# Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon for the Beggers* ([Antwerp: Johannes Grapheus, 1529;] *STC* 10883)

*A Supplicacyon for the Beggers* is a short and rhetorically powerfully treatise — written by Simon Fish, a reformer of otherwise marginal importance — in a style that superficially resembles an appeal to Henry VIII made on behalf of his poor and destitute subjects. Its actual purpose, however, as rapidly becomes apparent, is to launch a searing attack against the clergy (whose success as beggars of a less worthy kind had supposedly impoverished the whole realm) and to encourage Henry to undertake drastic measures to restrict their activities. The radical solution which Fish proposes is to abolish religious orders entirely, thus leaving only the secular clergy to minister to the spiritual needs of their congregations and to force the numerous monks and friars whom this would dispossess into ordinary employment. This audacious series of recommendations has obvious similarities with the events which actually transpired during the 1530s — although when Henry did undertake the dissolution of the monasteries he was little inclined to fritter the proceeds away on the relief of the poor. It is thus both tempting and rewarding to view the treatise as a trenchant prefiguration of later political events, and indeed many scholars believe the work genuinely to have had a significant impact on the process of ecclesiastical reform. [1] This may well be attributable in part to the ambitious conjunction of style and subject matter which the *Supplicacyon* performs: while its ostensible concern with issues of political importance places it within the ‘advice to princes’ genre, its truculent and hectoring language is unmistakably that of a religious polemic. It is perhaps also for this reason that the work is still of interest to modern scholars. Whereas most of the Reformation works which we read are primarily concerned with matters of doctrine and exegesis, the *Supplicacyon for the Beggers* provides a valuable insight into social and economic aspects of the English Reformation — one which is almost unparalleled in its concision and lucidity.

The author of this work, Simon Fish, is an enigmatic figure. He entered Gray’s Inn in around 1525, where he is believed to have become acquainted with various other reformers. [2] (It has been suggested that he had previously studied in Oxford, though there is no evidence to support this claim.) [3] In the years which followed, during which he resided in Whitefriars, his growing abhorrence of clerical wealth and his affinity with Protestantism brought him into repeated conflict with the authorities. First, in the Christmas season of 1526–27, he was involved in a play in which Cardinal Wolsey was personally satirised, an enterprise which forced him to seek sanctuary in the Low Countries. Then, following his return several months later, Fish was again in trouble, this time for smuggling certain proscribed books (including Tyndale’s *New Testament*) and was once again compelled to shelter himself abroad.

It was during this second period of exile (probably towards the end of 1528) that Fish set about writing his *Supplicacyon for the Beggers*. It was printed by Johannes Grapheus of Antwerp, a noted controversialist and reformer, and then smuggled to England. As a treatise of slender proportions — one that had been printed (and, no doubt, composed) as a single octavo gathering — this work would have been a highly suitable propaganda tool, one in which affordability and ease of concealment were readily combined. Its reception in England appears to have been quite avid, and it is reported (though somewhat confusedly) that the king himself was presented with a copy. In Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* the event is generously documented with two entirely separate accounts. One version describes how two merchants, George Elyot and George Robinson, were discovered in

1. William A. Clebsch, *England’s Earliest Protestants* (New Haven, 1964), pp. 242–43, 295; Rainer Pineas, ‘Thomas More’s Controversy with Simon Fish’ in *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 7:1 (Winter, 1967), 15–28; J. J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 247–48; Steven W. Haas, ‘Simon Fish, William Tyndale, and Sir Thomas More’s “Lutheran Conspiracy”’, *Ecclesiastical History* 23 (1972), 125–136; Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 118, 173.

2. The main figure in this respect appears to have been Robert Necton, whose activities as a smuggler of Bibles may well have prompted Fish to become involved in this activity himself. See Haas, p. 132.

3. J.S.W. Helt, ‘Fish, Simon (*d.* 1531)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9486 [accessed 17 June 2008].

4. *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. *S.R.* Cattley, 8 vols (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1837–41), 4, 657.

5. Foxe, *Acts*, vol. 4, 657. While the former account seems to have some basis in contemporary archival sources (see Eric Ives, *Anne Boleyn* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 133 n), the latter version has a suspicious echo of the supposed means by which Tyndale’s *Obedience of a Christian Man* was brought to Henry’s attention (see William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, ed. David Daniell (London: Penguin, 2000), p. xxiv).

6. Foxe, *Acts*, vol. 4, 657. The detail concerning the signet ring is especially suspect on account of its likeness to a similar incident which is reported between Henry and Thomas Cranmer at the height of the 'Prebendaries Plot' in 1543, Foxe, *Acts*, vol. 8, 25–26.

7. Thomas More, *The vvorkes of Sir Thomas More Knyght, sometyme Lorde Chauncellour of England, wrytten by him in the Englysh tonge* (London, 1557; *STC* 18076), p. 881.

8. The mandate was originally issued by Archbishop Warham on 4 November 1526 and was mainly intended to target the influx of vernacular scripture, but was expanded in manuscript sometime during 1529 (or shortly thereafter) to encompass a larger swathe of Protestant writings, including those by Tyndale, Luther, and Zwingli: David Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae* (London, 1737), vol. 3, 706f., citing the Exeter Register (Voysey), fol. 62. See also William A. Clebsch, *England’s Earliest Protestants* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 262.

9. See also the similar legislation of 1495 (11 Henry VII, c.2) which this later act revised, partly by making the dispensations which it offered to the unfit more explicit.

10. The association between Henry VIII and King David was widespread in this period, although the part of Goliath was usually assigned to the Pope. See John N. King, *Royal Tudor Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 80.

11. Having presumably read *A Supplicacyon for the Beggers* in 1529, Sir Thomas More singled it out for particular condemnation the following year by issuing a point-by-point refutation entitled *The supplycacyon of soulys* (*STC* 18092). In this work, the souls of purgatory are made — through an elaborate

possession of the pamphlet and then summoned before the king. They were required to deliver it to him first aurally and then physically, and were then sworn to secrecy in the matter. [4] The other recounts how a copy was sent to Anne Boleyn directly from Germany (before March 1529), who then, at the entreaty of her brother, delivered her copy to Henry. [5] This account includes the further (slightly far-fetched) narration of how the king brought Simon Fish out of hiding and 'embraced him with loving countenance', before then entrusting him with a signet ring to protect him from his adversaries. [6] These corresponding accounts, whereby the treatise was brought to Henry both by foreign merchants and through his own court, seem calculated (irrespective of their underlying veracity) to illustrate the fulfilment of the book's supplicatory design.

Despite the controversy which the *Supplicacyon* had apparently provoked, Simon Fish nevertheless decided to return from exile in 1529 and once again became resident within the precincts of London. In Foxe's account, Simon Fish had returned secretly, and then was subsequently granted royal protection. The Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, had, in the same account, briefly attempted to persecute his wife, but had not been at liberty to pursue Simon himself. Yet curiously enough, in More's own writings, he cites Fish as a successfully reformed heretic, stating how God 'gaue hym suche grace afterwarde, that he was sory for that good zeale, & repended hymselfe and came into the churche agayne, and forsoke and forsware all the whole hill of those heresyes'. [7] The true status of his beliefs at this stage is in fact likely to remain unknown, since he was struck down by the plague in 1531 and died suddenly.

though somewhat laboured use of prosopopeia — to appeal against the abolition of praying for the departed which Simon Fish's plans would have entailed.

12. Flora Lewis, ' "Garnished with gloryous tytles": Indulgences in Printed Books of Hours in England', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 10:5 (1995), 577—90 (p. 577); Charles C. Butterworth, *The English Primers, 1529—1545, their Publication and Connection with the English Bible and the Reformation in England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), pp. 279—85.

13. Foxe, *Acts* vol. 4, 659.

14. For a localised example of the decline in traditional acts of charity, see Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 104—06.

15. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 3. 8, 4. 12, 15. 58; Ephesians 4. 28.

The official reception which *A Supplicacyon for the Beggers* received in England was not favourable, and there were active steps taken to bring about its suppression. Within months of its publication it was added to an index of prohibited books which had been newly expanded through the collaboration of Sir Thomas More and Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London.[8] This attempt at censorship (virtually unprecedented in England) was mostly successful in suppressing the work until the closing years of Henry's reign, although there was a Latin version — the *Supplicatoris libellus pauperum et egentium* — which was printed in London during 1530. There had also been a German version printed on the continent late the previous year, translated by Sebastian Franck, and published under the title *Klagbrieff oder Supplication der Armen dürfftigen in Engenlandt*. But in England the next edition was not printed until 1546, when it was issued alongside Henry Brinkelow's *A Supplication of the poore Commons* (*STC* 10884) through the likely efforts of John Day and William Seres. It was also reproduced in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* in 1563 and was printed with a marginal gloss in all editions from 1570 onwards. A revised edition was also made available in 1680 — complete with an illustrative woodcut of a beggar supplicating himself before a king — under the more tendentious heading of 'The Very Beggars Petition Against Popery' (Wing F983). By this stage, the reputation of the work as a classic piece of Reformation propaganda seems already to have been well established.

The treatise itself begins with a forceful assertion of its central conceit — namely the adverse comparison between the honest beggars whose interests the author supposedly champions and the 'wretched hidous' (sig. A1[v]) clergy who obtain their income through acts of bullying exaction. The former group are described as 'nedy, impotent, blinde, lame, and sike, that live onely by almesse', whilst the latter are derided as 'an other sort (not of impotent but) of strong puissaunt and counterfeit holy, and ydell beggers and vacabundes' (sig. A1[v]). This language closely recalls that of existing vagrancy legislation, especially the act of 1504 which contained the most recent statutory pronouncements on the subject (19 Henry VII, c.12).[9] This stated, on the one hand, that all 'vagabundes idell people and suspect persons lyvyng suspeciously' should be punished with the stocks and then dispatched to their town of origin; yet conceded on the other that 'deminucion of punysshment' should be allowed to people 'in grete siknes and persons being impotent, and above the age of lx yeres'. The consequent distinction between the able-bodied and the afflicted was one of definite importance, since it effectively delineated lawful from unlawful forms of destitution. The description by Simon Fish of ordinary beggars as 'impotent' and clergymen as 'idle' should thus be seen as a conscious attempt to utilise this same distinction within a polemical setting and thereby situate his work within a legally coherent framework.

The use of these terms entails a further degree of subtlety, since by omitting to mention any genuine beggars who are not also 'impotent', the author is able to retain 'idle' solely for the derision of his clerical opponents. Indeed, while the beggars which Fish purportedly strives to have re-enfranchised are conveniently grouped together as a single

homogenous entity, the Church is by contrast ridiculed on account of the specious variety of titles with which it adorns its clergy: ‘Bisshoppes, Abbottes, Priours, Deacons, Archedeacons, Suffraganes, Prestes, Monkes, Chanons, Freres, Pardoners and Somners’ (sig. A1v). This litany of clerical offices stands in tacit contrast to the simple New Testament distinction between bishops and deacons (Philippians 1.1; 1 Timothy 1–13). The same device of enumerating at length the ecclesiastical structures of the Church of Rome, as a means of illustrating its copious excess, was a popular trope amongst reformist writers such as William Tyndale and John Bale.

The main political aim of the treatise is to drive a wedge between Henry VIII and the clergy, one which it mainly achieves by presenting the latter as seditious followers of Rome, intent on despoiling the kingdom from within its very borders. This process of abrogation has, according to Fish, already reached an advanced stage. The clergy have begged so forcefully and so successfully that they ‘haue gotten ynto theyre hondes more then the therd part’ (sig. A1v) of the realm, and have effectively annexed for themselves a kingdom within the king’s rightful territories. This alleged encroachment of the sacred upon the temporal is thus expressed in terms of a rupture within the body politic itself, whereby a substantial proportion of the kingdom, containing ‘the goodliest lordshippes, maners, londes, and territories’ (sig. A1v) are no longer in the ultimate possession of their rightful monarch. This overt attempt to rouse Henry VIII into action is sustained through the series of provocative questions which Fish intersperses throughout the treatise: ‘whate tiraunt euer oppressed the people like this cruell and vengeable generacion? whate subiectes shall be abill to helpe theire prince that be after this facion yerely polled?’ (sig. A2v) The inability of the people to support their monarch threatens Henry with political impotence, while the suggestion of a tyrant figure within the realm itself offers him the attractive challenge of liberating his own subjects. Thus, in turning against the clergy, Henry is offered a repeat of the domestic conquest made by his father and the ready fulfilment of his growing self-identification with the biblical King David — slaying the Goliath of an overweening and rapacious Church.[10]

The alleged subjugation of the English people is then used as the pretext for a series of historical comparisons, in which England is unable to match the achievements of legend and antiquity because of its current oppression: ‘The danes nether the Saxons yn the time of the auncient Britons shulde neuer ben abill to haue brought theire armies from so farre hither ynto your lond to haue conquered it if they had at that time suche a sort of idell glotons to finde at home’ (sig. A2v). Similarly, Greeks, Romans, and ‘nobill king Arthur’ could not have prospered under exactions of the clergy (sig. A2v). The clergy are a parasitic force which prevents the nation from flourishing as it ought, whose effective suppression is requisite to anything glorious or magisterial to which Henry might aspire. This strategy of appealing to the king’s sense of ambition is perhaps also apparent from the refusal, when speaking of the contemporary context, to extol any immediate political rivals, but instead to situate his example safely outside the bounds of Christendom: ‘The Turke nowe yn youre tyme shulde neuer be abill to get so moche grounde [...] if he had yn his empire suche a sort of locusts to deuoure his substance’ (sig. A3r). This final analogy shows the whole of Europe to be under threat from a common enemy, whose effect is comparable to the plagues of the Old Testament. The attempt to spur Henry into action is also advanced through a teasing, questioning refrain, attacking the disobedience which the clergy have come to display – ‘where was their obedience become that shuld haue byn subiect vnder his highe power yn this mater?’ (sig. A3v); ‘Where is theire obedience become that shulde be vnder his hyghe power in this mater?’ (sig. A4v) – before finally culminating in the alluring suggestion that once the clergy are forcefully repressed, ‘Then shall you haue full obedience of your people’ (sig. A8r). For many traditionally minded readers (including Sir Thomas More)[11] this repeated emphasis on ‘obedience’ (which is invoked 10 times) and on accusations of clerical sedition must surely have evoked strong echoes of that more notable and despised reformer, William Tyndale.

The main analytical foundation of the argument comprises a bold series of numerical deductions, according to which he purports to expose the full scale of the Church’s copious wealth. It is through this means that Fish attempts to demonstrate plainly that things are ‘farre out of ioynt’ (sig. A2r). The kingdom contains 52,000 parish churches, each of which serves 10 households, each of which is required to pay one penny per quarter to each of the five main religious orders. This equates to 20 pence per household given to religious orders, which in turn equates to 43,333 pounds, 6 shillings, and 8 pence given in total each year to these religious bodies. Though the figures which Fish uses must in fact be taken as averages and estimates, he nevertheless cites them as simple and uncomplicated facts, without any further explanation of their meaning or derivation. This mathematically precise yet methodologically suspect use of statistics would have been a potent means of stirring up unrest. Indeed, for most ordinary readers, these figures would have been almost unimaginably large, and few can have been qualified to see them in any correctly proportionate context. Without knowledge of the macro-economic situation in England at large — the size of tax revenues, the scale of import duties, or the levels of income derived from royal estates — it would surely have been impossible to make suitable comparisons. The aim of such figures is rather, it seems, simply to kindle incredulity through their sheer magnitude. This was certainly one function, though there were probably others. The attempt, however brazen, to attach concrete figures to these much resented monastic revenues would surely have made the wealth-laden monasteries an attractive prospect both for

aspiring regional landowners as well as for the magisterial greed of King Henry himself.

Yet although rhetorically powerful, this crucial component in Fish’s argument would surely have had its limitations, owing to its obvious hyperbole. There is, in particular, an unsettling likeness between the vast (yet also minutely specified) numbers which Fish provides and the inordinately sized indulgences which appeared in many traditional books of hours – especially those printed by François Regnault. The eschatological privileges which these books offered had become a matter of some controversy, having been hotly condemned by Martin Luther in his 1522 *Betbüchlein*, much of which was translated by William Marshall in his primer of 1534 (*STC* 15986).[12] This aspect of Fish’s work may well have caused some discomfort even among the supporters of the Reformation. In his reproduction of the *Supplication*, John Foxe makes a guarded apology for Fish’s hyperbolical reasoning in a sidenote, stating that ‘albeit the said parishes do not amount now, to the same rate of 52,000, yet nevertheless the number, no doubt, is great, and therefore the quarterage of the friars cannot be little, but riseth to a great penny through the realm: whereupon the scope of this man’s reason soundeth to good purpose.’[13] The figures have, in effect, been fabricated, yet they do at least serve to demonstrate a worthwhile point.

Having assured the reader of the superabundance of clerical wealth, the author seeks then to demonstrate the grossly disproportionate number of beneficiaries: ‘Compare theim to the nomber of men, so are they not the .C. person’ and not one person in four times that number if women and children are included in the statistic (sig. A3r). Were the clergy granted no more than one four-hundredth of the nation’s wealth (rather than the half which Fish now alleges they receive) then even this would be ‘to moche for thiem except they did laboure’ (sig. A3r), and yet in fact the clergy continue to take the easy option, living off their copious unearned income whilst wilfully eschewing all honest forms of employment. It is for this reason, we are told, that they should be reproved as ‘idle beggars’ and punished accordingly for their idleness. The claim, however, that the clergy account only for a small proportion of the total population is somewhat at odds with their earlier depiction as being very ‘great in nombre’. Fish wants to have it both ways. The corollary explanation for this seeming inconsistency is that Fish combines a general dislike for the size and complexity of the regular clerical hierarchy with a particular opposition to the parasitical religious orders which he wishes to see abolished. Whether or not such an explanation seems convincing, the question mark which it raises is an indication that the author was more concerned with his polemical impact than with strict analytical consistency.

As the treatise progresses towards its conclusion it attempts to reinforce its argument with recourse to a number of popular complaints against clerical malpractice. The clergy are unchaste and licentious people, who use their ‘superfluous rychesse’ to cause ‘wimen to runne awey from theire husbondes’ (sig. A4r) and poor labours to seek better wages by becoming ‘baude to a prest, a monke, or a frere’ (sig. A4v). For the unwitting families that become embroiled in these unsavoury dealings, they can expect a future filled with the stigma of known misdoings and illegitimate children, leading in turn to ‘ydelnesse[,] theft and beggeri’ for ‘both man[,] wife and children’, while the clergy continue to live in wealth and comfort (sig. A4v). Comfort, that is, except for ‘the pokes [and] lepry’ which they are accused of spreading through their promiscuous living. In all, they have ‘made an hundred ydell hores yn [the] realme whiche wolde haue gotten theyre lyuing honestly’ (sig. A4r), and brought the entire kingdom into moral degradation. Besides the simple crimes of ‘robbery, trespas, maiheme’ (sig. A5r), and other licentious offences, there additionally stands the more theologically loaded charge of their having strived to conceal their ‘cloked ypochrisi’ by hindering the Bible from going ‘a brode yn [its] moder tong’ (sig. A6v). There is also a somewhat topical allusion to Richard Hunne, who died suspiciously while in custody during 1514 — and who, having launched an action of *praemunire* against an ecclesiastical court which had excommunicated him, had been charged with heresy and imprisoned in the Lollards’ Tower at St Paul’s Cathedral. The issue remained sensitive for years afterwards, as is apparent from *The enquirie and verdite of the quest panneld of the death of Richard Hune* (*STC* 13970) which was published in 1537, as well as the later and equally partisan treatment of the case by John Foxe.

Having mainly concerned itself with the numerous social ills for which the clergy are supposedly responsible, the treatise suddenly culminates with a rapid succession of proposals, in which he entreats the king to set these ‘sturdy lobbies a brode in the world to get wiues of theire own’ and to ‘get theire liuing with theire laboure in the swete of theire faces’ (sig. A8r). Those who resist should be tied to carts and ‘whipped naked about euery market towne til they will fall to laboure’. These extreme measures, according to Fish, will yield a plenitude of social benefits, and he ends his treatise by arranging twelve such benefits into a single, rhetorically powerful crescendo:

> Then shall aswell the nomber of oure forsaid monstruous sort as of the baudes, hores theues, and idell people decreace. Then shall these great yerely exaccions cease. Then shall not youre swerde, power, crowne, dignite, and obedience of your people be translated from you. Then shal you haue full obedience of your people. Then shall the idell people be set to worke. Then shall matrimony be moche better kept. Then shall the generation of your people be encreased. Then shall your comons encrease in richesse. Then shall the gospell be preached. Then shall none begge

> oure almesse from vs. Then shal we haue ynough and more then shall suffice vs, whiche shall be the best hospitall that euer was founded for vs. Then shall we daily pray to god for your most noble estate long to endure. (sig. A8[r])

The conscious and sustained intermingling of issues of religious and secular importance which this closing passage performs is in many respects central to the Protestant vision of politics. Though primarily an endorsement of socio-political reform, the aims which the *Supplication* seeks to advance are nevertheless closely congruent with the broader context of reformation theology. The exclusive soteriological import which the evangelical movement attached to 'faith' (and its corresponding disavowal of 'good works') demanded a radical overhaul of traditional practices of almsgiving. To the adherents of solifidianism, the charitable acts by which Christians had traditionally sought to ensure salvation were of no consequence in the eyes of God and could, moreover, present a dangerous distraction to people whose true calling lay in the reading (and believing) of Scripture. This progressive change in spiritual values is apparent in Tyndale's translations of the New Testament, in which caris is rendered as 'love' rather than 'charity'. The effect is to exchange an outward and practical virtue for a more inward and metaphysical alternative.

It is therefore possible to see the pamphlet which Simon Fish wrote as an attempt to take charity out of the hands of ordinary parishioners, and instead consolidate it within the hands of government officials, whose immediate interests were practical rather than spiritual.[14] This revised pattern for religious living, in which traditional good works are rejected and idleness is openly reproved, carries with it an implicit celebration of simple and honest labour – an ideal which for many reformers found its epitome in the Pauline analogy between physical and spiritual labour in the life of the pious Christian.[15] To this extent, the *Supplicacion* is also perhaps deserving of recognition as an early expression of the underlying Protestant work-ethic famously identified by Max Weber. What is on the one hand an obvious demand for ecclesiastical reform is simultaneously, on the other, one seeking economic progress, and one guided ultimately by the desire to see an entire population labouring as a single nation under God and his appointed sovereign. Though the full impact of this audacious polemic is difficult to ascertain so long after its publication, it is clear that many contemporary (and near contemporary) readers were firmly convinced of its importance. It is clear likewise, given the colourful blend of reformist zeal and persuasive political comment which the treatise achieves, that it very much deserves the attention of anyone with an interest in early Tudor England.

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