Cornelis Anthonisz’s Representation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: A Protestant Interpretation of the Biblical Text*

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Cornelis Anthonisz’s representation of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) in six woodcuts is an exceptional work. Most likely executed during the 1540’s, the prints differ radically from other depictions of the subject produced in the Netherlands during the sixteenth century.1 Whereas the latter are basically naturalistic in character and adhere to the biblical text, deviating from it only to pad the bare bones of the story with the flesh of narrative detail2, Anthonisz’s series includes a host of allegorical figures, symbols, and non-narrative scenes which are not mentioned in the biblical text. Moreover, while such features were common in medieval representations of the parable3, their presence in the woodcuts cannot be considered merely anachronistic, as many of them are unique to Anthonisz’s prints. As will be demonstrated, Anthonisz invented some of these features and derived others from plays, sermons, and theological commentaries in order to convey Protestant beliefs. This, too, sets the series of woodcuts apart from other Netherlandish depictions of the subject; it is the only one that presents an explicitly sectarian interpretation of the parable.4

Though other Netherlandish artists did not employ the parable to convey religious propaganda, their colleagues in the theater did. Following the advent of the Reformation, Protestant playwrights in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Northern Europe seized upon the story of the prodigal son as an ideal vehicle for presenting the belief that man is saved by grace rather than by merit.5 Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the sources to which Anthonisz turned for inspiration was a Protestant drama, Gulielmus Gnapheus’ Acolastus. This play was easily the most popular of the prodigal son dramas; it was printed in a variety of languages no less than forty-eight times between 1529, when it was first performed in The Hague, and 1585.6

It is a scene in Acolastus that accounts for the only unusual feature in the first of Anthonisz’s woodcuts. In the foreground of this print, the prodigal’s father gives the youth his share of goods and in the background the youth departs, standard scenes in depictions of the parable (fig. 1). Unprecedented, however, is the presence of Conscientia (Conscience), who holds up the tablets of the Law, while the father attempts to direct his son’s attention to them. The prodigal is not interested and resolutely turns his back on the displayed tablets. This incident recalls a similar episode in Acolastus, an episode which is also employed to show that the prodigal refuses to heed his father’s words and is determined only to
pursue pleasure. In the play, the father gives his son, Acolastus, the book of the Law which the youth initially accepts but then discards at the advice of a disreputable companion.7

The prodigal continues to be undisturbed by the Law or the promptings of his conscience in the second print (fig. 2). For such freedom from care as well as for the pleasures he enjoys, the youth is indebted to his host, Mundus (World), who subdues Conscience (still clasping the tablets of the Law) by crushing her underfoot. In this print, the portrayal of the prodigal – embraced by a courtesan while his companions drink, dice, play musical instruments, and rob him of his purse – resembles numerous nearly contemporary renditions of the prodigal son carousing and other moralizing inn scenes.8 But while his contemporaries depict the prodigal in the company of ordinary people, Anthonisz represents him amid a host of allegorical figures, who play the same roles. For example, the courtesan is Caro (Carnal Love), with whom the prodigal is so enamoured that he fails to perceive that the procuress, Avaritia (Avarice), has stolen his purse and is passing it on to her accomplice, Proprium Commodum (Self-Interest). Clearly, the prodigal’s reason and powers of perception are adversely affected by his pursuit of sensual pleasure. That this is the case is underscored by the inclusion of Ratio (Reason), shown playing the bagpipes, an instrument symbolic of lust. Even without the presence of Mundus, whose posture and belled cap (draped over his shoulders) indicate that he plays the moralizing role of the fool, it is apparent that the prodigal is engaged in extremely foolish behavior that will end in sorrow. Figures bearing the same names and/or fulfilling the same functions appear in an earlier depiction of the parable, a set of two tapestries woven in Brussels around 1485 (Louisville, J. B. Speed Museum and Baltimore, The Walters Art Gallery).9 The other personifications in this scene, however, are unusual.

Vanitas (Vanity) portrayed in the act of blowing bubbles is present in no other rendition of the carousing episode, though the transitory nature of the entertainment provided by the world is remarked upon in theological commentaries. Jerome, for instance, writes that riotous living is hostile to both the virtues and God; it ‘...destroys the substance of the father and charming with pleasures of the moment does not permit future poverty to be thought of’.10 The inclusion of Vanity, though unusual, does not give Anthonisz’s work a meaning that distinguishes it from other sixteenth-century illustrations of the carousing episode. Indeed, it reinforces the warning conveyed by such works – the message that worldly pleasures are brief and inevitably lead to deprivation. The woman labelled Haeris (Heresy), who holds a fox and bears a scorpion on her head11, and the monster, spewing clouds of vapor, designated as Spiritus Erronci & Fanatici (Erroneous and Fanatical Spirits), on the other hand, are different. They demonstrate that the activities portrayed are hostile to God, and they remind the viewer that the distant country to which the prodigal journeyed upon leaving home is a place of sin far from God.12 Thus they introduce a specifically religious note to what