Tudor Interlude at Court: Reconstructing the Scenes behind the Scenes of Henry Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucre*  

Aegyung Noh

I. “The First Secular Interlude that Has Survived”

Interlude,¹ often derogated as a mere transitional type between medieval religious and Elizabethan drama, generally refers to the short indoor play mostly popular in the Tudor era. The “first complete and wholly secular Interlude that has survived” (Wickham 37), Henry Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucre* (1497?) occupies a unique position in the history of English drama with radical contrasts to its predecessors, medieval cycles and morality plays. As F. P. Wilson noted, “We have to wait for many years before meeting with another play so free from religious and allegorical treatment and so original in its method of adding pleasure to instruction” (Wilson and Hunter 7). Despite the trace of morality tradition still visible in the play’s dual characterization of the main characters—Gaius Flaminius and Publius Cornelius, whose clean-cut moral opposition is apparently patterned after morality’s typical dichotomy between ‘Virtue’ and ‘Vice,’ or ‘Reason’ and ‘Sensualyte’ as featured in Medwall’s own morality play *Nature* (1495?)—its overall theme and characters are distinctively outside the preceding dramatic tradition which is marked by biblical episodes and themes, and characters as allegorical abstractions. The plot centers around a young Roman woman named Lucre who is wooed by young suitors in competition, one a virtuous plebeian and the other an idle patrician of high birth. This secular plot, ended with Lucre’s choice of the common man since “unto the [noble] blood [she] will have little respect / Where those conditions be sinful and abject” (II. 765-766),² contains a debate between the rival

---

* This project was supported by a grant from the College of Education, Korea University in 2011.
¹ ‘Interlude,’ put hereafter with the first letter ‘I’ capitalized according to its customary usage.
² Quotations from *Fulgens*, cited hereafter by part and line number.
suitors on the nature and origin of ‘true nobility.’ The debate, dubbed as “the disputacyon of noblenes” in the title-page of the original script archived in Henry E. Huntington Library in California, serves as a critical measure for the woman to make her final selection of a bridegroom while adding an ultimate ‘humanistic’ flavor to the whole play.

Critics and historians generally agree that Fulgens was premiered at the Cardinal John Morton’s court during the Christmas season of 1497, with the only exception of Alan H. Nelson, who dates it several years back to 1491 or 1492 taking as evidence the affinities between the characters ‘A,’ ‘B’ featured in the comic subplot of the play, and the young Thomas More circa 1491-2 as portrayed in his biography written by his son-in-law William Roper. One particular anecdote Roper related interests us illustrating the way Morton hosted dramatic entertainments within his own palace, with young More often jumping into the stage playing extemporary roles:

This Sir Thomas More, after he had bine brought vpp in the Latyne tongue at St. Anthonies in London, was by his fatherys procurement receaved into the house of the right reuerend, wise, and learned prelate Cadinall Mourton; where, thoughe he was younge of yeares, yeat wold he at Christmas tyde sodenly sometimes steppe in among the players, and neuer studyeng for the matter, make a parte of his owne there presently among them, which made the lookers on more sporte then all the plaieres beside. In whose wit and towardenes the Cardinal much delightynge, would often say of him vnto the nobles that divers tymes dined with him: ‘This child here wayting at the table, whosoeuer shall liue to see it, will proue a mervailous man.’ (qtd. in Nelson 17)

In all probability, Fulgens must have been offered as part of a banquet, with Morton as “the master of the feast” (Fulgens I. 1423), for the noble audience gathered at his Lambeth Palace located right across the River Thames from Westminster. The high class Londoners taking up the demographic majority of the audience are recognizable by the flamboyant costumes of the guests as observed by ‘A,’ the comical servant to one of the suitors—Cornelius—in the play: “There is so much nice array / Among these gallants” (I. 53-4). All these facts about the premiere venue of Fulgens point to a radical change in the choice of venues of dramatic performance in Medwall’s times: from the provinces of East Anglia, and the north of England where most performances of the Chester and the York cycles as well as morality plays were concentrated, to London.