

## **Saint John Fisher and *The Field of Cloth of Gold.***

**T**he land between the villages of Guînes and Ardres in that section of Picardy which was then the English enclave in France, was in June of the year 1520 the scene of one of history's more ostentatious displays of riches and magnificence, the Field of Cloth of Gold. Under hundreds of pavilions of golden cloth, two kings who could barely stand each other -- 29-year-old Henry VIII of England and 26-year-old Francis I of France -- met to sign a treaty of enduring friendship between their two countries. The English king prided himself on having better shaped calves than the French king, who in turn could take consolation in being an inch or two taller than the English king. <sup>1</sup> Not far over the border in Gravelines, the 19-year-old Emperor Charles V waited to meet afterwards with Henry, the husband of his aunt, Catherine of Aragon. Without mentioning his name, the registers of the Field of Cloth of Gold record that among the thousands present was the Bishop of Rochester, who along with the bishops of Hereford and Llandaff, was « to attend upon the Queen. » <sup>2</sup> Henry VIII once asked Reginald Pole « whether in all his travels he had ever found a prelate of equal worth and ability with the bishop of Rochester. » <sup>3</sup> Under the shadow of the vainglorious Cardinal Wolsey, who had engineered so much of the English splendor, this worthy and able prelate John Fisher found himself engaged in what was perhaps his only voyage abroad. Whatever displacement he may have felt, writes Jean Rouschause, « he was able to observe with complete liberty this magnificent open air theatre and to note in passing a thousand picturesque details... » <sup>4</sup>

If the records of the Field tell nothing of Fisher, Fisher thus tells much of the Field in one of the two sermons he preached for the feasts of All Saints and All Souls the following November, 1520. At the beginning of the first sermon Fisher announces that he will preach on three subjects. <sup>5</sup> Because it is All Saints Day, « it is convenient somewhat to speak of the sovereign joys and pleasures which be above in the king-

dom of heaven, where these blessed saints be present now with our Savior Christ. » Since the next day is All Souls, it is fitting to speak of those the Church remembers then, the souls « tarried by the way in the grievous pains of Purgatory » (A2r). Finally, he will speak

concerning our own souls, which as yet be abiding in this world : we may by the remembrance of both those two places somewhat quicken and stir them so to live here that, after our departure hence, we be not arrested by the way, and so cast into the prison of Purgatory, but straight to be received into that most glorious place and kingdom of Heaven, withouten any great delays (A2v).

### I

Fisher's description of the Field of Cloth of Gold may also be seen to fall into these divisions. The Field as it was intended suggests life on this earth as one might like it to be, and the Field as it really was suggests Purgatory. But along with these two concepts, exists a third, to Fisher's mind the only reality, that of heaven, with which Fisher repeatedly contrasts the intended and pretended splendor of the Field. With persistent Platonic imagery, he sees all earthly glory as counterfeit, a passing shadow on the wall of a cave, not to be confused with reality. He never uses the name Field of Cloth of Gold, even when he speaks of it directly. « I doubt not, » he says,

but ye have heard of many goodly sights which were shewed of late beyond the sea, with much joy and pleasure worldly. Was it not a great thing within so short a space to see three great princes of this world ? I mean the emperor, and the king our master, and the French king (A3r).

Accounts of the apparel of men, women, and horses at the Field tell again and again of golden clothing, of gold and silver decoration, of crimson velvet, of crimson-velvet-caparisoned and gold-barded horses, of hundreds of attendants preceding and following the movements of the more aristocratic figures. It was impossible to look at the French king without blinking <sup>6</sup> : if the golden gown and golden mantle of Francis I did not blind the beholder, then the diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and pearls cascading over the gold might certainly do so (*L & P*, 305 and 310) :

And each of these three in so great honor, shewing their royalty, shewing their richness, shewing their power, with each of their nobles appointed and appareled in rich clothes, in silks, velvets, cloths of gold, and such other precious arraiments (A3r).

Was the saintly and scholarly bishop impressed ? Eleven years earlier Fisher had delivered the funeral oration for Henry VII :

... his mighty power was dread everywhere, not only within his realm but without also, his people were to him in as humble subjection as ever they were to king ... his treasure and riches incomparable, his buildings most goodly ... But what is all this now as unto him ? All be but *fumus et umbra*, a smoke that soon vanisheth, and a shadow soon passing away. Shall I praise him for them ? Nay, forsooth ! <sup>7</sup>

The only praise of royalty in the 1520 sermon comes with the mention of the three queens present, Reine Claude, wife of Francis I, Mary, sister of Henry VIII and widow of Louis XII of France, « a right excellent and fair Lady, » and Catherine of Aragon, « the very exemplar of virtue and nobleness to all women » (A3r). The most thorough English chronicler of the Field, Edward Hall, writes : « to tell you the apparel of the ladies, their rich attires, their sumptuous jewels, their diversities of beauties, and the goodly behavior from day to day sith the first meeting, I assure you ten men's wits can scarce declare it. » <sup>8</sup> And so Fisher tells his congregation that each queen was « accompanied with so many other fair ladies in sumptuous & gorgeous apparel » (A3r). How could he not recall the noble lady whose chaplain and confessor he had been and from whose great virtue he learned more he said than ever he could teach her, <sup>9</sup> the Lady Margaret, mother of King Henry VII, who had worn a hairshirt and ministered to the ailing poor with her own hands ? (*EW*, 294 and 297).

As for the diversions of the Field, there were dancing, music, endless tourneys, masks, and revels (*L & P*, 306-13 *passim*) : « such dancings, such harmonies, such dalliance, and so many pleasant pastimes ! » (A3r). The English had begun to build their pavilions in March, floating from the Netherlands to Calais construction beams too large for any ship to carry. <sup>10</sup> Hall devotes four large pages (189-193) to describing the residence and the chapel built for Henry VIII to occupy for less than a month. Fisher thus speaks of « so curious houses and buildings, so preciously appareled » (A3v). The English had shipped « mountains of plate, cutlery and glass » to the Field, for each side entertained the other. <sup>11</sup> Hall relates that « forests, parks, fields, salt seas, rivers, moats and ponds, were searched and sought through countries for the delicacy of viands » (210). When feasted by the English lords, the French lords had to tear their golden garments so as to keep on eating (*L & P*, 304). Fisher recalls « such costly welfare of dinners,

suppers, and banquets, so delicate wines, so precious meats » (A3v). Did he not perhaps think again of the Lady Margaret, whom he had praised in her month's mind as one who never banqueted, never ate between meals, who took only one meal a day in Lent, even though she was beyond the age of fasting ? (EW 293-4). « The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play » (1 Cor 10:7). How did they play ? « Such and so many noble men of arms, so rich and goodly tents, such joustings, such tourneys, and such feats of war. » In short,

These assuredly were wonderful sights as for this world, and as much as hath been read of in many years done, or in any Chronicles or Histories heretofore written, and as great as men's wits and studies could devise and imagine for that season (A3r and v).

## II

Human pride planned the ideal of the Field of Cloth of Gold. How was this ideal of earthly perfection turned into what might be equated with a purgatory ? Fisher gives five ways. First of all, people grew tired « of those goodly sights which were had and done beyond the sea ... and some of them had much leaver [rather] have been at home » (A3v and A4r). In the second place, « the joys of this world have adjoined with them many dreads, » for knowing that sooner or later one will have to forgo earthly pleasures, one « can not but alway drede to forgo and lese [lose] them. » Therefore,

A little sickness, a little trouble, a nigh likelyhood of death, disappointeth all these pleasures. We must needs therefore dread and fear sickness, fear trouble, and fear the sudden coming of death, and fear everything that may let [hinder] or break our pleasures ... the which did right well appear in the pleasant sights whereof I spake before (A4v).

In the third place in this catalog of purgatorial aspects of the Field : the pleasures thereof « had many interruptions » (Blv). Hall writes : « Monday the xviii. daye of June, there blew such storms of wind and weather that marvel was to hear, for which hideous tempest some said it was a very prognostication of trouble and hatred to come between princes » (210). First came the wind, and with the wind came the dust -- a key word for Fisher who later in the same sermon cautions his congregation to withdraw its appetites from this world, « whereby we daily gather the dust at the least of venial sins » (C4v), and in the ser-

mon for All Souls Day states « if there be any venial sins abiding in us, they must be clean scoured by the flame of this said fire » of Purgatory (Glv). Of the dust of the Field, Fisher says :

For that little while that we were there, sometime there was such dust, and therewithal so great winds, that all the air was full of dust. The gowns of velvet and cloth of gold were full of dust ; the rich trappers of horses were full of dust ; hats, caps, gowns were full of dust ; the hair and faces of men were full of dust ; and, briefly to speak, horse and man were so encumbered with dust, that scantly one might see another (Blv).<sup>12</sup>

The central pavilion of Francis I was topped by a gilt figure of St. Michael in a blue mantle powdered with gold fleur-de-lys, bearing in his right hand a spear and in his left a shield with the French coat of arms. This pavilion was blown down and its mast broken (*L & P*, 308), no doubt bringing the archangel with it. Weather, however, has no favorites, and with what seems to be some pleasure the French historian Michelet notes that the wind played a trick on Henry by carrying off and smashing his crystal palace.<sup>13</sup> And so Fisher relates, « the winds blew down many tents / shaken sore the houses that were builded for pleasure... » After the winds, « sometime again we had rain and thunders so unmeasurably that no man might stir forth to see no pleasures » (Blv).

Fourth in this catalog of thwarted earthly joys : Where are the snows of yesteryear ? The pleasures of the Field, like the glories of the reign of Henry VII, « were soon done, » for « they were but shadows, & like shadows they be past, like shadows they be slid away, like shadows they be now vanished away from us... » (B2r). This allusion to the Myth of the Cave leads into another Platonic allusion in the fifth and final reason that earthly joys are disappointing and the dream of the Field of Cloth of Gold became a purgatory : « all the glorious sights worldly that can be devised of men, be but counterfeits in comparison of the Joyes above in heaven » (B2r). Everything that makes for human glory, including that of princes, is borrowed from non-human creatures :

First the cloth that they wear, it cometh only of the poor sheep's backs. The fine and costly furs, from other unreasonable beasts. The silks wherewith they cover their bodies were taken of the entrails of worms. The fresh colors both of cloth and silk be made by the craft of dying, and by the mixture of divers things taken of right vile creatures. The gold which by craft is turned into their garments, what is it else but earth ? The precious stones likewise be gathered, some out of beetles, some out of fishes, some out of the sea, some out of the earth. In these things stand all the

glorious sight of man, and this is not his own natural glory... (B2r and v). Take away the glistering garments, take away the cloth of gold, take away the precious stones and the other riches of apparel, and what difference is betwixt an emperor and another poor man? Take from the ladies their gay clothes, chains and other jewels, and what difference of them, as concerning this outward glory, and of a poor woman? (B2v).

Among the princes of this world, did Fisher include the papal legate, Cardinal Wolsey, hardly less ostentatious at the Field than Henry? Parading before Wolsey were fifty gentlemen of his household on horseback and fifty ushers carrying gold maces with one end as large as a man's head, followed by his crimson-velveted crossbearer with golden hood, two lackeys in cloth of gold, four guards, and two velvet-clad young men wearing the Cardinal's device back and front and carrying gold batons as one carries poleaxes. Wolsey himself wore velvet overlaying figured crimson velvet. But as a sign of humility the cardinal rode not a horse but a mule. If the weight of the velvet-laden legate was not enough for his bearded mule, the humble animal was fitted out with headstall, studs, buckles, and stirrups, all of fine gold. Mule and cardinal were then followed by a number of bishops and one-hundred archers of the king's guard (*L & P*, 304). Did Fisher look at Wolsey's retinue and remember the sermons on the Penitential Psalms he had preached at the behest of the Lady Margaret? It was a more glorious sight to see St. Paul, Fisher had said in his sermon on Psalm 101/102, who earned his living by his own labor, in hunger, in thirst, in watching, and in cold, teaching the gospel by land and sea,

than to behold now the archbishops and bishops in their apparel, be it never so rich. In that time were no chalices of gold, but then was [sic] many golden priests, now be many chalices of gold, and almost no golden priests... (*EW* 181).<sup>14</sup>

### III

If both the joys and the glories of the Field are counterfeits, the reality is the heaven Fisher is urging his congregation to live so as to enter quickly after their deaths. Unlike the unsubstantial glories of the Field, heavenly glory is of substance:

But the glorious apparel of the blessed angels and of the blessed saints... is so annexed and so adjoined unto them, and it is so fastened unto their substance that it cannot be taken away. They never lay it apart; they never put it off, nor they need not for it never fadeth nor withereth, nor may in no wise impair. It is the garment of glorious immortality, more bright than the sun (B3r).

In the reality of heaven, « O what marvelous joy shall it be to see that glorious sight of that court, where the least groom is clad so richly above all the kings and princes of this world! » (B3r). In her book on the Field, Joycelyne Gledhill Russell writes: « It would probably be fair to suggest that the intention of this 'memorable meeting' was to deceive. »<sup>15</sup> No one, however, deceived Fisher, and it is in the evocation of the sight of the Trinity that Fisher demonstrates most acutely the clarity of his perception of the Field of Cloth of Gold:

Specially to see the glorious virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, and the Queen of that most glorious kingdom. But above all other things, to see that glory, that worthiness, that excellency of that glorious Trinity... These three, though they be three divers persons, yet they be but one God perfect knit together in a perfect amity, in one love, in one will, in one wisdom, in one power inseparably (B3v).

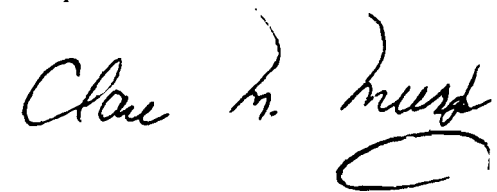
Thus Fisher depicts the heavenly; but in the counterfeit of the Field:

Tho[se] three princes, of whom we spake of before, were not so, but they had divers wills, divers counsels, and no perdurable amity, as after that did well appear. These princes were mortal and mutable, and so their will did change & not abide (B3v).

In heaven, however, « is the very true joy, the most blessed and excellent glory that never shall have end » (B4r).

The counterfeit gold is that of Wolsey and his ornaments, the real, that of Fisher and his golden priesthood.

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### NOTES

1. See André Castelot, *François Ier* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1983), p. 134.

2. *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, Arranged and Catalogued by J.S. Brewer, Vol. VIII, Part I (London: Longmans,

Green, Reader & Dyer, 1867), p. 245. All further references to this volume of *L & P* will be given in the body of the text.

3. John Bruce's *Archaeologia*, quoted in Charles Henry Cooper, *Memoir of Margaret, Countess of Richmond and Darby* (Cambridge : Deighton Bell and Co., 1874), p. 74 n. 1 ; see also p. 253.

4. *La Vie et l'Oeuvre de John Fisher* (Angers : Editions Moreana, 1972), p. 80 : « Quoi qu'il en fût de son dépaysement, il put observer en toute liberté ce magnifique théâtre de plein air et noter en passant mille détails pittoresques... »

5. *Here after ensueth two fruytfull Sermons, made & compyled by the ryght Reuerende father in god John Fysshier / Doctour of Dyuynte and Bysshop of Rochester* (London : W. Rastell, 28 June 1532). Apparently this is the only printing of these sermons and according to E.E. Reynolds [*St John Fisher* (Wheatthampstead : Anthony Clarke Books, 1972), p. 85 n. 2], of this printing there are only four known copies, one in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and three in the United States. The text quoted here is that of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, a copy that bears the bookplates of two previous private owners. Marie Denise Sullivan edited *A Critical Edition of the « Two Fruytfull Sermons » of St. John Fisher* for a 1965 thesis at Notre Dame University, South Bend, Indiana. All further references to the Sermons will be given in the body of the text by Signature. Most spelling and some punctuation are modernized.

6. Castelot, p. 139.

7. *The English Works of John Fisher*, collected by John E.B. Mayor, Part I (London : EETS, 1876, rpt. 1935), pp. 269-70. All further references to this collection will be given in the body of the text as *EW*.

8. *Henry VIII*, Vol. I (London : T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1904), p. 215. All further references to this work will be given in the body of the text.

9. In a 1527 dedication letter of Fisher to Bishop Fox of Winchester, quoted in Reynolds, p. 13.

10. J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (London : Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), p. 77.

11. Scarisbrick, p. 76.

12. In his sermon on Psalm 101/102, Fisher had used dust as a simile for those who easily succumb to temptation : « Such light and evil-disposed people of the world be in comparison like dust that is soon blown away from the ground with every blast of wind ». Those, on the other hand, who « though they be many times overthrown by the sudden blast of temptation, » rise again to wash themselves with their own tears, and by penance make themselves « strong and tough » are like « dust [which], when it is tempered and made moist with water, waxeth tough in manner as earth or clay, so that then it cannot lightly be blown away with a blast of wind » (*EW* 175). Later in that same sermon Fisher makes an apocalyptic reference to the time « when our Lord of his goodness shall

change and turn the soft and slippery dust, signifying wretched sinners, into tough earth by weeping and true penance for their sins, and after that make them hard as stones by burning charity... » (*EW* 190).

13. *Renaissance et Réforme : Histoire de France au XVIe Siècle* (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1982), p. 277.

14. In a passage of *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) on the use of golden chalices, Thomas More seems to contradict his friend Fisher in arguing for the liturgical use of « the best and moost precyous of suche metals » as God's goodness « giueth unto man » [*The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. VI, Thomas M.C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard C. Marius, eds. (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 40-41]. For the background of More's discussion, see pp. 608 and 758-9 of this edition. *Moreana* 21 (February 1969), p. 62, considers both Fisher and More on golden priests and golden chalices, while *Moreana* 35 (September 1972), p. 90, presents some further background, especially to the *Heresies* statement, both entries by Germain Marc'hadour. Fisher's intention, however, is clear from its context in his sermon on Psalm 101/102 : The golden chalice serves as a metaphor for clerical ornamentation : « truly neyther gold, precious stones, nor gloryous bodily garments be not the cause wherfore kings and princes of the world shoulde dread God and his church, for doubtless they have farr more worldly riches than we have, but holy doctrine, good life and example of honest conversation be the occasions whereby good and holy men, also wicked and cruel people are moved to love and fear Almighty God » (*EW* 181).

15. *The Field of Cloth of Gold : Men and Manners in 1520* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 182.

