

An apology for this
book: authorial power
in the pilgrim's
progress



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John Bunyan, as he tells us in his prefatory remarks, didn't mean to write *Pilgrim's Progress*; it all happened while he was otherwise engaged. His Apology, at least at first, takes on the word's modern connotations. He regrets having inflicted the reader with the book, which wasn't his fault, and he seems on the verge of promising not to do it again. Even the aggressive act of publication is taken by the author out of the author's hands. Not knowing whose advice to follow, Bunyan prints "to prove then who advised for the best" (2), and lets the audience be the ultimate accountant. But after he has made sufficient excuses, he lets loose with pages of justification and outright praise for his book: "Art thou for something rare, and profitable?/ Wouldst thou see a Truth within a Fable" (6). This confidence is allowed by the earlier diffidence. Bunyan, following some dictates of nerve and etiquette, needs to make a protective abdication of his power as the author in order to proceed with the book. But it does not end with the Apology. Abdication of power is a prominent feature of Bunyan's style throughout his book, and it reflects the fissure at the heart of a writer in his position: when pursuing the ends of faith through the means of fiction, how far into God's territory can you intrude? In other words, when religion becomes art, who is the creator? Fiction is therefore a disturbing proposition. Bunyan's discomfort manifests itself in a certain unwillingness to go so far as to create a work of fiction, though fiction seems the natural inclination of his talent. Even his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, is full of vivid, homely metaphors that tend to expand into miniature narratives. Yet Christian's story is presented as a dream of the author's, something visited on him rather than created by him. And within that dream allegories are presented, stories are told, and of course, dreams are dreamt.

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Within the great narrative there are smaller narratives, and narratives within those as well. The effect of all these layers is to erode the boundaries of fiction and remove the teller. As in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the surrogate authors diffuse attention from the ultimate author, who, in Bunyan's case, may be doing something he shouldn't. For in Christianity, God is the ultimate author. And, in Protestantism especially, the Bible is the ultimate text. The Puritanical insistence on a return to that text, eschewing the trappings of Catholicism, created a vacuum for supporting mythology and tradition that could only be filled problematically. Protestantism was a young religion both lacking and ideologically opposed to the rituals that make religion comfortable. As *Pilgrim's Progress* demonstrates, the unassisted journey to God is the hardest and most dangerous path. But Protestant didactic fictions, helper texts like *Pilgrim's Progress*, had no certain place in a newly written tradition. Islam, for example, has a well defined system separating God's own words from various categories of story and criticism, with guidance as to the authority of each. For the Puritans, only the Bible was meant to have authority. It was not merely a young religion, but a religion committed to remaining young, defined by endless new encounters with one sacred text. The primacy of the bible conflicts with the needs of the writer. The Bible is not on par with the Romans and Greeks that formed Milton's tradition, nor the Romances that formed Bunyan's. It is the truth, and its author is God. But writing a new text demands that the Bible become, in some measure, just another source. A writer must be able to borrow from, steal from and manipulate his sources. This amounts to an assertion of power over the author, an act of one up-manship. How do you appropriate the words of God?

Can the Bible be just another text? In *Grace Abounding*, the 'fiend' of <https://assignbuster.com/an-apology-for-this-book-authorial-power-in-the-pilgrims-progress/>

Bunyan's own doubt suggests:...whether the holy Scriptures were not rather a fable and cunning story, than the holy and pure word of God?...The tempter would much assault me with this: How can you tell but that the Turks had as good scriptures to prove their Mahomet the savior, as we have to prove our Jesus is... Everyone doth think his own religion rightest, both Jews, and Moors, and Pagans; and how if all our faith, and Christ, and Scriptures, should be a think-so too? -(27)No wonder Bunyan is so cautious about the tendency of fiction to demote the Bible or One Book to one book among many: He actually- though the thought is foisted off onto a devil- flirted with that outrageous idea. Vincent Newey, noting that Bunyan was treading dangerous ground, identifies Pilgrim's Progress as a preliminary force in a movement that has "left us largely god-less and without faith... adventurers seeking our treasure within the consciousness... or in the emotional lessons or intriguing structures of the text itself, or wherever it might be found" (28). Bunyan is certainly not god-less, but, as Newey points out, his creation of an inwardly reliant hero in a world where the mysticism of the holy spirit is hardly felt might have helped make god-lessness a possibility. The story is about Christian, not God. God is less a pervasive presence than an occasional help on the journey. Therefore, the danger of Christian's maker slipping into the role of creator is always there. The tension between the demands of authorship and the demands of professorship is always there, defining Bunyan's use of allegory and the inconsistencies thereof. The best excuse for the romance format- the one given in the Apology- is that of straight allegory: the adventures and obstacles encountered are not mere storytelling sensations, but edifying metaphors of the inward difficulties suffered by the seeker after God. But <https://assignbuster.com/an-apology-for-this-book-authorial-power-in-the-pilgrims-progress/>

Bunyan often swerves from that standard, occasionally delivering moments of supreme disorientation. In the second book, the helper Great-Heart says of the pilgrim Fearing, “ he had, I think, a Slow of Dispond in his mind, a Slow that he carried everywhere with him” (207). He had a slow of Dispond where? the allegorical reader is inclined to protest, on the grounds that a symbol walking through symbols cannot use symbols to describe other symbols, especially if they are already part of the symbolic landscape. But the anomalous sentence only throws light on the way Bunyan slips from one mode to another. The allegorical landscape becomes a Romantic and even a realistic one, while the component pilgrims become characters: “ Not Honesty in the abstract, but Honest is my name” (205). That last example, also from the second part, shows a certain awareness and acceptance of the fact that characters are being drawn. Indeed, although there are similar examples in the first part (Hopeful who is hopeful, for instance), the second part discards some of its trepidation. After the phenomenal success of his first book, he seems readier to claim the authorial role. The preface this time is no apology, but a fond address to his new creation, which is able to reply in Christiana’s voice. The character is not only allowed life within the romance/allegory, but has achieved enough vitality to exist outside it, and to speak to her creator. The creator is Bunyan, not God, but the authority of part one has somehow made that less problematic. This contrast between parts one and two is particularly revealing. N. H. Keeble, in his essay *Christiana’s Key*, wonders at the split made by critics between the two. He cites the careful touches of geography and motif that link them, supporting the idea that part two was written to bolster and complete the theology and story of part one: to show the various kinds of pilgrims, to show penitence in <https://assignbuster.com/an-apology-for-this-book-authorial-power-in-the-pilgrims-progress/>

a social rather than personal context, to include women. But it seems more likely that part two was written for the usual reason sequels are written: because the original was a success. This is not to say Bunyan had a mercenary motive. Rather, as it is made plain in the opening poem, Christian had become a famed trope, and his lend both confidence and a new subject to the author. The many references to part one create a cozy, excited feeling, the comfortable arousal of a reader being allowed to visit the landscape of a book in a new way. Christiana travels in her Christian's footsteps, revisiting her husband everywhere, and picking up companions who speak with awe of the legendary pilgrim. By following Christian's path as it is described in Bunyan's work, they achieve salvation. Part two is an investigation of part one's effect on the world. In it, the author gives himself supreme vindication, not, like a prophet, by declaring himself the mouthpiece of God, but by representing his efficacy through fiction. Like Dispondencie, Honest, and Feeble-mind, readers may follow the text and be saved. But the recursive nature of the justification again raises the perennial issue: the dissolution of God's authority into Bunyan's. Christiana's story is the story of Christian's success- but as a conversion text, or a work of fiction?

Works Cited
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