. Lawrence Stone grants that there was something new when the “wealthy and influential local squires” sitting in parliament “came to look upon themselves as representatives of the gentry constituents they left behind them.”<sup>19</sup> But for the most part he thinks the court-country split simply “a version of the normal state of tension that exists in all organized societies between the centralizing and decentralizing forces.”<sup>20</sup> D. M. Loades, more receptive, views the country not as a party but a broad segment of the population with “a heightened awareness of Parliament’s function as the representative and trustee of the commonwealth.” This segment nevertheless “not only respected the royal office, but had a strongly developed sense of the responsibility of the monarch for the welfare of the commonwealth.”<sup>21</sup> Both Loades and Zagorin see 1641, the year of *The Benefice*, as a turning point for the country’s adherents. Loades writes that by August 1641 (the Long Parliament had opened the previous November) “The ‘country’ interest of the 1630s, which had been so sweepingly successful in the elections of [1640] had now brought its programme to fruition.”<sup>22</sup> The “country” has utterly vanished by the time of John Adamson’s more recent and much admired account, *The Noble Revolt*, which puts the House of

Lords in the driver's seat, specifically a Puritan-inclined faction of the aristocracy ("the Junto"), led by Robert Devereux, third Earl of Essex. Adamson agrees with the other historians that the fall of 1641 was a period of crisis in the events leading to the Civil War.<sup>23</sup> It is not exaggerating to say that Wild's comedy is about this moment, as viewed from a perspective resembling that of Essex and his adherents.

The chief aims of dissidents in Parliament were "the removal of economic controls exercised by the central government,"<sup>24</sup> and equally of ecclesiastical controls. Far more than those London plays that have been associated with the country,<sup>25</sup> *The Benefice* specifically lists these objectionable controls and abuses, beginning with the financial mess involving Scotland that followed the "bishops' wars." This conflict had ended with Scotland's invasion and occupation of England in Newcastle and parts of Northumberland and Durham. In Wild's first act the character Invention presents himself as a projector trying to discover "a Plot how the Scots may get more money, when that they have is gone" (6). Book-Worm opens act 4 selling almanacs proclaiming it has been a year "Since the Scots had Mony" (38). Scotland's invasion, in August 1640, is said to have dislodged the clown Hob-Nail from his home in Cumberland "last year." A year later, about the time of this play, King Charles, whose frail treasury was paying out £50,000 to 100,000 a month for his own army,<sup>26</sup> was forced to settle for payments to Scotland of £300,000. The previous October he had already begun paying the Scots £850 a day for their army's maintenance. Indeed, they got more money.

These financial needs had contributed to the summoning, in November 1640, of what would become the Long Parliament, whose achievements *The Benefice* celebrates. It abolished some of the more noxious institutions like Star Chamber and the ecclesiastical Court of High Commission not long before the play (July 1641). On the religious front, one of Invention's projects is to "find out a Cure for one that's sick of two Livings" (6), referring to the clerical practice of pluralism, securing the income from more than one church. Elsewhere, the Tinker's aforementioned long monologue puns on the usage of candles—a hated standby of Laudian liturgy—and "prolongers," or sockets used to prolong candle life:

Who will buy a brave Candlestick? ... I'll warrant, this was the Candlestick *Diogenes* sought for an Honest Man with ... But now Conformity burns and stinks in the Socket, and Wax-Candles wax dim, and are like to go out in a Snuff; yet it serves a *Papist* to light him to *Rome*. For the *Pope's* Fire begins to burn Blew, and it's thought he wants a pair of Tongs to turn up his *Purgatory-bottom-Cake*. – Come, who buys it? That the Tinker may have some better Mettal to melt into Ale. He that will chaffer, shall have this *Prolonger* into the Bargain. – O brave Prolonger! – If Patents and Monopolies had had Prolongers, they had not gone out yet. – You that are the *Lights* of the *Church* have Extinguishers enow, but your two Steeples like double-wick'd-Candles, want Prolongers. – Ship-Money, Star Chamber, High-Commission, *Michaelmas* Term, – all want Prolongers. (44)

The two steeples could refer to Archbishop Laud and his chief minion, Bishop Wren, both unlikely to be prolonged at this time (Laud was impeached in December 1640, Wren in July 1641). Ship money, in effect a tax the crown used to raise money for all purposes, was declared illegal 7 August 1641, the latest date of any allusion in the play. Adamson has succinctly described the atmosphere at this time, when “The twin evils” of oligarchy (by the “Junto”) and Puritanism were “the dominant themes of England’s plague-ridden summer of 1641.”<sup>27</sup> As for the plague, in the opening lines of the play proper (2.1) Marchchurch wishes the old parson had died of “the plague or a whole kernel of diseases.”

With “Patents and monopolies” the Tinker refers to a practice especially hated by the country, and decried elsewhere in the play. Monopolies already existed in Tudor England, whereby the crown gave the holder, for a price, the right to control and collect money from the sale of a particular commodity. By 1640 monopolists and patentees held rights to salt, soap, coal, bleach, pins, in fact just about everything sold.<sup>28</sup> That year a speech by Sir John Culpepper in Parliament compared monopolists with the frogs of Egypt in Exodus: “They sip in our cup; they dip in our dish; they sit by our fire. We find them in the dye vat, the washing bowl, and the powdering tub ...”<sup>29</sup> In act 1 of *The Benefice Furor* tells the

would-be projector Invention, “your Brains are as nimble as if Projections and Monopolies were alive again” (5). That remark, along with the one about “prolongers,” above, reflects the widespread impression in 1641 that the Long Parliament had, once and for all, done away with monopolies, though this would prove not true.

Names are named in the satire. Furor proposes a concoction of “a Quart of *Abel's Wine*, a Pound of *Brumfield's Soap* that hath scaped a Scouring, with an handful of *Goring's tobacco-roots*.” The names belong, first, to William Abell, a London vintner who held the patent on wine and was thus universally loathed, as in *The Copie of a Letter Sent from the Roaring Boyes in Elizium to the Two Arrant Knights of the Grape, in Limbo, Alderman Abel and [his partner] M. Kilvert, the Two Great Projectors for Wine* (1641). A bill in parliament of May 1641 specifically named Abell and Kilvert as engaged in an illegal enterprise.<sup>30</sup> The soap monopoly was held by Sir Edward Bromfield, London's lord mayor in 1637, and that for tobacco by George Goring Earl of Norwich, also known for his incompetent soldiering during the Scottish war. These three monopolies seem especially to have been targets of reformers, beginning in the very first month of the Long Parliament.<sup>31</sup> A six-page pamphlet of 1642, *The Proiectors Down-Fall*, celebrated the defeat of the three as especially laudable.

In act 2 Marchurch engages the two watchmen with a speech stumping for mayor, riddled with satire on the corruption of local governments. Because the king cannot see everything, he appoints two officers, “the one a Magistrate, the other a Governor . . . the Rat-Traps of the Kingdom, as it were, baited with the soft Cheese of Justice, to take those who gnaw holes in the Commonwealth, the Cubbard of the Kingdom” (22). Marchurch is already the local magistrate, as we know from his authorizing the Gypsy's passport; now he seeks to govern as well. He himself is the rat after the cheese of justice, which is “soft” because pliable:

And these two, like those two Friends I read of in Prophane Writ, *Caesar* and *Pompey*, are to join together, – Hum – *Fratres in Malo*, as one saith, *Brethren in Coats of Male*, to keep off danger. – And forasmuch as I am called to one of these Duties

under the Vulgar Title of Mayor, give me leave to tell you according to the Statute of *Richard* the Sixth, what a Mayor is. A Mayor is a Magistrate with two Legs, Sadled and Bridled for his Masters service . . . (22)

Politicians, says the satirist, being “brothers in evil,” love each other about as much as Caesar and Pompey. They succeed by their willingness to serve the needs of their rich or powerful riders. Marchurch then pledges to serve his constituents “as that famous *Cataline* did, when he was Mayor of Rome.” This allusion calls to mind the widespread fear that conspiracies and rebellion were fermenting in the turbulent halls of Westminster in 1641. The readiness of some (puritan) clergy to participate in rebellion is suggested in the watchmen’s response to Marchurch when he closes with “God save the King.” “The King?” says one. “I say, God save your Worship. –I’m but an ignorant Man, but in my opinion it is a rare speech; is’t not Neighbour? –Our Vicar, for all his black Coat, hath not such a word in his Belly” (23). The episode implies, inaccurately, no doubt, that for every corrupt landowner who clung to the established order, there were two ignoramuses who seconded their clergy’s hopes for a puritan takeover.<sup>32</sup> Wilde probably felt himself in a political quandary. His monarchism would have been reinforced a few years later when Charles I, returning to Oxford after the Battle of Edgehill, stayed at a great house next to Wild’s church at Aynho. A few days after the king arrived at Oxford, he published a list of seventy clergymen, including Wild, who were to receive a Bachelor of Divinity from the university.<sup>33</sup> Several years further on, Wild’s signature appears among those of “certain well affected Ministers” opposing the parliament’s legal proceedings against the king. After the Restoration Wild expresses his allegiance to the new king in his poem “The Grateful Nonconformist.”

As a clergyman, Wild predictably called his audience’s attention to the period’s ecclesiastical problems. The puritan Scuttle asks the disguised Book-Worm, with his pamphlets and almanacs, “Have you any thing against Bishops?” (43). Book-Worm’s offerings include “*Little Laud in Limbo*,” which must refer to the archbishop’s imprisonment in the Tower, beginning in March 1641, as well

as "*Rome for a Corner'd Cap*, and the *Character of a Bishop*," all three of which may have been actual pamphlets. A fourth title in Book-Worm's stock does exist, *Lambeth Fair* (1641, 2 eds.), the text of whose title continues: "wherein you have all the bishops trinkets set to sale." The trinkets are accouterments of Anglo-Catholicism—the crucifix, the bishop's crosier and chair, vestments, licenses, candles, and the Prayer Book. The same year saw another pamphlet, *Lambeth Faire's Ended*. Wild's aversion to Laudian reforms must have intensified when, in 1639, in his hometown of St. Ives, a curate named Reynolds raised a ruckus by holding communion at a communion rail in accord with the archbishop's creeping Catholicism.<sup>34</sup> But Protestants of every stripe were united in their fear of a return to "Roman" religion.

One more especially loaded political passage occurs with Book-Worm's entry in disguise as a seller of books and ballads. He hawks his almanacs in a speech laced with nonsense prophecies and allusion to current political news. The jokes would hold special appeal to informed country residents holding anti-establishment views: "Since the Conquest, one Year. Since the Rising in the North—Since *Hallifax* went to the *Tower*—Since *Finch* and *Windebank* departed this Nation—Since *Doctors Commons* were enclosed" (38). Wild suggests a new conquest by the Long Parliament replacing that of the Normans as the law of the land. He alludes to the June 1641 imprisonment of Sir William Saville, father of George, later first Lord Halifax, and to the flight of Sir Francis Windebank, secretary of state, to France in December 1640. The job-hunting cleric in Wild's "Alas, poor scholar" considers whether he should "follow *Windebank*/And *Finch*, to see if either/Do want a Priest to shrive them."<sup>35</sup> "Doctors Commons" refers to the London doctors of civil law, a branch of law widely associated with the church courts. By 1641 they had become "symbols of Laudian tyranny" and the Long Parliament was (wrongly) believed to have abolished them. Wild puns, of course, on the enclosing of common land by persons of influence.<sup>36</sup> Such were the causes for celebration among a great many Englishmen during the year following the new conquest.

It is worth noting in this regard that the title page of Wild's popular *Iter Boreale* in 1660 says that the poem is "By a Rural Pen." We may read this as both a political and a personal declaration.

Wild's Comic Tradition: Jonson, University Theatre,  
and Plautus

The play opens with "Behind the Curtain a School-Master [Pedanto] at study writing, with many Books before him; and a little Boy under him with his Grammar in one Hand, and Bread and Butter in the other." Observing Pedanto are the two allegorical figures of the induction, Furor Poeticus and Invention, who incidentally provide some sense of the theatrical arrangements: "Brother *Furor*, where are we? – What Place is this? It should be a Conventicle, with so many Heads and Faces in it, and all together in a Barn too" (7). As a clergyman, Wild would have known about "conventicles," unauthorized "puritan" gatherings for worship. A barn would have been a likely site both for such meetings and for a country school's playhouse. The boy then speaks "behind the Curtain," conjugating Latin verbs, whereupon "Furor peeps within the Curtain" (stage direction). This use of an induction to frame the main play marks the first indication of Wild's regard for the comedic practices of Ben Jonson, who used such framing in plays like *Everyman out of His Humor* and *The Magnetic Lady*. Wild openly admits his debt to the London stage when the boy in act 1 reports that the schoolmaster-playwright Pedanto "hath all the Play Books in the Country to help him. Like a Cuckooe, he sucks other's eggs: Here he steals a Word, and there he filches a Line, as we Boys do for Theams" (7–8).<sup>37</sup> The saucy boy himself has counterparts in Jonson (e.g., *Epicoene*, *Magnetic Lady*). The imposing Rabelaisian cook Ursley brings to mind Ursula in *Bartholomew Fair*. Homily's trick with the baby recalls that of the Wench in Middleton's *Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (2.2), who conceals her and Touchwood Senior's baby in a basket under a loin of mutton, then disappears when the forbidden basket of meat is seized by the Promoters for Lent.

Wild pays tribute to his comic tradition, past and present, in the induction with a roll call of comic dramatists. This mostly restates conventional opinion, but its very presence recalls similar moments, with tributes to individual authors, in the three "Parnassus" plays performed decades before Wild's time at Cambridge. In particular the third play, *The Returne from Parnassus: or The Scourge of Simony* (sometimes called *The Return from Parnassus, Part II*), a comedy of 1601–3 (ptd. 1606), bears

some notable resemblances to *The Benefice*.<sup>38</sup> *Return* was acted by students from St. John's, Wild's college at Cambridge. Its prologue has a stagekeeper, a boy, and others who discuss the play to be performed, calling it a Christmas toy. There are two would-be poets named Furor Poeticus and Phantasmo, some joking academic exercises, and an unscrupulous, lecherous old landowner named Sir Roderick, who is trying to sell a living. The opening scene presents Ingenioso quoting Juvenal's famous tag, "Difficile est, Satyram non scribere"; Wild quotes the same line (11). Both comedies lament the supposed neglect of poetry; Wild's *Furor*, on hearing that Pedanto's play will have to be performed without costumes, declares, "Must Poet's Fancies thus be starv'd and tortur'd!/Avant, ye Bastards of Parnassus Mount!" (11). Both are written largely in prose, with some verse and songs, though *Return* is considerably longer, with a larger cast.

The roll call of comic predecessors opens with Plautus, then proceeds to the moderns: Jonson, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and "Tom Randolph," but Jonson first:

Great Brick-bat *Ben*, the Envy of thy Days!  
 Thy only English Brow deserves the Bays.  
 Others did wear the Ivy-Bush as Sign,  
 Not of their Wit, but, Lattice-face, and Wine.  
 But thy Industrious Brain (great *Ben*!) did seem  
 To make the Lawrel, which thou wore, grow Green.  
 Thine are the Tragicks and the Comick Lays;  
 And thou'rt th'Refiner of our Drossy Phrase;  
 And so thy Alchymy, I dare be bold,  
 Hath turn'd our baser Mettal into Gold.

Invention here knows about Jonson's youthful bricklayer employment, and refers to the ivy bush as a familiar tavern sign (does the lattice refer to the grillwork on tavern windows?). Taverns, he suggests, are haunted by pretenders to wit and poetry—Jonson gave us the real thing. Furor Poeticus's role in the roll call is to check Invention's enthusiasm—here with an unflattering allusion to the old playwright's drinking problem and envious disposition: "Pritty! Pritty!—An ordinary Wit would make him Piss and Stink at

th'Stake like an old Bear. – And then damnable tedious and costly too. – Every half quarter of an Hour a glass of Sack must be sent of an Errand into his Guts, to tell his Brains they must come up quickly, and help out with a Line" (9). Wild presents the modern playwrights in order of their excellence. In each case Invention offers words of praise, Furor of sarcasm. When Invention claims that Jonson's "Alchymy ... Hath turn'd our [language's] baser Mettal into Gold," Furor counters that he drank too much. Shakespeare had great wit, says Invention: "His Quill as quick as Feather from the Bow!/O who can such another *Falstaff* show?/And if thy Learning had been like thy Wit,/Ben would have blusht, and Johnson never writ" (10). Furor replies that Shakespeare "had been a Curate to the Stage so long" that he could not help having some success. "But for the fine and true Dramatick Law,/He was a Dunce and scribled with a Straw" (10). As for Beaumont and Fletcher, they were "The Muses Twins," but also "A pair of Journey-Men ... Part them and like two Worms, they would shrink in their Heads" (10). Randolph, a Cambridge alumnus ten years older than Wild, seems out of place here, but he wrote witty poems as a famous "son" of Ben Jonson, as well as several plays including, *Aristippus, or The Joviall Philosopher*, which contains a dialogue on the competing delights of ale and sack. Invention mourns his untimely death: "Methinks, I see the *Fates* and *Muses* fight,/Who's Chaplain *Tom* should be; and in despight,/Like *Jealous Lovers*, bring him to his Herse,/That they might kiss his Chin & read his Verse." *The Jealous Lovers* was Randolph's great Cambridge triumph, performed before the court at Trinity College in 1632, Wild's first year at the university. Wild's mock-heroic poem "The Norfolk and Wisbich Cock-Fight" has been mistakenly attributed to Randolph; they are kindred wits despite their very different lives.<sup>39</sup>

The most admirable comic poet is Plautus:

A subtile Diver into Man, and yet  
 The fate of Poets, *Poverty and Wit*;  
 Pimp *Mercury*, and Cuckold-making *Jove*,  
*Amphitrión's* Horns, and *Alcamena's* Love  
 Could not find out a better Quill, nor we  
 A better Father for our Poetry.

(9)

Plautus showed his knowledge of human nature by having furnished many proverbs for collections like Erasmus's *Adagia*.<sup>40</sup> His wit could not save him from poverty, however: a well-known story claimed that debt sent him into slavery, grinding in the mills. But in what sense is he "Father for our Poetry?" Wild recognizes the greater impact that he exercised on English comedy than the milder Terence. Plautus was the favorite for university productions of ancient comedy and "was accounted the best for Comedy . . . among the Latines."<sup>41</sup> Because both Shakespeare and Jonson started out with Plautine comedies (*Comedy of Errors*, *Case is Altered*), a university graduate can be forgiven for attributing this fatherhood to Plautus. Finally, Plautine comedy often mocks authority, but nowhere more than in the play Wild chooses to exemplify, *Amphitruo*, where both the gods and the famous leader of the title turn out to be fools or knaves.

"I am blowing my Nose for a *Dialogue*," says Wild's hapless playwright. A dialogue on "Dialogue" follows:

*Invention*. A Dialogue? What's that? It's neither Prologue, nor Epilogue, nor Tragedy, nor Comedy, nor Pastoral, nor Satyr, nor Masque, nor Morrice-Dance. – What's a Dialogue?

*Pedanto*. Why Gentlemen, a Dialogue is a Poetical Pudding, or the Muses Hodg-Podg; a Discourse like that between Dr. *Faustus* and the *Devil*, or two or three Men in a Pig-Market. – That's a Dialogue.

Wild may be admitting the loose construction of his play, including the fondness for presenting characters in amusing one-on-one encounters. However, it is worth noting that Roman satires, specifically those of Horace, are sometimes called *sermones*, or conversations. Also "dialogue" had acquired literary status by 1641. Literary historians have mentioned the popularity of pamphlet "dialogues" and "discourses" in the mid-seventeenth century, and one has compiled a long list of "Dramatic or semi-dramatic pamphlets" in 1641 and 1642 alone.<sup>42</sup> Most of these texts are not really dramatic, of course, but in Tudor times the example of Erasmus's *Colloquies* and other such writing contributed to the production of thematic dialogue-comedies like Medwall's

*Fulgens and Lucrece* (on high-born vs. low-born marriage choice) or Heywood's *Play of the Weather* and *Play of Love*.<sup>43</sup> Dialogue, "The Muses Hodg-Podg," would become something like the simple man's drama.

Pedanto also testifies to Wild's knowledge of the London stage when he says he had wanted to write a real play, something along the lines of high romance-comedies like those of Shakespeare or Beaumont and Fletcher, or Thomas Randolph's *Amyntas*. I had planned, he says, "to have had my scene *Delphos, Apollo* and the *Nine Muses* should have been in a Masque," along with "an *Oracle, Priest, Poet, and Notaries*.—And that *Oracle* should have told Fortunes; All these *Poet's Ghosts* should have come in their *Winding-Sheets*;—But in truth we have not so much Linnen in the Town as would have dress'd them.—I had much ado to borrow an old Doublet to act a Tinker in; and am fain to pay for Hair to make Beards of ..." (11). The sorry state of rural theater prompts Invention to awaken Comaedia, who has been locked in a trunk "ever since *Dialogues* came in": "Comaedia do no longer snort,/Awake, and thank Invention for't" (13). Invention then begs Ceres, the harvest goddess, to bless the evening's entertainment: the audience in the barn is "no Rebellious Rout./But here they'r set to see Children play Men,/And Boys wear Beards" (16). The presence of these allegorical and mythological characters creates a fleeting and tongue-in-cheek masque for the audience. Pedanto admits that the barn is a less worthy venue than the Temple (i.e. the local church), where the comedy would play out "Among the Untomb'd Ashes of our Fathers," yet "there to vent our Folly, and build our Stage,/Were to challenge Thunder-bolts from *Jove*."

The comic induction fulfills its promise. *The Benefice* succeeds both as a spirited comedy about human folly and as a satire that feasts on ecclesiastical and political absurdities in English society on the eve of the Civil War. Instead of Jonson's citizen comic types the characters are small-town denizens—watchman, clergyman, unlettered clod. The playwright had learned his craft from university productions, but also, as the schoolboy reports, from the pages of "all the Play Books," the printed comic drama available in the libraries of the rural gentry. The comedy's political specificity and the unabashed offensiveness of its satire differ from the indirect and coy jabs of satire in contemporary London theater.

Nor does any other play share its peculiarly “country” venue and authorial slant. Although Wild employs comic types with tell-tale names and moral criticisms in the Jonsonian manner, his satire sports with specific crimes as well as human follies. If one finishes reading *The Benefice* with the feeling that its world has no redeeming social values, that sense is not exactly alien to Jonson’s comedies. Consider the difficulty critics have deciding whether *The Alchemist* offers moral insight or holiday farce. *Epicœne* has been called “unprecedented in its total lack of an embodied positive.”<sup>44</sup> Like so much of Jonson’s work, Wild’s comedy is dedicated to the exposure of frauds—in language, religion, even play-writing. The *DNB* article on Wild reports that he had a reputation for an “irregular wit,” which *The Benefice* amply documents, and which is probably unavoidable when a future Presbyterian champion has been schooled in Jonsonian comedy.

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#### NOTES

1. Texts of *The Benefice* are available in two e-databases: *Literature Online* and *Early English Books Online*, the latter being the source of quotations presented here.

2. See James Sutherland, *English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 157, 575. The only substantial work on Wild is David R. Viles’s well researched *The Revd. Dr. Robert Wilde 1615–1679* (Huntingdon, Cambs., UK: Westmeare, 2003). Although Viles, 14, has good evidence for the spelling “Wilde,” I follow the standard practice in reference works such as *DNB* and *ODNB*. Supplementing the biography is David R. Viles, “The Revd Dr Robert Wilde at Tattenhill,” *Staffordshire Studies* 17 (2006): 77–82. See also George Southcombe, “‘A Poet and a Prophet Both’: Nonconformist Culture and the Literary Afterlives of Robert Wild,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73 (2010): 249–63, which should be supplemented with Viles’s work on the biography.

3. See Viles, “Wilde at Tatenhill,” 81.

4. Both Charlotte Fell Smith, *DNB*, and Richard L. Greaves, *ODNB*, overlook Wild’s curacy, which Viles, *Robert Wilde*, 25–27, amply documents.

5. Robert Wild, *Iter Boreale, with ... Other Poems* (1670), 55. The poem is printed in a broadside of 1641 (2 eds.), contained in John Rous's Diary for 1641 (Camden Society vol. 66) and is reprinted in *Roxburghe Ballads* and elsewhere. William Lily's Latin grammar was widely used in schools from about 1540 on.

6. He was not so named at Oxford, however. See Viles, *Robert Wilde*, 58, 139–40.

7. Bishop Lawrence Womack, quoted in Greaves, *ODNB*.

8. *The Works of John Dryden*, gen. ed. Samuel Monk, vol. 17 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 17:10 and note p. 364.

9. From *Iter Boreale*, 93. The separate ed. of 1663 was repeated in 1668. Also quasi-dramatic, but more sober, is "The Tragedy of Mr. Christopher Love, Late Minister of the Gospel, Acted upon Tower-hill, August 22, 1651" in a prologue and five "acts" (22).

10. Robert Wild, *The Benefice: A Comedy* (London, 1689), t.p. and fol. A2. Janeway has been seen, in his early career, as "fanatically Protestant": Henry Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers who were at work in England, Ireland, and Scotland from 1668 to 1725* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 170.

11. The tinker's rant continues to mention contemporary events such as the abolishing of "Ship-Money, Star Chamber, [the court of] High-Commission" (44). Specific dates for the last two events: 5 July 1641; for the first: 7 August. See the useful chronology of political history, 1640–1642, in David Cressy, *England on Edge: Crisis and Revolution 1640–1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 427–31.

12. Viles, personal correspondence.

13. Montague Summers, *The Playhouse of Pepys* (London: Kegan Paul, 1935), 345.

14. *The Diary of the Rev Henry Newcome, from September 30, 1661, to September 29, 1663*, ed. Thomas Heywood. Chetham Soc., ser. 1, v. 18 (1849). At other times Newcome also "read over Dr Wild's poems," and "wrot out Dr Wild's verses on Mr Calamy's imprisonment" (61, 157). Folger MS V.a.232 ("Miscellany of Henry Newcome begun 1669 September," part 1 of which is *The Benefice*) has been seen as inferior to the printed text: Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 5:1266.

15. Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), 207, 210–11.

16. Perez Zagorin, *The Court and the Country* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969). Recent historians of this period almost never mention Zagorin in indexes and bibliographies. (They never mention Wild, either.) See John Adamson, *The Noble Revolt: The Overthrow of Charles I* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007); Michael Braddick, *God's Fury, England's*

*Fire: A New History of the Civil Wars* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2008); Gerald Maclean et al., eds., *The Country and the City Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Nicholas Tyacke, ed., *The English Revolution c. 1590–1720* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Explanation for this neglect comes from Richard Cust, "'Papists' and 'Popular' Spirits: Narratives of conflict in Early Stuart Politics," in Tyacke, ed., 43–61, which mentions Zagorin's "traditional view of the 'court' and 'country' divide which gives insufficient weight to the malleability of these images" (61, n. 41). Cust explores this malleability in his and Ann Hughes's collection, *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics 1603–1641* (London: Longman, 1989), 19–21, 140–43.

17. Zagorin, 75.

18. *Ibid.*, 268.

19. Lawrence Stone, "Court and Country," in *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 219.

20. *Ibid.*

21. D. M. Loades, *Politics and the Nation 1450–1650*, 3d ed. (London: Fontana, 1986), 363–64. For the all-important religious backgrounds of the country, see *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520–1725*, ed. Margaret Spufford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

22. *Ibid.*, 415.

23. Adamson's entire, long (over 700-page) book, in fact, focuses wholly on the period from summer 1640 to January 1642.

24. Stone, 219.

25. See Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis 1632–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 251–79; Susan Wiseman, *Drama and Politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

26. Cressy, 71, 97.

27. Adamson, 383.

28. Between 1630 and 1650 a "patentee" was the same as a monopolist. See Hermann Levy, *Monopoly and Competition: A Study in English Industrial Organization* (London: Macmillan, 1911), 19. See also Tyacke, ed., 14–17, on monopolies, which provides a thumbnail history of the salt monopoly.

29. Levy, 20. See also Braddick, 119, where the spelling is Colepepper.

30. Other 1641 pamphlets blasting Abell include *Dialogue or Accidental Discourse*, *Exact Legendary*, and a *Last Discourse* (which was not the last). It seems odd that Adamson's copious index omits mention of patents, monopolies, or any of the offender-monopolists discussed here.

31. See Wallace Notestein, ed., *The Journal of Sir Simonds D'Ewes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 540, Appendix B, which reprints a MS account of that month's doings in which the three are singled out.

32. See Loades, 363, 423–25, 434.

33. Viles, *Robert Wilde*, 28–30.
34. *Ibid.*, 26.
35. *Iter Boreale*, 54.
36. On Halifax see *ODNB*, s.n. “Saville Family.” On Doctors’ Commons at this time see Brian P. Levack, *The Civil Lawyers in England 1603–1641* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 194–95.
37. One play that *The Benefice* is not indebted to is Peter Hausted’s *The Rival Friends* (1632), despite the claim by Summers, 345.
38. This influence was noted in passing by David Erskine Baker and Isaac Reed, *Biographia Dramatica*, 3 vols. (London, 1812), 2:58, in their entry on Wild: “The opinion which the Presbyterians (of whom this author was a very zealous one) entertain of the orthodox clergy, may be collected from this comedy. The design is taken from another play, called *The Return from Parnassus*.”
39. Wild’s poem appears in several texts during his lifetime, e.g. *Iter Boreale* (6th ed., 1670). W. Carew Hazlitt makes the misattribution in his ed., *Poetical and Dramatic Works of Thomas Randolph*, 2 vols. (London, 1875), 1:xviii, 2:667–70. On the poem, see David R. Viles, “Cockfighting and Bible Raffling at St Ives,” *Records of Huntingdonshire* 4.2 (2006–7): 29–36.
40. Sayings include “lupus est homo homini”: Man is a wolf to man, *Asinaria* 495, and “Di nos quasi pilas homines habent”: The gods treat us humans as if we were balls, *Captivi* 22. Plautus collections include Bonus Accursius, *Dicta Plautina* (Milan 1478) and Hermann Busche, *Hermani Buschii . . . Decimationum Plautinarum Pemptades* (Paris, 1521).
41. Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), 2:317.
42. Wiseman, 26–36, discusses the popularity of pamphlet dialogues. For the list see Butler, 289–91.
43. Alexander Leggatt, *Introduction to English Renaissance Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 4–5, noting of earlier Tudor interludes that “In many of these plays what may look like a comic situation becomes the occasion for a debate, creating a play not of intrigue but of ideas, almost a precursor of the Shavian discussion play.”
44. John Creaser, “Enigmatic Ben Jonson,” in Michael Corder et al., eds., *English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 111–12.