

# THEATRE AND HUMANISM

*English Drama in the Sixteenth Century*

KENT CARTWRIGHT



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*The humanism of acting: John Heywood's*  
The Foure PP

To the extent that medieval morality plays reproduce a system of allegorical correspondences, they depend on straightforward acting: Good Deeds must demonstrate her name. Even when a work's meaning may signify in political or social rather than in exclusively religious terms, the moralities favor clarity of representation.<sup>1</sup> But sixteenth-century drama's shift toward humanist and secular subjects privileged ambiguity in a character's presentation, evident in the enigmatic acting of both the Pardoner and the Palmer in John Heywood's *The Foure PP* (c. 1520s).<sup>2</sup> That ambiguity invades the lying contest that forms the play's climactic action, for there the script obscures whether the victor has spoken falsely or truly. With acting and audience perception an implicit theme, *The Foure PP* manifests an unusual complexity in the representation of truth and its didactic effect. Ambiguity of acting in secular humanist drama produces an unexpected openness of meaning, an effect with implications for English sixteenth-century theatre<sup>3</sup>

While the protagonist of medieval dramatic allegory represents every man, Renaissance theatre inches away from fixed correspondences; interpretive possibilities begin to derive, at least partly, from the nature of theatrical experience itself. Sixteenth-century England, of course, struggled increasingly with the conflict between its habits of categorical thinking and the vagaries of experience, conscience, and historical fact. Against what they considered scholastic abstractionism, the humanists launched a return to historical context in philology, rhetoric, and biblical exegesis. Led by Erasmus, they advocated a learning oriented toward practical experience, just as early Tudor interludes aimed their didacticism at personal behavior and specific abuses of power.<sup>4</sup> To that end, Erasmus invented a rhetorical persona,

epitomized in Folly, a presumably authoritative but sly, playful, and enigmatic figure who foreshadows Heywood's own personages. Folly's demand to be understood in a complicated, almost moment-by-moment way chafes against the age's inherited tendency toward apothegmatic wisdom. Likewise, *The Foure PP* puts didacticism in friction with theatrical experience. In doing so, Heywood's play anticipates the creative energy of later sixteenth-century drama, as it grapples with the dilemma of explaining life proverbially while presenting it complexly.

## 1

Humanist pedagogy offers a crystallizing perspective on early Tudor interludes. I would emphasize here, first, the humanist educators' interest in personal experience and, second, their belief in humanity's unlimited potential – matters embedded in *The Foure PP*'s enigmatic acting. Erasmus's pedagogy implies a tension between authority and experience.<sup>5</sup> The humanists criticized scholastic grammar and dialectic for their artificial abstractness and promoted instead a discourse paralleling life experience.<sup>6</sup> Folly notes that “The apostles refuted pagan philosophers and the Jews . . . more by the example of their way of life and their miracles than by syllogisms.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Socrates, because he validated his philosophy by the life he lived, became a humanist hero. In Erasmus's *Apophthegms*, an important sixteenth-century school text, Socrates earns first position for “not onely so framyng and ministryng his doctrine, that he might effectually persuade unto menne vertue & perfecte honestee, but also directyng ye exauple and paterne of all his life and dooynges to the same ende, effecte and purpose.”<sup>8</sup> The precept convinces through its embodiment, a strategy that valorizes experience. Thus, Erasmus peppers his own educational writings with personal anecdotes about the shaping of his pedagogical theories, particularly his abhorrence for corporal punishment.<sup>9</sup> While the humanists taught by imitating classical authority, they added, according to Kristeller, a new seriousness toward individual feeling and experience: “An air of subjectivity pervades all humanist literature.”<sup>10</sup>

An emphasis on subjective experience – particularly play and delight – constitutes a humanist pedagogical innovation.<sup>11</sup> Erasmus and Vives stress “allurements to learning: kindness,

praise, judicious recreation; play and games as methods of teaching; stories, fables, and jokes to spice uninteresting facts; and graphic devices of many kinds.”<sup>12</sup> Erasmus contends that pictures impart a wealth of information “in a most instructive yet delightful manner” and that “Brightness, attractiveness, these make the only appeals to a boy in the field of learning,” and he further reminds us that “excellence in true learning” can only “be attained by those who find pleasure in its pursuit; and for this cause the liberal arts were . . . called ‘Humanitas.’”<sup>13</sup> He recommends giving children “letter-shapes” so that they can learn letters by holding them, handling them, pinning them to their clothes; he even promotes baked goods made in letter-shapes so that when a child identifies one, “his reward is to eat it!”<sup>14</sup> Because it releases a special reservoir of childhood energy, play figures centrally in Erasmian pedagogy. The most effective learning, according to Erasmus, engages the child actively or imaginatively in play, a godly energy felicitous to the training of free men.<sup>15</sup> But play does more than “serve” learning; rather, its creative, liberating power manifests the spirit of learning itself.

Later humanists followed Erasmus in making experience a part of formal education and thereby revealed tensions that help clarify *The Foure PP*. Elyot emphasizes delight in *The Governour* (1531), and Ascham in his preface to *The Scholemaster* (1570) echoes Socrates, saying that “the schoolhouse should be indeed, as it is called by name, the house of play and pleasure [*ludis literarum*].”<sup>16</sup> Pushing beyond the heuristic of play, Juan Luis Vives urges learning by direct observation, reminding young scholars that “we very rarely attain actual knowledge; or rather we get none, as long as so-called knowledge consists of people’s views of it.”<sup>17</sup> But that is the road to skepticism. Against it, the more conservative Erasmus insists ultimately on authority: experience can benefit only those who “by the wisdom of learning have acquired an intelligent and informed judgment. Besides, philosophy teaches us more in one year than individual experiences can teach us in thirty.”<sup>18</sup> In *The Foure PP*, experience confirms by surprise the wisdom of authority. The play thus expresses the crucial but potentially troublesome relationship between direct observation and doctrinal learning in early humanist epistemology.

A related humanist tenet, the belief in man’s potential, also reaches the stage in *The Foure PP*’s enigmatic acting. Pico della

Mirandola, one of the Florentine neo-Platonists who influenced Erasmus, had, of course, declared man “a work of indeterminate form,” dislodged from the medieval hierarchy, capable of becoming earthly or heavenly by his own free will.<sup>19</sup> Erasmus likewise defends man’s free will against Luther’s denial of it. Erasmus’s moral view of the human condition and his belief in man’s perfectibility and powers of self-determination grant mystery and unpredictability to human action and psychology. That mystery reverberates rhetorically in Folly’s ambiguities or the wryness of Erasmus’s *Colloquies* – and later in the enigmatic mode of Heywood’s Palmer. Folly’s voice can veer from high-spirited Erasmian self-parody to a certain graveness, to an authorial earnestness, to a melancholy irony about life.<sup>20</sup> The relationship between Folly and Erasmus sometimes blurs, as if the character suddenly speaks for the divided soul of the author, an effect also apparent in Erasmus’s *Colloquies*.

Much of the power of *The Praise of Folly* lies in its narrator’s engaging and vacillating presence. As Altman observes, “Folly pursues a decorum that is consistently inconsistent, and this makes it impossible for the reader, too, to respond consistently, since one never knows whether at any given moment she is to be taken seriously.”<sup>21</sup> That enigmatic voice, as much as the tract’s ideas, may account for the sometimes outraged responses from scholastic theologians toward *The Praise of Folly*. In his “Letter to Martin Dorp,” Erasmus takes pains to defend his tone, his voice, and the reformative power of satire.<sup>22</sup> Folly, self-consciously oratorical, focuses attention on her immediate presence and, paradoxically, on her mystery receding before analysis. Folly, that is, dramatizes herself.<sup>23</sup> *The Praise of Folly* employs the metaphor of drama to suggest man’s “indeterminate form” and potential; Heywood takes the next step, into the Tudor playing space. By no accident did Erasmus dedicate the *Moriae encomium* to Heywood’s patron, Sir Thomas More. Erasmus notes More’s delight in Folly’s brand of humor, and he adjures More to champion his namesake, Folly.<sup>24</sup> More practiced a wry, enigmatic, even dramatic style – perhaps of necessity, given the cultural and political paradoxes he faced – noted in some famous incidents. Roper, of course, reports More’s jumping into Cardinal Morton’s Christmastide plays and improvising the wittiest part.<sup>25</sup> According to Harpsfield, More had to dissemble his merry wit at court so that he would not be sent for

so often; conversely, at a dinner once, More hid his identity to create amusement by astonishing a foreign pedant with his reasoning.<sup>26</sup> The university student Messenger in *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* tells More that “ye vse (my mayster sayth) to loke so sadly whan ye mene merely y<sup>t</sup> many times men doubtte whyther ye speke in sporte whan ye mene good earnest”<sup>27</sup> It would be false to suggest that humanism had a particular dramatic persona (especially since many scholars view humanism as preeminently an educational movement<sup>28</sup>), yet if we could say that a certain persona served some humanists well, it would be the witty enigmaticness lived by More, fictionalized by Erasmus, and staged by Heywood.

## 2

*The Foure PP* unfolds, principally, by shifting the spectator’s attention from theology to character and performance, and, secondarily, by allowing the Ps to parody spiritual values with material ones. In pursuing those interests the play creates an ongoing sense of surprise and unpredictability, with the individual voice taking centerstage.<sup>29</sup> *The Foure PP* may be divided into three segments: (1) from the beginning through the Pedler’s first recommendation of partnership in sending souls to heaven (1–403); (2) from the Potycary’s and the Pardoner’s reactions against cooperation through their competitive displays and the lying contest (404–1033); and (3) from the subsequent reactions of the contest losers until the end of the play (1034–1234). The first section states theological issues; the second section reduces those issues to comedy; and the third section mediates the opening theological concerns. Parody operates as a principle of structure. The play’s activating debate about the best path to salvation, for example, degenerates in the second section into a competition for mastery in the world: “To one of you thre[,] twayne must obey” (429). Likewise, rivalry over spiritual riches in the initial section descends in the next to boasting about material riches. Again, the debate over truth in the first section devolves in the second into the contest of lying. The first section emphasizes virtue; the second section, virtuosity – in merchandizing and prevaricating. Overall, Heywood stages both Socrates’ critique of the sophists

and the humanists' critique of the schoolmen by reducing the search for reasoned truth to artful lying.<sup>30</sup>

The spirit of surprise sometimes registers in Heywood's precarious transitions – as when the Potycary enters in a farcical mode discontinuous with the comedy he interrupts. Because such transitions-by-disruption can seem gratuitous, Heywood lubricates them with puns and multivalent words – “nought,” “hope,” “rychesse,” “honest,” “mervell” – that set up an engaging play of ideas that parallels the action. The Potycary's “By the masse, I holde us nought all thre” (202), for example, uses “nought” in a spiritual sense. But the Pedler misinterprets that “nought” as a reference to penury (203, 215). The pun helps sway the action toward the material and physical, further exaggerated moments later when the presumably harmless “pyncases” (242) unleashes a rain of puns about female sexual voracity and male impotence. Similarly, following the Pedler's phrase, “eche of you may hope to wyn” (461), the Potycary performs a pun, hoping/hopping (another confusion of the spiritual and physical), by suddenly hopping about (at 467), adding, “Upon whiche hoppynge, I hope and nat doute it, / To hop so that ye shall hope without it” (472–73). Riches, too, go the way of hope. With the Palmer defending a spiritual “quietnesse” as sufficient “rychesse” (474–82), the multivalent *richesse* affords Heywood a comic interlude about materiality, as Pardoner and Potycary boast unquietly and competitively about whose pack carries the greater riches (483–643). Later Renaissance drama will struggle with the disconcerting proximity of the spiritual to the economic; Heywood grasps that confusion early and creates with it a volatile atmosphere of aesthetic play.<sup>31</sup>

With the Palmer's “honestie,” Heywood moves beyond confusions about verbal meaning to confusions about a speaker's intention. The uncertainties here (655–97) foreshadow the epistemological quandary of the ending. Challenged to proceed with the lying contest, the Potycary replies to the Palmer, “Forsoth ye be an honest man” (655), to which the Palmer agrees. Believing that the Potycary had meant to praise the Palmer for honesty, the Pardoner interjects that they both lie – whereupon the Potycary declares that he was really lying himself. The Pardoner's misperception hints at the dramaturgical problem that the ending will exploit: the possibility of not knowing whether a character offers

prevarication or honesty. The action now halts to sort out who speaks the truth about the Palmer: “But who tolde true or lyed in dede, / That wyll I knowe or we procede” (666–67). The episode lodges a question on which the play will later capitalize: is the Palmer an honest man or not? From spiritual issues the dialogue glides toward doubtful matters of intention and character. Truth, likewise, takes on the subjective aura of marvelousness. Marvelousness and improbability will win the lying contest, declares the Pedler, as he invites the other Ps to “tellethe most mervell / And most unlyke to be true” (701–02). “Mervell” emerges as a spectatorial value for the Ps. The Potycary makes claims of “mervalyngge” and “a mervaylouse thyngge” (704–05) about his story; likewise, the Pedler praises the Pardoner’s adventure as wondrous (977). But when the Palmer comments on the Pardoner’s narrative, he complicates the language of the marvelous by linking it to a truth-claim: “This in effect he tolde for trueth, / Wherby muche murvell to me ensueth, / That women in hell suche shrewes can be / And here so gentyll as farre as I se” (989–92; see also 982). Correspondingly, the Palmer’s own truth-claim is now received as marvelous. The Pedler, for example, declares the Palmer victorious for his “incredyble” assertion that he has never seen a woman “out of paciens” (1061, 1003).<sup>32</sup> Surprise and confusion persist as a pattern: “Richesse” takes on multiple meanings; the intention behind the word “honestie” becomes opaque; what is claimed as truth registers as “mervaylouse.” That pattern invites spectatorial doubts about what and how one knows in *The Foure PP*.

## 3

Thus, structurally, *The Foure PP* evolves from a focus on theological issues to a focus on character and acting,<sup>33</sup> a movement that foregrounds epistemological confusion. Heywood inherited from medieval morality plays a rhetoric whereby different modes of characterization battle for the power to define values. In an allegory, characters express a “relationship rhetorically constructed and controlled,” manifest a set of conflicting theological definitions, and achieve a final configuration revealed as doctrine.<sup>34</sup> Such allegorical drama depends on unambiguous acting to define virtues.<sup>35</sup> With Corpus Christi plays, similarly, “Overall, characterisation is strong and can be subtle, but is generic, not individual,” so that

“Character is always subordinate to narrative.”<sup>36</sup> Because plays such as the mysteries are “extremely intellectual,” the actor is obliged to emphasize “content” rather than “motivation and the emotion behind it.”<sup>37</sup> In folk drama, by contrast, the playful relationship that apparently prevailed between playgoers and stage tricksters suggests that those characters fashioned not intellectual representation but a more emotionally based theatrical enigmaticness. Robert Weimann links the folk-inspired Vice, for example, to plebeian social satire, game, and topsy-turvydom, the Vice standing ambiguously at the intersection of the serious and the comic.<sup>38</sup> Although folk drama does not survive, its wily deceivers probably help to make credible *The Foure PP*’s more cultivated beguilers; Heywood may be reworking a value deriving from folk theatre to serve the interests of humanist thematics. In cycle drama, nonetheless, even the folkloric and elusive Mak of *The Second Shepherd’s Play* must be rendered recognizable, his disguises stripped away as the play progresses. An opposite process occurs in Heywood’s interlude; there opaque acting evolves toward an epistemology of doubt: how do we know what truth a character represents?

Posing the problem of truth, *The Foure PP* demands from its spectators increasing sophistication in discerning its characters’ qualities and meanings. The play’s attention to character and acting complements its structural and linguistic drive toward the marvelous. Although the Palmer wins the lying contest by claiming, against the Pardoner’s and Potycary’s misogyny, that he has never seen “any one woman out of paciens,” he may intend no lie at all. Because the play never defines his intentions, its most important moment coincides with inscrutability in a character’s scripted meaning. Here the actor may choose between opposed interpretations or may choose a reading that could include the possibility of either interpretation. The choice identifies an acting dimension explored in the Renaissance that will lead from Heywood to Marlowe, Shakespeare, and beyond. More than any early humanist playwright, Heywood anticipates the modern, because among its allegorical figures, his stage interjects characters who begin to stand for an irreducible theatricality.<sup>39</sup> Enigmatic acting not only induces audience doubt but also can reveal the *absence* of a definitive frame of reference to explain a character’s meaning. In a Shakespearean example, Benedick says to Leonato, “Your

answer, sir, is enigmatical" (*Much Ado About Nothing*, v.iv.27),<sup>40</sup> to describe a possibility beyond Benedick's understanding: namely, that the Prince, Claudio, and Leonato have engineered his falling in love. Enigmatic acting conveys not irony but ambiguity; it destabilizes spectatorial assumptions and emphasizes the spectator's position as a reader of theatrical signals; it encourages speculation. In *The Foure PP*, doctrine may propose truth, but theatricality must mediate it.

Criticism traditionally lumps the Palmer, Pardoner, and Potycary together as scalawags: "con-men," "quacks," and "charlatans."<sup>41</sup> But the Ps form a group partly by their contrasts, and each occupies a different moral and satirical domain. The Palmer and Pardoner provide opposing approaches to salvation, the one through travail, the other through ease. The Palmer, frequently addressed as "father," is the eldest P and resembles a friar in his penury and probably his habiliments (283–84). While the others display their worldly wares, the Palmer lists holy shrines. He speaks the least, the most tactfully, and the most disarmingly, his modesty illustrating his spirituality. At the other extreme, the Potycary comes closest to the Vice figure by attempting to subvert the play's morality and seriousness. He enters on a drinking joke, "Sende ye any soules to heven by water?" (151), and acts periodically tipsy (579). His path to salvation is theologically farcical. He leads the others in singing, hops around the stage, lavishes kisses on a relic presumed to intoxicate, attempts to bribe the judge, and dances mock curtsies around the Palmer. His role is the most physical of the four (the Palmer's is the least), and his activity is complemented by the most scatological humor, particularly jokes about excremental functions and the Gargantuan size of female parts. He stands for the carnivalesque body, exuberant, extrusive, and bawdy. The Potycary bears a generic resemblance to the hard-drinking, womanizing quack Doctor Brundyche in *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, and that likeness may suggest a shared folk provenance. As a festive outsider – a recurrent figure in Heywood's plays<sup>42</sup> – the Potycary does not occupy the same ethical or ontological ground as the others. He is the parody to their *topos*. The Pardoner, on the other hand, asserts an outsized egoism; he begins by optimizing physical comfort over pain. More theologically fraudulent than the Palmer and more subtle than the Potycary, charming and dangerous in his hubris, like his

Chaucerian ancestor, the Pardoner offers a juicy and complex role.<sup>43</sup> By the conclusion of his fabliau, he becomes a slightly uncanny presence in *The Foure PP*, priming the audience for the Palmer's enigma. The Pedler, finally, both encourages and arbitrates the play's different rhetorical directions. He sells goods and jokes with the Potycary and Pardoner about women and liquor but remains independent of their perspectives; he judges the lying contest but also participates in its misogyny.<sup>44</sup> The Pedler sometimes speaks for the play, sometimes not, and his changeable taffeta of homily and expressionism demands both thespian authority and malleability.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of acting, the Palmer's part calls for sincerity and reserve, the Potycary's for hyperbole and slapstick, the Pardoner's for presumptuous confidence, and the Pedler's for versatility in negotiating the improvisational and the authoritative.<sup>46</sup> A common acting problem arises, however, when the Potycary and Pardoner each display their wares. How should they speak: deadpan, pretending seriously to hawk their bogus junk, or ironically, acknowledging its humor: the con-man or the unconned hearer? That local problem of voice again shows *The Foure PP* moving from its opening issues of religion toward those of character and acting, as if in a slow barrel roll. The Potycary's inventory implies a heavily tongue-in-cheek acting:

It pourgeth you clene from the color  
And maketh your stomake sore to walter,  
That ye shall never come to the halter.  
(599–601)

A lytell thyng is inough of this,  
For even the weyght of one scryppull  
Shall make you stronge as a cryppull.  
(613–15)

The extravagant joke, that the Potycary's medicines are poisons, calls for a winking, comic presentation, with speaker and hearers in cahoots. That style recollects the boy Colle's farcical praise of his master Dr. Brundyche: "He seeth as wele at noone as at nyght, / And sumtyme by a candelleyt / Can gyff a judgment aryght- / As he that hathe noone eyn" (537–40).<sup>47</sup>

By contrast, the Pardoner's role offers a more subtle, less winking attack. To be sure, his vaudevillian stage properties are

immense and grotesque, like a clown's shoes: a swollen great-toe of the Trinity, All-Hallow's stinking jawbone, a smelly slipper, Pentecost's buttock-bone, a huge eyetooth from the Great Turk (as a Christian relic). Reducing a saint's life to absurdity, the Pardoner's relics recall those in Erasmus's satirical colloquy "A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake," where, on a visit to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in England, a pilgrim is invited to kiss a giant-sized joint from a human finger that his guide claims belonged to the apostle Peter.<sup>48</sup> The Pardoner's sly speeches, however, play against the clownish visuals: "Here is a relyke that doth nat mys / To helpe the leste as well as the moste. / This is a buttocke bone of Pentecoste" (519–21). Heywood creates the speech's subtlety by burying the irony of the first two lines inside the third's rise toward climactic visual display. The performer's success will depend on that flicker of irony, whatever acting attack he chooses, from that of a streetvender to something Brechtian.

Indeed, different choices invest the Pardoner's dialogue now, perhaps more than on any occasion so far. The script even invites the performer to shift from voice to voice: The Pardoner's persuasion to kiss one of the tongue-twisting Seven Sleepers' slippers ("For all these two dayes it shall so ease you / That none other savours shall displeas you" [528–29]), for example, sounds more subtly wry than his boast about the Turk's eyetooth ("Whose eyes be ones sette on thys pece of worke / May happely lese parte of his eye syght, / But nat all, tyll he be blynde outryght" [539–41]).<sup>49</sup> Such implied acting recollects Folly's shifting decorum and enigmaticness. But the Pardoner's properties always resist the speeches describing them. The props are cruder, grosser, and more insistent in humor, and their physical presence registers a productive tension between visual overstatement and verbal understatement. An actor could hold up a bulbous toe yet boast straightforwardly of its healing powers: "[Who] ones may role it in his moueth, / All hys lyfe after, I undertake, / He shall be ryd of the toth ake" (511–13). Unlike the Potycary's farce, the Pardoner's comedy increases if he affects sincerity as a counterpoint to the objects.

During the Pardoner's relic speeches the Potycary makes overt the comedy of the Pardoner's claims, so that when the Pardoner coaxes that if you kiss the slipper, then for two days "none other savours shall displeas you" (529), the Potycary completes the

joke with, “For all the savours that may come here / Can be no worse” (531–32). Toward the play’s end, the Pedler praises the Potycary for such responses to the relics, saying, “Ye are well beloved of all thys sorte, / By your raylynge here openly / At pardons and relyques so leudly” (1198–1200). That tribute to the Potycary’s railings confirms the comedy-team acting implicit in the dialogue, with the Pardoner as a kind of slick carnival barker and the Potycary a witty rube, the former acting as the straight-man who sets up the latter’s punch lines.<sup>50</sup> This “marketplace” style of acting underscores, moreover, how the play’s spiritual interests can be bootlegged into a domain of materialistic connotations. The Pardoner’s speeches require the audience to scrutinize gestures, to listen carefully for nuances of voice, to revise impressions – in short, to attend to the acting more closely than before; the spectatorial position loses stability. Understanding in *The Foure PP* becomes not just a dimension of reason but also of close observation, contextual looking and listening, experience.

The Pardoner’s fabliau further destabilizes spectatorial interpretation in a way that anticipates the Palmer’s later defense of women. Generations of readers have found the Pardoner’s tale engaging, delightful, surpassing anything else in the play.<sup>51</sup> But what creates its appeal? The Potycary’s misogynistic and scatological fabliau simply extends his role as Vice; his tale is predictable. But the Pardoner’s story surpasses predictability. The Potycary’s crude humor cloaks a fear of female sexuality, and the expansiveness of his tale registers in a fictional female body that is monstrously carnivalesque, as the enema’s ballistic effect shows. The expansiveness of the Pardoner’s tale, however, appears in its *mise-en-scène*, its largeness of environment rather than of anatomy. The Pardoner’s story sparkles with ornamental details well beyond those needed for his narrative: the souls curtsying to him in Purgatory; the one sent to Heaven for blessing his sneeze; his acquaintance with the devil-doorkeeper from Corpus Christi plays at Coventry; the elaborately worded safe-conduct pass; the trust between Pardoner and devil, who walk “arme in arme” (872); the appearance of the devils on their festival day and their merry game of rackets; the description of Lucifer, so frightful that the Pardoner flatters him as “O plesant pycture” (904); the Pardoner’s self-promotion before Lucifer as he claims himself to be a “controller” of souls (918); the image of Margery turning her spit;

the celebratory joy of the devils as the two pass out of hell; and the parting on Newmarket Heath. The Pardoner's self-satisfied rehearsal of narrative minutiae reveals him as a seductive incarnation of Pride. His travelogue is really the landscape of his dazzling, imaginative egoism; the objective details expose hauntingly the subjective interior architecture. The story is engaging as a projection not simply of social role, doctrine, or rhetoric but of mind and will, of an aura or presence exceeding role, doctrine, or rhetoric. The fabliau inspires an uncommon delight, less from its action than the ego it represents, and, reciprocally, the Pardoner's exhibition blazons his theatricality, his pleasure in being watched. His narrative's energy derives from his solipsism, as outsized, in its own way, as the eyetooth of the Great Turk. The passage challenges the spectator's assumptions about what and how the narrative will reveal; it demands, like the Pardoner's relic-speeches, a close, adaptable looking and listening.

## 4

*The Foure PP* spoofs the Palmer but also cloaks him with a certain moral opaqueness, shifting him away from a doctrinal or allegorical ontology to more theatrical grounds. Overall, the play distinguishes the Palmer for his honesty, even when it satirizes his profession. Before the lying contest he alone speaks truthfully and seriously; the play discusses his honesty (and only his) as a real possibility; he makes his "lie" as a brief rebuttal (to another's traducing of women), bracketed from the preceding narratives. The Palmer launches the play with disarming humility and straightforwardness; the humor about him arises indirectly through his catalog of shrines. Having entered first, looked at the audience, and discovered himself in high company, the Palmer apologizes for his homespun pilgrim's appearance. This father figure speaks devoutly and sincerely throughout his monologue; his comedy emerges not in his manner of speech or preposterous logic but in his busyness. The parody in the Palmer's inventory of shrines (he names some forty-two, mostly in Britain) rests on a humanist critique of excessive pilgrimages and phony relics shared by Erasmus, More, Colet, and other reformers.<sup>52</sup> The inventory proceeds, like the play as a whole, according to a process of parodic reduction. The Palmer begins with an authentically miraculous

locale, Jerusalem and its sites of Christ's passion (13–16) – though some church reformers discouraged visits even there. His humility – “My rewdnes” (4), “good intent” (12) – helps to deflect criticism, and his experiences in Jerusalem honor Christ's suffering. But as he describes Rome and Saint Peter's shrine (21–23), the Palmer betrays self-satisfaction about his superior knowledge of holy places (23–28). Eventually, the sheer density of the Palmer's almost consumerist itemizing diminishes his spirituality: “On the hylles of Armony where I see Noes arke, / With holy Job and Saynt George in Suthwarke” (33–34).<sup>53</sup> From Jerusalem the trajectory of parodic reduction descends finally to the trivial “Our Lady that standeth in the oke” (50), apparently a statue of the Virgin in the forest on Hampstead Heath.<sup>54</sup>

The list of shrines becomes saturated with locales of secondary and dubious veneration, as much associated with popular superstition as with the Bible or sainthood. Saint Tronion (31) may have been a medieval burlesque phallic saint; by mid-century Geoffrey Fenton derided his site as an example of French Papist idolatry.<sup>55</sup> The Cross of Waltham (34) involved a fantastical story of dream visions, pseudo-stigmata, and a sometimes miraculously immovable slab of marble with healing powers.<sup>56</sup> Walsingham, a favorite of the upper classes, was notorious enough that Erasmus lampoons its excesses in his colloquy on pilgrimages.<sup>57</sup> Concerning the Palmer's “Saynt James in Gales” (37), Erasmus satirizes his own pilgrim for having departed festooned foolishly with straw necklaces, shells inlaid with lead images, and snake eggs adorning his arms.<sup>58</sup> Saint Patrick's Purgatory (40) earned Erasmus's mockery more than once,<sup>59</sup> and Hazlitt observes of this old, apparent coal-pit that “The popular tradition concerning it is as ridiculous as is to be found in any legend of the Romish Martyrology.”<sup>60</sup> The dissolvers of the monasteries exposed the blood of Hailes (41) as a trick of colored water and light.<sup>61</sup>

Thus the Palmer's inventory of shrines degenerates into a list of well-known regional sites ridiculed by humanists and reformers. Many such locales were notorious for their great crowds, crass commercialism, dubiously miraculous healing powers, and Marian cultism.<sup>62</sup> Such associations taint the Palmer's piety. To some degree the progressive debasement of Christian sites in the Palmer's inventory recalls the loss of early Christian vision and experience for which Erasmus faults the schoolmen. But while the

audience might laugh at the catalog, the Palmer rehearses it with naive sincerity: he has labored barefoot (18), sweated “[m]any a salt tere” (19), observed diligently (26–27), prayed devoutly (52), and undertaken “dayly payne” (55). For an age that anticipated the agonies of Purgatory even for the righteous, the intercession of the saints had real importance.<sup>63</sup> Toward the end of his opening speech, however, the Palmer manifests the self-love that Erasmus’s *Folly* makes her theme. Going “for love of Chryst” (1143) will be the play’s grounds for approving pilgrimages, and the Palmer claims to seek saints “for Crystes sake” (59). Yet he also asserts that pilgrims who “punyshe thy frayle body – / Shall therby meryte more hyely / Then by any thyng done by man” (61–63). In his self-abasement the Palmer takes a certain pride, the comic insight hinted in the lines’ quick brush-strokes. Even with this first speech, Heywood begins to train the audience to attend carefully for nuance and complexity. The Palmer emerges as comically tinged but, unlike the others, as neither hypocritical nor insincere; rather, he poses a subtle paradox of manner and matter. This opening figure initiates the kind of complex dialectic the More circle enjoyed: a figure who is humanly sympathetic, in pursuit of an excess that is ridiculous. The irony at work here helps to distinguish *The Foure PP* from the moralities, where the audience is seldom asked to make subtle judgments of character. The Palmer’s complexity is an effect of theatre, of, particularly, the spectators’ discrepant awareness.

The Palmer’s role is the shortest in *The Foure PP* and requires the most straightforward acting, a difference from all the other parts and a sign that his praise of women could be performed as sincere. The Palmer explains simply, for example, that he began the pilgrim’s life “To rydde the bondage of my syn” (78), beseeching the mediation of the saints upon his “humble submyssion” (86). He sincerely invites someone to present a surer means to salvation (103–05) but rehearses the popular wisdom in distrusting pardoners (107–14). The Palmer becomes, in fact, the play’s temporary spokesman: “Ryght selde is it sene or never / That treuth and pardoners dwell together” (109–10). He notes that pardoners often exaggerate their claims; that his own authentic suffering makes for more certain remission than does a dubious pardon; and that God will respect the labor of each person. Indeed, the Palmer’s claim “So by his [i.e., God’s] goodnes all is

rewarded” (126) anticipates the final sentiments of the play. Only the Palmer consistently takes others seriously. When the Pedler and Potycary joke about women’s pincases, the Palmer alone remains silent. To the Pedler’s proposal of the lying contest, the Palmer replies that, though he can fib, he is “loth for to goo to it” (453). The Pedler’s answer implicitly treats the Palmer as more honest than the others (454–55). To the Potycary’s comic preening before the lying contest, the Palmer responds moderately:

Syr, I wyll neyther boste ne brawll,  
 But take suche fortune as may fall,  
 And yf ye wyne this maystry  
 I wyll obaye you quietly.  
 And sure I thynke that quietnesse,  
 In any man is great rychesse  
 In any maner company  
 To rule or be ruled indifferently.

(474–81)

The Palmer defends the dignity of quietness, a value that his part has come to demonstrate. In that same spirit, after he wins the contest, he immediately releases the others from serving him.

Although the Palmer wins the lying bout, *The Foure PP* portrays him as a truth-teller and leaves his intentions in the competition open to doubt. The Pardoner has just told his ornamented tale of redeeming his friend Margery Coorson from Hell, with the devils relieved to shed themselves of a typically troublesome woman. Margery gains renewed life because of her unruliness; the Pardoner claims also to have subsequently sent ten women to Heaven for every man, pursuant to Lucifer’s request.<sup>64</sup> The Palmer then declares the Pardoner’s tale “mervaylous” (982) in the part

... where he sayde the devyls complayne  
 That women put them to such payne  
 By theyr condicions so croked and crabbed,  
 Frowardly fashonde, so waywarde and wrabbed,  
 So farre in devisioun and sturrynge suche stryfe  
 That all the devyls be wery of theyr lyfe.  
 This in effect he tolde for trueth,  
 Wherby much murvell to me ensueth,  
 That women in hell suche shrewes can be  
 And here so gentyll as farre as I se. (983–92)

The deictic “here” of the last line invites the Palmer-actor to

include the gentlewomen of the audience in his assessment, looking out at them “as far as I see.” The Palmer’s overall scripting suggests straightforward delivery here. Indeed, an audience of aristocratic women would make the Palmer’s description, “gentyll,” demonstrably true. The Palmer attributes to the Pardoner’s tale depredations about women that the devils never uttered, but in so doing, the Palmer only amplifies the Pardoner’s real attitude. True in spirit if false in fact: the Palmer tells a “true” lie, whose enigma anticipates his own praise of women.

The Palmer proceeds to claim that in his travels, among all the “fyve hundred thousande” (998) women he has known and with whom he has “long time [taried]” (999),<sup>65</sup> “I never sawe nor knewe, in my consens, / Any one woman out of paciens” (1002–03). That statement prompts convulsive charges of gross lying from his fellow Ps, producing the Palmer’s victory. But the Palmer never acknowledges a lie, nor does he offer the appropriate “tale” like the two preceding, nor does he announce his “entry” in the contest as the other two have done (704–05, 742, 797). The play separates the Palmer from the misogynistic jokes and prejudices of the other Ps. One can imagine a pilgrim who might not have viewed women as “out of paciens” – since the claim is subjective – and his “conseyns” need not dismiss them with the misogynist term “shrewes.”<sup>66</sup> While critics often assume that the Palmer prevaricates, Jill Levenson has recently claimed that the Palmer does not participate in the lying contest and wins “unintentionally” in an effort to correct a falsehood.<sup>67</sup> The Palmer, of course, *could* be lying, but he also *could* be telling the truth: the script as a blueprint to performance leaves the issue suspended in doubt. An actor might make either choice, or he might remain inscrutable; moreover, unless he indicates by inflection, facial expression, or stage business that he prevaricates, the audience *cannot* know his state of mind. If an actor, that is, plays the lines straight his intentions will be unknowable on stage. That the Potycary, Pardoner, and Pedlar react to the Palmer’s comments with such immediate outrage makes sincerity more likely than winking irony in the Palmer’s delivery. *The Foure PP* raises at a critical juncture the horror and delight of secular drama: there is no authority, beyond an equivocal misogyny, capable of settling meaning. Just as *The Foure PP*’s epistemology shifts from theology to theatricality, its lying contest also mirrors the performance: actors – professional

liars – imitating professional lying, so that the play hints at a complicated, proto-modern self-reflexivity.

The Palmer does not win just for telling a lie; rather, he wins for telling the biggest lie, the one most marvelous and most “unlyke to be true.” Put differently, the Palmer triumphs solely because of the misogyny of the other characters, who cannot *imagine* speaking well of women. The Pedler offers “evidence” more absurd and offensive by far than the Palmer’s praise of women:

But hys boldnes hath faced a lye  
 That may be tryed evyn in thys companye.  
 As yf ye lyste to take thys order  
 Amonge the women in thys border,  
 Take thre of the yongest and thre of the oldest,  
 Thre of the hottest and thre of the coldest,  
 Thre of the wysest and thre of the shrewdest,  
 Thre of the cheefest and thre of the lewdest,  
 Thre of the lowest and thre of the hyst,  
 Thre of the farthest and thre of the nyest,  
 Thre of the fayrest and thre of the maddest,  
 Thre of the fowlest and thre of the saddest;  
 And when all these threes be had a sonder,  
 Of eche thre two justly by number  
 Shall be founde shrewes – excepte thys fall,  
 That ye hap to fynde them shrewes all.

(1066–80)

If “evyn in thys companye” and “in thys border” invite an inclusive gesture toward the women in the Tudor aristocratic audience, then the Pedler’s empirical test would hardly have sounded convincing<sup>68</sup> – especially in the More circle with, for example, its commitment to women’s education. The Pedler’s “proof,” that is, can produce the opposite effect, for its flagrancy makes the Palmer’s encomium to women that much more credible. Indeed, the Pedler’s deictic language – “thys companye,” “thys border” – sets itself up specifically against the Palmer’s “here so gentyll.” The two speeches would seem to draw the audience’s female members into the play, and the Pedler’s crude abuse might actually pull response in the other direction. The Pedler’s attack virtually guarantees that post-performance conversation will consider whether or not women are shrews. *The Foure PP* invites the audience’s play in creating its truth, and play, Erasmus proposed,

expresses the spirit of learning by another name.<sup>69</sup> *The Foure PP* refuses to affirm that the Palmer really lies; this Tudor interlude about honesty and falsehood leaves the spectator's perception unstable.

Although the Palmer succeeds by speaking well of women, we should note the ambiguity as he stresses his closeness to them: "Yet have I sene many a myle / And many a woman in the whyle" and "And oft with them have longe tyme [taried]" (993–94, 999). Do such lines carry innuendoes of sexual foraging along the pilgrim's way, as with Chaucer's travellers? Much earlier the Pedler has teased the Palmer: "Have ye nat a wanton in a corner / For your walkyng to holy places? / By Cryste, I have herde of as straunge cases!" (228–30). And why does the Palmer, when examining the Pardoner's fetid relics, step forward eagerly to kiss the bumble-bees "That stonge Eve as she sat on her knees / Tastyng the frute to her forbydden" (547–48)? Seeing the Palmer as a philanderer refashions him also as a religious hypocrite, especially given his guise of ascetic suffering. But dalliance can also lend his defense of women's patience a kind of credibility, one that emanates from a dallier's determination to be pleasing and to be pleased. Such puzzling over the Palmer merely enhances the inscrutability toward which his broader rhetorical scripting leads. Ultimately, we cannot tie the Palmer at the play's climax to any particular doctrine about women. It is not just that the available positions fail to do justice to the Palmer; rather his mode of being is *other* than a position. We might say that in some sense he exists dramatically, that our impression of him now arises ineluctably from the theatrical circumstances of his performance.

## 5

Although the play anticipates the productive tensions between theatricality and doctrinal knowledge that will characterize much Renaissance humanist drama, delight actually supports instruction in *The Foure PP*. The enigma of the Palmer amplifies the play's advice about how to discover the truth, for received authority gets its strongest boost from empirical observation's inconclusiveness. That relationship recalls the problems of authority and observation treated by Erasmus and Vives. To the rivalry over religious practices, the play proposes three successive answers: mutual

cooperation, respect for hierarchy, and wise tolerance. Concluding the play's first section, the Pedler proposes mutual cooperation: the other Ps should "contynue togyther all thre" (393), united in a common will in which each shares (388–96). But that idea of Utopian cooperation ends up only rearranging, not ending, the rivalry. The Potycary proposes hierarchy. For "good order," he says, "Twayne of us must wayte on a thyrde. / And unto that I do agree, / For bothe you twayne shall wayt on me" (414–17). But hierarchical self-glorification fails, too, as the Potycary and Pardoner resist serving the Palmer after he wins, and he wisely declines to force them. Pride has defeated the first solution and intransigence the second: "Now be ye all evyn as ye begoon" (1137).

With the opening aversions returned, the Pedler advises the Ps to amend their spirits by following their occupations "for love of Chryst" (1143) or for love of their neighbors "in God onely" (1150). "[E]very vertue . . . / Is pleasaunt to God" (1171–72), but despising another's virtue is proof of ungodliness, "lyke as the syster might hange the brother" (1186). But this mutual tolerance falters, too, for the Potycary claims to have no virtue and insists on the Pardoner's phoniness (the Palmer has disappeared as an object of satire). Perforce the Pedler refines his case: you may reject the obvious fraud, but where you cannot know the truth, believe the best, or preferably, follow the church's judgment (1203–16). Spiritual attitude now looms as the secret to social order. A proper spirit, though preferring to think better of someone rather than worse, recognizes that the limits of human understanding necessitate the authority of doctrine: "where ye dout, the truthe nat knowynge, / . . . as the churche doth judge or take them, / So do ye receyve or forsake them" (1207–14).

That advice verges on self-combusting, for *The Foure PP* has just cast doubt on both religious practices and empirical observations. The play has cloaked the Pardoner and climactically the Palmer in enigma and marvelousness, as truth has moved from the obvious to the complex. By shifting focus from theology to character and acting, *The Foure PP* has demanded ever-closer observation from its participants and spectators, only to demonstrate that such attentiveness will not settle its epistemological disputes. The Pardoner's speeches invite a scrutiny that leaves him all the more uncanny; the Palmer's "lie" invites a questioning before which his

intentions only recede: if the Pedler offers a convincing politics, he does so on grounds aesthetic as much as political. We must think the best of others or trust the prior authority of the church because our keenest empirical judgments fall prey to error and presumption, a stance somewhere between Erasmus and Vives. The inscrutability of the actor validates the Pedler's argument experientially. Though *The Foure PP*'s performance values support its sentence of wise ignorance, that conjunction seems rather fortuitous. From the larger perspective of Tudor drama, *The Foure PP* demonstrates that the claims of theatrical experience have begun to rival those of authority. Doubleness, duplicity, depth of space: theatricality at its extreme tends to undercut narrative certainty. The emergence of secular, nonallegorical plays in the sixteenth century manifests an energy latent in performance and surely familiar in folk drama. No matter, then, whether Heywood "intended" an enigmatic Palmer or not. Judging from its mention by the itinerant actors in *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, *The Foure PP* had an active stage life for fifty years after its publication in the 1540s. If so, during that time the ambiguity scripted in the Palmer's role surely underwent exploration.

The opacity hinted regarding the Pardoner and realized climactically with the Palmer expresses a quality present elsewhere in early Tudor drama. Other Heywood plays contain moments similar to the Palmer's "lie," moments that surprise formal expectations, suddenly offering characters in a new light of seriousness, pathos, or realism. At the end of *The Pardoner and the Frere*, for example, the two eponymous, self-aggrandizing scalawags, who have been shouting over each other's voices for most of the play, finally fall to fisticuffs. The Parson and Neighbor Pratt enter at this commotion and undertake to haul the two off to the stocks. Instead, the Friar and the Pardoner pummel their would-be policemen and stroll off the stage under their own steam, threatening to return: "Than adew, to the devyll, tyll we come agayn" (640). These two comic figures disappear suddenly tinged with dangerousness. In *A Play of Love*, the character No lover nor loved occupies the most Stoic position in the debate over love's sufferings. But toward the play's end, No lover nor loved rushes onstage as "the Vice" with a pail of exploding squibs on his head. The switch from high Roman philosophy to low-humor high-jinks gives No lover nor loved a newly compelling stage presence.<sup>70</sup> *Johan Johan* also

changes tone unexpectedly. A cuckolded husband, angry and defiant when alone but hen-pecked and submissive before his wife, apparently rises at the end of the play to beat her and her lover out the door. But this victory snatched from the jaws of defeat turns just as abruptly into despair, as Johan imagines the two gone off to cuckold him. Heywood increases the poignancy of this ending over its French original: "Although he [i.e., Johan] now triumphs physically, the victory is both momentary and empty."<sup>71</sup> In these cases, Heywood sets new twists of behavior against the characters' previous rhetorical identities so as to give the audience a sudden, climactic impression of the enigmatic.<sup>72</sup> *The Play of the Wether's* Mery Report shows, too, a Folly-like ambivalence: though serving as authorial voice, Mery Report also "reflects the petty vices around him and enlarges them to the highly visible proportions of caricature."<sup>73</sup> Thus, Mery Report pursues a double function that invites audience discrimination. In such examples, Heywood transgresses the boundaries of allegorical identity to give us an experience of character that must be understood in theatrical terms.

Although Heywood's dramaturgy ventures beyond that of Henry Medwall or Heywood's father-in-law, John Rastell, the three playwrights share affinities. In Rastell's *The Nature of the Four Elements* (c. 1517) the Taverner's puns create transitions and disruptive surprises in a way that may have influenced Heywood, and Rastell even devises an incident where spectatorial response seems to shape meaning. Yngnoraunce encourages Humanyte to dance, sing, and make merry, "And so shalt thou best please / All this hole company" (1296–97).<sup>74</sup> Yngnoraunce obviously means the audience members, since he adds, "For all they that be nowe in this hall, / They be the most parte my servauntes all" (1301–02). Yngnoraunce's insult invites the audience to resist his blandishments to Humanyte; the deictic gesture is in danger of provoking a moral backlash. That speech works remarkably like the Pedler's long, outrageous diatribe naming every two out of three women "in this border" as shrews, a diatribe that invites a moral resistance from the audience confirming the Palmer's view of women. In *Calisto and Melebea* (c. 1527) the heroine Melebea angrily resists Calisto's wooer-by-proxy, the bawd Celestina, but Celestina hits finally on the metaphor of a knight sick with "the toth ake" (835) and begs remedy from Melebea's holy girdle. At this plea Melebea

softens in pity toward Calisto. Is she suddenly enticed sexually, or is she duped into innocent sympathy by the old toothache routine? The metaphoric dialogue renders Melebea's intentions temporarily ambiguous, as with Heywood's characters; only ensuing events make her susceptibility clear.

Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrez* (c. 1490) offers the characters A and B as audience members who step into the drama, deploying the two as sometimes wise, sometimes utter fools.<sup>75</sup> Beyond those confusions of character, the play also concerns itself with the enigmatic relationship between play and earnest. At the beginning of Part II, A enters as prologue, reminds spectators of the first half's action, and reflects that "there was / Dyvers toyes mengled yn the same / To styre folke to myrthe and game . . . / The which tryfyllis be impertinent / To the matter principall" (II.21–26).<sup>76</sup> Those irrelevant trifles are apparently the doings in Part I between Lucrez's maid, Joan, and the two males A and B, when Joan, sent as a messenger from her mistress, encounters B, who attempts to woo her. Joan refuses him, with the business turning ribald, upon which A enters and offers himself as a rival wooer. Joan declares that she will choose the one "that can do most maystry" (I.1095). Following inconclusive singing and wrestling contests, A and B engage in a parody of a chivalric joust, apparently involving sticks and anatomical targets. The two fight ridiculously, with B finally knocking down A, only to have Joan declare triumphantly that she is already engaged to another man. Joan makes fools of the two and escapes uncompromised and saucy. In comparison, the main plot of *Fulgens and Lucrez* involves the competition between the aristocrat Publius and the self-made man Gayus for the hand of Lucrez, to be decided according to which man is "most honorable" (I.454). Is the episode of A, B, and Joan an impertinent trifle to that principal matter? Although the central plot could proceed without it, the episode parodies the main business – with its burlesque marriage contest concerned more with money than honor, with Joan outwitting pernicious suitors, as does Lucrez, and with the forms of chivalry reduced to bawdy pranks so as, possibly, to reflect on Publius's aristocratic presumptions or the cockfighting potential of both principal suitors. Such trifles may be deliciously pertinent. While A in the prologue to Part II claims, tongue-in-cheek, that the qualities of mad and sad, trifle and matter, amusement and instruction, coexist independent of each other, the

experience of *Fulgens and Lucrez* suggests the opposite. *The Four PP*'s confusion of earnest and game, its enigmatic moments, its audience engagement, even its puns and surprises, enlarge upon possibilities hinted in earlier or contemporaneous drama.

From the perspective of the 1590s, Heywood-style acting may look vaudevillian, artificial, fixed in a narrow range of low comedy.<sup>77</sup> But *The Four PP* and other interludes suggest that, while each acting role would carry a rough "line," the actor might be called on to exercise several voices – honest, ironic, clownish, authorial, ribald – contrasting realism with playfulness and culminating in the enigmatic. Heywood employs a humanist-inflected theatrical dynamic that will migrate to *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, to the Vice drama of the 1560s and 1570s, to Marlowe's ambiguous protagonists, and beyond. In recent years we have learned to talk about subjectivity. "The human subject, the self, is the central figure in the drama which is liberal humanism," argues Catherine Belsey.<sup>78</sup> But the "self" of *The Four PP* does not tend toward the attributes – autonomy, knowledge, unity – that Belsey finds in liberal humanism. Rather, Heywood's subject emerges as an aspect, as something reticulated in the acting and auditorial relationships of the performance event. In early humanist drama, we might consider that "self" identifies not so much an autonomous subjectivity as a theatrical ontology.