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Sacrilege and Unholy Ceremony: Satire in *Boss for Three Days*

A first reading of *Boss for Three Days* reveals the comic elements of the play — slapstick, irreverent humor, drunkenness — and a seeming lack of literary sophistication. Multiple readings, however, reveal that more complex issues are at hand, that the author is a sophisticated playwright who subtly explores important themes such as spousal conflict, the abuse of alcohol, and the manipulative power of language. I would argue, too, that irreverence toward religion in the play not only contributes to the humor but also suggests that the playwright is a satirist. The target of his satire, if not religious ritual itself, is the sinful lay practitioners of religion. I shall examine this aspect of the humor of the play by focusing on the irreverent religious language and the dinner scene, which could be read as a mock Eucharistic ceremony.

The characters use religious references — to God, the Virgin Mary, St. Nick, St. John, and St. Michael — some fifteen times in this short play, but none of the situations in which they use them is what we might call "religious." As irreverent as they are, these references perform an important function in *Boss for Three Days* by establishing comic and satirical situations. If we first examine these fifteen-odd references to Christian figures, we find that each character uses religious references for different reasons.

After the Messenger introduces the play in a prologue, Imbrecht, the first character to appear, exclaims,

> We shall play here a piece of shit
> way above your heads.
> God grant you shame and great
> laughter! (12-14)

The close proximity of the reference to God (the sacred) to "shit" (the profane) presages the context for the remaining religious references in the play. Imbrecht uses them in the opening speech to command the audience's attention and to establish the tone of the play. He exclaims to the audience: "God grant you shame and great laughter" (14), "God punish him who always holds back [saves any ale in the mug]" (26), "It [beer] smells good, by St. John" (30), and "Ah, look as those gapers, by St. Nick's behind" (36). We can assume that Imbrecht's medieval audience was familiar with the teachings of the church. Because swearing by saints' names is not absolutely necessary for Imbrecht to establish the comic tone, it is apparent that the playwright, through Imbrecht's irreverent humor, intentionally commingles the sacred and the profane in order to intensify both the comic *and* the irreverent tone.

Imbrecht continues to prod the audience, vying for its attention and acting as if he is angry at its members when, after his wife appears briefly and chastises him for drinking, states,

> Mary, mother and sweet virgin,
> in truth, you have no shame in
> you.
> Look at me well! Do you think
> me a scarecrow?
> You never heard of such wonders.
> (48-51)

Imbrecht, of course, does not really need to invoke

Mary's name. It seems apparent that a satirical playwright is at work here.

When Jan enters the pub, the principal action shifts from the audience to the story, and during the ensuing conversation between Jan and Imbrecht, we see both men, who complain of their tormenting wives, using religious references to underscore their situations. Jan's first speech changes the purposes of the irreligious language:

> By our dear Lord,
> neighbor, you complain in comfort,
> because if you had left at home a wife
> such as mine, I dare say
> you would soon forget about the people
> you are now so angry about. (60-65)

Imbrecht does indeed forget about his unruly audience, becomes engrossed in Jan's complaints, and offers advice:

> I swear to you, Jan, by St. Nick,
> one must bear for the sake of the better
> and sometimes keep completely quiet,
> even if one dislikes it. (120-23)

"By our dear Lord" emphasizes Jan's apparent misery, while "by St. Nick" allows Imbrecht to give more emphasis to what he has discovered about an unruly wife — that it is better to remain quiet and flatter her with gifts.

The next time we see the two together they are, again, in the tavern. Jan, who has successfully presented Bette with his proposition — to let him be boss for three days — is drinking in celebration. Imbrecht asks rather disingenuously, "Neighbor, sir, drinking? Tell me! Listen! / Neighbor, how did you fare?" (224-25), to which Jan responds, "Ah me, God has brought me here" (230). The absurd implication in Jan's words is threefold: that God's beneficence has brought Jan to the tavern, that God is responsible for Jan's success in tricking Bette, and that ultimately God approves of Jan's behavior.

The only religious reference that seems remotely sincere appears when Imbrecht and Lijsbet arrive for dinner, and Imbrecht states, "God and St. Michael / keep you in peace here!" (294-95). The irony, of course, is that any peace between Jan and Bette is transitory, for the dinner scene will soon erupt into more farcical discord, a reflection of the more distressing connubial discord. Peace has not prevailed in their home, and will not.

Just as Imbrecht's and Jan's first words contain religious references, so do Bette's, which maintain the tenor of irreverence. Like Imbrecht, she first addresses the audience, and in frustration calls upon the Virgin Mary and God, in what may be lightly called a "prayer," to curse Jan. This "prayer," however, is anything but reverent and dispels any notion that she and Jan are one in flesh and spirit:

> Look, Our Lady curse him!
> Where he goes, may God curse him
> who makes me suffer so much
> with his drinking night and day!
> I may well shout, "Oh me, oh my,"
> that I ever got him for a husband. (142-47)

At this point, Jan enters, and just as he drew Imbrecht away from the audience in the first scene, so too does he completely absorb Bette's attention:

> Now go, idiot, God curse you!
> And fetch water and hurry up,
> or I'll stomp on
> your hide with my feet. (148-51)

The tone of Bette's religious language becomes increasingly irreverent as she moves from lamentations to the Virgin Mary and God to ordering God to curse Jan. After granting Jan his three days as lord and discovering that she must prepare dinner for Jan, Imbrecht, and Lijsbet, she talks to herself and calls upon Mary:

> By St. Mary, you have heard quickly
> what it's like to be lord of the house!
> But he might yet feel embarrassed
> if he went too far. (288-91)

Bette is almost having a conversation with Mary here. Bette is far from reverent, and she then becomes conniving herself, increasing the dramatic tension and the audience's anticipation when she says Jan might be embarrassed if he goes "too far" (291). In the same way that Jan places God in the middle of his initial unhappiness and subsequent celebration, Bette places Mary in the middle of her plans to "undo" the agreement she has with Jan. Again we see the commingling of the sacred and the profane.

The playwright's use of irreverent religious language to help establish the tone of the play gives us reason to look more closely at the dinner scene and the possibility that it is something of a mock Communion service. And indeed, images and situations in the dinner scene remind us of one, or rather of an anti-Eucharistic mass. Of course, the sacred ritualistic order of a mass is not immediately apparent, nor are the roles of priest and parishioner. In other words, the direct and obvious correlations that we see in a medieval allegory are not present. Nonetheless, all of the elements of a mass are here: priest and parishioner, the washing of hands, and the bread and wine. This mock mass, though, results in anything but reconciliation.

When Imbrecht and Lijsbet arrive, Jan and Bette may be seen as carrying out the priest's role, while Imbrecht and Lijsbet may be seen as parishioners. Jan exuberantly tells Imbrecht,

> Welcome, neighbor, go wash your hands,
> sit there, and your lady of the house here,
> and I shall sit next to the fire.
> Bette, put salt and bread here
> and everything which is to eat big and small.
> Get wine for us and bring us cups.
> (296-301)

First, Jan asks Imbrecht to wash his hands, something a priest performs as a symbolic cleansing of sin before he blesses the bread and wine. Things are a bit mixed up, for Jan should be the one who washes his hands. Nevertheless, the image of washing hands reminds us of the priestly ritual during the mass. Second, similar to the way in which a priest carefully prepares the altar for a Eucharistic mass, Jan persists in having his table set perfectly and arranging his guests perfectly. Once this profane "altar" is set, he then delegates the rest of the priestly role to Bette and joins Imbrecht and Lijsbet as anti-parishioners. It turns out that that is a mistake, for Jan will now certainly go beyond that "point" Bette is waiting for. Her role as priest will now afford her power to get revenge.

Wine and the jam tart become central images after Bette assumes complete authority in her role as priest. For example, Bette insists that all "drink up," and she insists on being the pourer and not drinking until all are served, in the same way that a priest waits until all parishioners are served:

> By God! Don't pour one for me.
> If you want anything else, let me know,
> so that I may come and eat too.
> (316-18)

The scene is rife with requests for wine, and as

Jan and Imbrecht become more intoxicated, the heavy drinking seems only to augment the sense of satire, if we continue to read the scene as an anti-Communion mass.

The jam tart, which in my reading is a perversion of the Eucharistic wafer, plays an equally important part, for it becomes the central focus of the scene. Although Jan is more a parishioner now than priest, he is the most concerned with the tart. He first orders Bette to prepare it then continues to dwell on its preparation until Bette serves it to him and asks if he likes it. Jan responds negatively:

> It is not [well made], it didn't
> come out right.
> It's too thin. Do you want to teach
> me
> how to make pastry?
> Go and do it over again,
> because it seems to me you are
> miserable. (346-50)

Despite his own aversion to the first tart, Jan offers it to Imbrecht who gobbles it up. The gluttonous consumption here reminds us of the gluttonous consumption of the wine. When Bette returns a second time with a better-made tart, Jan finally gives her permission to sit down and drink. We realize that the tart, in Jan's eyes, is the symbol of his domination over Bette when he tells Imbrecht,

> And don't you think with regard to
> my manner of speech
> I can indeed conquer my wife?
> I'll make her jump through a hoop
> before you depart from here. (360-
> 63)

At this point in the dinner scene, we near the end of the play. While we do not know the playwright's conclusion, we cannot help but feel that Jan has deluded himself, particularly in light of Bette and Lijsbet's private conversation. Lijsbet rebukes Bette for making the deal:

> And if he comes out on top,
> the men will want amongst
> themselves
> to dominate their wives this way.
> And there is no woman on the
> street
> who can carry on with her affairs,
> without being worse off because
> of you. (382-87)

Bette's response hints that she and Lijsbet will contrive a plan to restore domination over Jan:

> Dear aunt, now calm down.
> by the passion of Saint Nick, I
> won't do it any longer.
> I would rather hang him to smoke
> in a basket in our smoke hole.
> Fie! God curse the fur
> that I ever surrendered myself.
> (388-93)

In our rendition, the play ends with Bette entering the dining room with a third tart and dumping it on Jan's head. The tart becomes a symbol of Bette's domination over Jan. The only resulting reconciliation of the mock mass is Jan's resigning his power to Bette.

One could argue that I have read too much into the scene — that the over-indulging in wine and the emphasis on the tart are not perversions of the sacrament but simply comical elements. In light of the importance of irreverent religious language, though, it seems quite plausible that the wine and the tart are among the playwright's satirical tropes which allow him to suggest allusions to the Communion mass.

The comical nature of *Boss for Three Days* creates a delightful facade in front of the more complex issues of irreverence that emerge from the play. Calls to God and Virgin Mary and evocations of the saints, as I have shown, govern much of the

action and speech of the characters. Of course the playwright wants us to laugh at Imbrecht's taunting of the audience, at Jan's futile antics, at Bette's and Lijsbet's delightfully tormenting behaviors, and at the fast-paced dynamic among all four characters. But to ignore the irreverent tone toward religion in the play and to assume that they are only a part of the comedy is to sell short the author's artistic sophistication and the play's literary merit.