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THOMAS BECON AND LITERARY STUDIES

by A. G. NEWELL

MR. NEWELL'S article on "A Christian Approach to Literature" a year ago dealt with an important phase of the Christian's relation to the arts. He illustrated the problem then by reference to an early nineteenth-century writer; now he goes farther back and shows us how the problem was tackled in one quarter at least in the sixteenth century.

"**A**LLSO, the 8 of July, 1542 [actually 1543], being Reliques Sunday, three persons recanted at Paules Crosse, one called Thomas Beacon, *alias* Theodore Basill, Wysedome, Curate of Aldermary, under Doctor Cromer, and one Shingleton, all three preistes; and the sayd Thomas Beacon cutt in peeces at his sayd recantinge 11 bookes which he had made and caused to be printed, wherein was certeine heresyess."¹ Thus a contemporary chronicler records the second recantation of the Rev. Thomas Becon. At the time Henry VIII, as Wriothesley's account demonstrates, was both burning Protestants for heresy and hanging Roman Catholic for treason, but Becon escaped with his life by abjuring his "heresyess" and publicly destroying copies of his books. Afterwards he thought it best to leave London for the Midlands until the Protestant party gained the ascendancy under the young King Edward VI. He became "a popular and able exponent of Reformation teaching who knew (sometimes only too well) how to attract and hold the attention of the ordinary reader."² When Queen Mary came to the throne Becon suffered imprisonment and went into exile. A moderate Reformer, he became one of the ministers in the revised Frankfurt church. On the accession of Queen Elizabeth Becon for some reason failed to secure preferment although he had been marked for it. He ended his days as a Canon of Canterbury, where he died in 1567, aged 55.

As a popularizer Thomas Becon is hard to better. His

¹ *A chronicle of England during the reigns of the Tudors, from A.D. 1485 to 1559, by Charles Wriothesley, Windsor Herald.* Ed. by W. D. Hamilton, 2 v. Camden Society, N.S. 11, 20. 1875-77. 1, p. 142-3.

² D. S. Bailey, *Thomas Becon and the Reformation of the Church in England* (Edin./Lond., 1952, p. xiii).

biographer, Dr. Bailey, considers that his works "often reflect the intense but narrow piety of an incipient Puritanism."³ He doubts whether Becon really was a Puritan, but admits him to have been in the forefront of the literary battle for the establishment of the Protestant faith. Becon's later works are somewhat after the style of Bishop John Bale, and even now are a little offensive in their statements about the Roman Catholic ritual. But much of the interest of his works today lies, inevitably, not so much in their literary value or theological content, but in the light they throw on the ideas of "incipient Puritanism". Indeed, they encourage such interest. As Dr. Bailey observes, "Becon's works are not, and were not intended to be, theological treatises, but as tracts for the times they are admirable. Their simple, homely language and colloquial idiom, their many proverbial sayings, their clarity of arrangement and statement and their effective *exempla*, show his genius for popular exposition and apologetic."⁴ His aim was to expound the Reformers' teaching to those people who were forbidden or unable to read the Bible for themselves, and to help them to apply it in a practical way to their lives. This ambition Becon achieved; he was one of the most popular and influential Protestant propagandists. As an early controversialist for this party his views are of interest historically as well as intrinsically.

The purpose of this paper is to gather what evidence Becon's works afford for a consistently-held attitude to literature on the part of early English Protestantism. Thus speculation as to whether Becon would have developed into a thorough-going Puritan had he lived longer is irrelevant. His works have been reprinted in part by the Parker Society (3 vols., Cambridge, 1843-44), for which they were edited by J. Ayre.

Like all the Reformers Becon was concerned to point out the need for a Christian education for the children of believers. It is mainly in connexion with the upbringing and instruction of the young in the faith and practical godly living that his references to literature are to be found. With William Perkins, Becon believed that "Theologie is the science of living blessedlie for ever",⁵ and that the living blessedly began in this life that it might continue in the next. The elect, justified by faith, dis-

³ *Op. cit.*, p. xiv.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 115-6.

⁵ William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine, or The Description of Theologie* 2nd ed., 1597, p. 9.

played the effects of their salvation in their lives. Puritan insistence on practical piety is a commonplace. Hence Becon and the other Reformers were desirous of preventing the early corruption of youth which, they believed, would and did derive from the teaching of the pagan classics. In this aim they were treading in the footsteps of the Church Fathers like Tertullian and Jerome, who had wished to avoid or minimize the anti-Christian influence of the pagan literature and learning of their period. If the whole man were to be governed by the dictates of Christianity his learning and his reading must be primarily in Scripture and Christian authors; his children could not be permitted to fill their young and unformed minds with the pre-Christian stories and imagery of the classical authors, based on what were often anti-Christian values. A follower in the tradition of the early English Protestant divines, John Foster, writing in 1805, could declare that the genius of Homer (for example) "displays a number of atrocious savages in a hideous slaughter-house of men, as demigods in a temple of glory."⁶

If the pagan classics were a pernicious influence, so were the medieval and contemporary authors in Christian England. A writer's membership of the visible Church did not guarantee that his work would be suitable reading for an earnest Protestant. Richard Greenham lamented the "unchast and wanton love-songs of Italian Poetry", and Edward Dering, writing nearer to Becon's time, described the "many bawdy songs . . . sonnets, . . . palaces of pleasure, . . . unchaste fables, . . . more than man can reckon." Many such complaints about the taste of the reading public have been noted by scholars⁷ in their progress through the religious literature of the time.

In his *Catechism* Becon sets the problem in its theological perspective. This work is "sette forth Dialogue-wise in familiare talke betwene the father and the son". who is "not six years old,"⁸ but speaks like a mature divine.⁹ Under interrogation as to the meaning of the seventh commandment the son replies :

⁶ John Foster, *Essays in a series of letters*, 6th ed., 1819, p. 343.

⁷ E.g., L. B. Wright, *Middle-class culture in Elizabethan England*, Chapel Hill, 1935, from whom the two quotations are taken, pp. 232, 231.

⁸ *The Catechism of Thomas Becon* [etc.], ed. for the Parker Society by J. Ayre, Cambridge, 1844, p. 8.

⁹ Cf. the case of little Thomas Josselin, who "began to learne his accidence by heart as wee say, memoriter; he is now 6 yeares old and about two months". *The diary of the Rev. Ralph Josselin*, ed. E. Hockliffe, Camden Third Series, vol. 15, 1908, p. 71, under date March 1st, 1649, O.S.

All filthy talk, wanton countenances, singing of bawdy ballads, reading of amorous books, idle jesting, vain pastimes, and whatsoever maketh unto the provocation of fleshly appetite, as idleness, banqueting, wanton company-keeping, &c. is here also forbidden.

And again,

God forbiddeth us here also the impurity and uncleanness of the mind.¹⁰

For this comprehensive interdict the son quotes ample New Testament authority.¹¹ Yet Becon very sensibly realizes the importance of literature in education: "if they [i.e. youth] be brought up in barbarous rudeness, and without any civility or knowledge of good letters, and such other necessary acts, it must needs come to pass that they shall be rather pestilences than preservers of the commonweal."¹² The godly and noble children of the Duke of Somerset, the Protector, had been brought up, says Becon approvingly, "in good literature, and in the knowledge of God's most holy laws",¹³ thus achieving nobility in a three-fold way — by birth, by learning and by true godliness.

The *Catechism* follows this recognition both of the dangers and the explicit sinfulness of reading pagan and modern secular works, and of the necessity for a formal education in "good letters", with positive instructions to parents. Firstly, they must send their children "unto such a school-master as feareth God". Then Becon presents his proposals.

But in this education and bringing up of the children in good letters this must be provided, that the children be not, after the common custom of schools, continually noursled in reading and learning heathen and pagan writers, of whom many times is drunken in more wickedness than godliness, more sin than virtue (for the tongue may not so be filed that the mind be defiled, nor the speech so polited that the heart be polluted;) but that with eloquence they learn also godliness. . . . Without this knowledge, I mean of Christ and of his gospel, all other knowledge is not greatly profitable, yea, it rather hindreth than profiteth. Porphyry with his logic, Aristotle with his philosophy, Homer with his poetry, Ptolemy with his astronomy, Hippocrates with his physic, &c. without the knowledge of Christ crucified, are ignorant and blind men, neither knowing nor seeing anything that is allowable before God, or is profitable for their souls' health.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

¹¹ Cf. later Puritan writers' expositions of the Decalogue: John Dod, *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 1614, pp. 295-6, which condemns the reading of love-books as "a kinde of contemplative fornication"; William Perkins, *op. cit.*, chap. 26; etc.

¹² *Early works*, p. 399.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Catechism*, p. 350.

He goes on :

. . . it is the duty of parents to prepare for them [i.e. their children], not idle and wanton, nor vain and trifling books, but wholesome, holy, and godly books, as the new testament of our Saviour Christ Jesu, the parables of Salomon, the book of Jesus the son of Sirach, and such like, that they may be trained and brought up in them, and by this means drink in the knowledge of godliness from their young and tender years.¹⁵

Further on he turns to the duties of schoolmasters. Becon's ideal godly master would "take heed that there be no whoring nor uncleanness of body, no, not so much as a filthy word used in his house; . . . Let no filthy ballads or songs of love be sung in his house, that might stir up the filthy desires of the flesh; but rather songs of the holy scripture, and the psalms of David, set forth in metre in our English tongue, very apt for that purpose."¹⁶

What were these "filthy ballads" which Becon condemns, and which the Puritans were to condemn from this time onwards? Even William Vaughan, whose chapter "Of Poetry, and of the excellency thereof" in *The Golden-grove* (1600) is liberal ("The fault is not in the Art of Poetrie, but rather in the men that abuse it"), is careful to state "that many of our English rimers and ballet-makers deserve for their bawdy sonnets, and amorous allurements, to bee banished, or severely punished."¹⁷ Becon gives some examples of "bokes of fables, of fond and lyght love"; he instances "Bokes of Robyn Hood, Beves of Hampton, Troylus, & such lyke fables" which "do but kyndle in lyers lyke lyes and wanton love".¹⁸ He does not make out such a lengthy list of "friulous books of tales, iests, & lies" as Arthur Dent, for instance, furnishes in his classic *The Plaine Mans Pathway to Heauen*,¹⁹ but his examples indicate sufficiently the type

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, chap. 42. Vaughan is more in the humanist tradition of Sir Thomas Elyot's *Governour* (1531). He agrees with Elyot against "the false opinion, that nowe rayneth, of them that suppose that in the warkes of poetes is contayned nothyng but baudry (such is their foule worde of reproche), and unprofitable leasinges". *Governour* (Everyman ed.), p. 57.

¹⁸ *Golden Boke of Christen Matrimonye* (1542), quoted by L. B. Campbell, *Divine poetry and drama in sixteenth-century England*, Cambridge, 1959, p. 32. Miss Campbell's book contains much interesting information concerning the definite attempt made by the divines to wean the public away from the popular and objectionable literature and songs by providing a more suitable diet of translations and adaptations of sacred themes, and particularly of the Psalms.

¹⁹ Cf. Antilegon's catalogue in the 1622 ed., p. 371.

of popular literature which disturbs him.

To this condemnation of contemporary popular literature Becon adds his disapproval of the unqualified teaching and reading of the classics. ". . . would God that all schoolmasters and teachers of youth would, instead of Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, &c., teach these verses of David!"²⁰ Becon's remedy for both evils is the teaching of the Psalms. "If we deliyght to synge songes ye have the Psalmes and many godly songes & bokes in Englysh right fruitefull & swett."²¹ For the singing of popular songs Becon would substitute the singing of the Psalms, both for children and adults. But before this the knowledge of Christ crucified should be imparted. That is, of course, the aim of the Puritan; the salvation of the individual soul is the purpose of all his sermons and his innumerable guides to Christian living. The singing of lewd ballads was a bad influence on others (even if the Tudor or Stuart Puritan were to admit that a non-Christian could please himself as to his behaviour) so Becon and those similarly concerned attempted to prevent such pastimes by inculcating the Psalms at an early age.

When the child had been grounded in the religion of Christ, taught to express his pleasure in godly rather than ungodly songs, and guided in the choice of reading, he could then be instructed in what Becon calls "good letters". What he means by this expression he explains in the *Catechism*. The son says:

. . . [by] good letters, I mean, poets, orators, historiographers, philosophers, &c.; not that they should be mates with God's word, but rather handmaids unto it, and serve to set forth the honour and glory thereof. For unto this end ought all liberal sciences to be studied and learned, even that they might not depress, but advance the true religion of God. For eloquence without godliness is as a ring in a swine's snout; yea, all arts and sciences, not coupled with the love of religion, are rather instruments of wickedness than of godliness.

After quoting Cicero the son continues:

But, in reading these kinds of authors to his disciples, the schoolmaster must diligently take heed that he read those only to his scholars that be most profitable, and contain in them no matter that may either hinder the religion of God or the innocency of manners. Some writers in many places of their works are wanton and dishonest, as Martialis, Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, Cornelius Gallus, and such-like; some wicked and ungodly, as Lucianus, &c. From the reading of these and such-like filthy writers, it is convenient that the youth do abstain; lest by the reading of them they make shipwreck both of their faith and manners, and in their tender years drink in such corruption as shall be noisome unto them all their life after,

²⁰ *Early works*, p. 266.

²¹ L. B. Campbell, *loc. cit.*

The son considers next the opinion of the heathen on the subject.

Plato, that most divine and noble philosopher, also expelled all poets out of his commonweal, as persons occupied about vain, false, lying, and wanton matters. . . . Was not the poet Ovidius banished of Augustus Caesar for the books which he made *De Arte Amandi* (he might more justly have termed them *De Arte Meretricandi*, because that through the reading of them he corrupted the minds of the youth); . . . A punishment worthy of such fact,

If the pagans were so concerned to foster virtue and honesty, how much more should Christians, comments the son in conclusion. His father adds:

To interlace godliness in the lessons of profane writers maketh greatly unto the advancement of virtue; and heathen authors so read profit very much. . . . I see not what the excellency of learning profiteth, if civility of manners lacketh.²²

The schoolmaster therefore should select carefully those classics which are suitable for his pupils to read and learn; those which are to be included in the syllabus should be studied with an "interlacing" of godly comment and interpretation. Becon, in his chosen role of popular expositor of the practical aspects of Protestantism, puts his case well. He goes to neither extreme — of allegorizing otherwise unacceptable classics (as Golding treated Ovid, for example), or of rejecting all secular and pagan literature. He exhibits, indeed, something of the spirit of that *via media* which apologists often claim to be the specific virtue of Anglicanism.²³ In one respect he was ahead of his age: he advocated publicly-supported schools for "women-children", staffed by "honest, sage, wise, discreet, sober, grave, and learned matrons".²⁴ Becon's schoolmaster was to teach godliness by both example and precept; he was to inculcate the truths of the Bible, and respect and obedience to the word of God; he was to teach both devotional literature and "good letters"; he was to instruct his scholars in good manners; he was to chastise his pupils if the occasion demanded it.²⁵ This programme Becon felt to be much more worthy and acceptable than those he saw in the majority of the schools of contemporary England. The spirit and the aims of Protestant education were not recognized. In the general preface to his works, written in 1564, he refers to this vital

²² *Catechism*, pp. 382-383.

²³ Cf. *Anglicanism*, ed. P. E. More and F. L. Cross, London, 1957, p. xxxii, etc.

²⁴ *Catechism*, pp. 376-377.

²⁵ Becon's general educational views are discussed by Norman Wood, *The Reformation and English Education* (London, 1931, pp. 176-182).

question of a truly Christian education in literature. In the past, he remarks, children were taught about Biblical writers; this method has been restored in all true Reformed churches in Germany and "in divers other countries, as I myself have seen. Profane and strange letters of the wanton poets, lying historiographers, prattling sophisters, babbling orators, vain philosophers, &c., were then not known in the schools of christian youth: whereas now in our schools (alas, for pity!) they bear the chief rout. Such kind of teaching schools might be used in the midst of Turkey without any displeasure of Mahumet."²⁶

While he inveighs against the common vices of his time like all the Puritans and several others, Becon finds space for constructive proposals on the subject of literary education — and on what he plainly considers to be a Christian view of literature. Although he vigorously attacks those bugbears of Puritanism, swearing, drunkenness, gaming and idleness, with all the alliterative rhetoric at his command, his approach to literature is coloured by the equally genuine Puritan conviction of the necessity for a good education, especially for those who were to become ministers. Becon's ready invective is as easily summoned by the thought of a Sir John Lacklatin, who "teacheth not much more than the hill moveth", while the beneficed cleric "hath licked the fat from his parishioners' beards, and hath taken his journey",²⁷ as by the "bishop of Rome". He himself, in addition to his plentiful citations from the Bible (part of his propagandist intention was to teach his readers the words of the Scriptures which they were perhaps unable to read themselves), cites classical authors, but with no deliberate display of learning.²⁸ His failure to appreciate music²⁹ ought not to blind our eyes to his view of literature and its place in a system of Protestant education.

Becon embarks on no detailed criticism of actual texts. "Close reading" was not a Tudor practice. Perhaps the nearest he gets to a directly critical observation is his reference to Ovid's *De arte amindi* quoted above. His criterion is an explicitly Christian one, as we should expect. Children should be protected from

²⁶ *Early works*, p. 10.

²⁷ *Early works*, p. 360.

²⁸ Cf. John Northbrooke, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes* (1577), ed. J. P. Collier, London, 1843, a list of whose citations would constitute a firm basis for the contemporary liberal education.

²⁹ "To say the truth, music is a more vain and trifling science than it becometh a man, born and appointed to matters of gravity, to spend much time about." *Catechism*, p. 429.

the corrupting influence of "wanton and dishonest" or "wicked and ungodly" writers, and he gives examples. No less are we given to understand in many scattered passages that the reading of such literature by adult Christians is also to be avoided, as being a bad example, an unwholesome influence spiritually, and a direct failure to obey the seventh commandment. Yet not all secular writers are condemned by Becon; those not immediately offensive to Christian taste he envisages as being taught to children, provided a suitable Christian commentary accompanies them. Once a grounding in the Scriptures and the Protestant doctrines has been achieved, "good letters" can be taught in comparative safety.³⁰ Becon insists on the Puritan priorities. Learning without the Christian virtues is worse than useless.

Such is Becon's attitude to literary studies. It is consistent, and, for an "incipient Puritan", it is liberal. He exhibits the sturdy common-sense and independence of thought that we might expect from the author whose bold rhetoric and homely colloquialisms made him "one of the most attractive and even entertaining writers among the English reformers."³¹ No obscurantist, he recognized the educational value of the accepted literary canon; as a "handmaid" to God's word it was necessary and useful, but the seventh commandment prohibited him from sanctioning the reading of those writers whose works troubled the Christian conscience. Becon's clarity, his forcefulness and his sincerity offer the modern reader, prepared to investigate the writings of the sixteenth-century English Reformers, a coherent, consistent and traditional Christian attitude to literature.

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³⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge, London, 1953, I, p. 236.

³¹ D. S. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 121.