CHAPTER FOUR

REPRESENTATION IN THEOLOGY

O Blessed glorious Trinity,
Bones to Philosophy, but milke to faith,
Which, as wise serpents, diversly
Most slipperinesse, yet most entanglings hath
John Donne, ‘A Litany’

Introduction

One of the most striking features of Hobbes’s theory of representation is his attempt to rewrite the central dogma of Christian theology in terms of a concept of representation he first devised for his politics.¹ This is the dogma of the Trinity, according to which God is triune, existing as three persons in one being.

It was the Latin theologian Tertullian, a converted lawyer, who first fixed the language of Trinitarian orthodoxy by applying the word persona to the Trinity, which he describes as ‘tres personae, una substantia’ (three persons, one substance). His innovative use of persona in this particular theological context is not altogether self-explanatory, and the question of what ‘person’ meant when applied to the triune God remained highly contentious, not least in seventeenth-century England.² Still, most of Hobbes’s contemporaries continued to follow the Boethian orthodoxy, embracing a definition of ‘person’ as a first, singular, subsistent, intelligent substance which clearly combined the Christian theology of the church fathers and the philosophy of Aristotle, with its ontology of substances and accidents.³ This is clear from

¹ As is clear from Hobbes’s exposition, representation in theology follows Hobbes’s account of representation in politics and not the other way around, as sometimes suggested. See, for instance, Tuck in Hobbes 1996, p. xli, n. 55.
² See Dixon 2003.
³ Boethius famously defines ‘person’ as ‘naturae rationabilis individua substantia’. Boethius 1973, p. 84. While setting forth his definition, however, Boethius also emphasises the original theatrical meaning of persona, making an explicit reference to the
theological treatises as well as the most popular devotional books of the time, such as *The Practice of Pietie* (1631), in which the Puritan Lewes Bayly maintained that the three divine persons ‘are not severall substances, but three distinct subsistences; or three divers manner of being of one and the same substance, and Divine Essence’, so that ‘a Person in the Godhead, is an individual understanding and incommunicable Subsistence, living of itselse, and not sustained by another’.

In Hobbes’s view such Hellenised theological renderings of the Trinity were errors in construal, an example of insignificant speech, which uses words without any correspondence in the mind, ‘through misunderstanding of the words they have received’. This attack aims, for instance, at the interpretation of words not found in Scripture, such as ‘Trinity’ or ‘person’, according to concepts derived from Greek philosophy, such as ‘homoousios’, ‘hypostasis’, ‘subsistent subject’, ‘substance’ or ‘essence’, that were mingled with Scripture in the explanation of the Trinitarian ‘mystery’. By contrast, Hobbes’s project of the reformation of theology is led by an impetus to expurgate from its ‘difficult points’ any remnants of the ‘Tenets of Vain Philosophy’, especially those Aristotelian categories, transmitted by the patristic tradition, which stood in the way of a reformed ‘first philosophy’ and a sound civil science. Therefore, Hobbes’s treatment of the Trinity takes a contrasting path, that of philological reconstruction, and aims to take words as used in common speech, since common men ‘seldome speak Insignificantly’. These men are to be delivered from abuses of Scripture, which draw ancient theatrical masks called *personae*, as well as to the etymology of *persona* as from *personando*, that is, ‘sounding through’. Ibid., p. 86.

---

4 Bayly 1631, pp. 5, 6.
6 Ibid., pp. 59 and 462. For the de-Hellenisation impetus underpinning Hobbes’s reformed theology, see Wright 1999.
7 Hobbes 1996, p. 59. Gianni Paganini has argued that Lorenzo Valla is a probable humanist source of Hobbes’s Trinitarian theology, as in the fifteenth century Valla controversially confronted the Boethian definition of ‘person’ by maintaining that the three divine persons should be read after the Latin notion of person as some ‘quality’ whereby we differ from one another; for instance, the different professional, social and familial roles we commonly impersonate. See Valla 1686, lib. 6, ch. xxxiv, Ll4 and Paganini 2001, especially pp. 30–6. Although there are obvious continuities between Valla’s and Hobbes’s anti-clerical and anti-Scholastic project of leaving behind the Aristotelian categories in favour of common speech, any suggestion that Hobbes is historically dependent on Valla for his particular use of the concept of ‘person’ should be rejected, as Hobbes may have derived the relevant idea independently from a prior source, namely Cicero, as Hobbes repeatedly claims (see below). (Paganini discounts Hobbes’s reference to Cicero as merely a humanist commonplace.)