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Rastell's *Four elements:*
from "Moralité" to "Interlude"

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While recondite analogues and possible sources for the "scientific" content of William Rastell's interlude of *Four Elements* have been proposed,[1] it seems to have escaped notice that behind the interlude almost certainly, and at no great distance, lies a French morality claiming as its subject the same primary matter (as it were): *Moralité nouuelle des iiii elemens à XV personnaiges, c'est assavoir Raison, l'Homme, l'Air, le Feu, etc*. This text, of somewhat over a thousand mostly octosyllabic verses, has been assigned the number twenty-two in the so-called "Recueil Trepperel". That collection consists of thirty-five farces, *sotties*, moralities and other miscellaneous pieces issued between 1460 and 1525 (according to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) by the prolific Parisian printing house of Jehan Trepperel, whose business, after his death, was carried on by his widow in collaboration with her son-in-law, Jehan Jehannot. The colophon of the *Moralité* specifies the latter collaboration,[2] whose dates, according to the website Biblissima

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1 A still-useful survey is provided by Devereux, 1999: 107-108. My text of reference is the edition by Axton, 1979, of what was originally entitled *A New Interlude and a Mery, of the Nature of the Four Elementis, declarying many proper poyntys of phylosophy naturall, and of dyvers straunge landys, and of dyvers straunge effectis and causis, etc.* (Axton, ed., 1979: 30).

2 As printed in Droz, ed., 1966. For further information on the collection, which was discovered in 1929 and has never been fully edited, see Droz, 1935: xi-xiv. As Droz points out, the printed text is very poor, "très souvent incompréhensible" (xiii), but generally possible to follow. Fortunately, the *Moralité* has recently been rendered more readable thanks to Devlaeminck, ed., 2016, whose transcription of the text and line numbering I gratefully follow.

Like all the pieces in the Recueil Trepperel, the *Moralité* was printed anonymously, although it has sometimes been (doubtfully) attributed to "Jehan d'Abundance", as the name is standardised by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, whose catalogue explains: "Pseudonyme d'un poète dont on ignore

(again on the authority of the BnF), would narrow its printing to between 1512 and 1519.[3] This fits with the date of 1515 advanced by the Universal Short Title Catalogue.[4]

It would obviously be helpful to be more certain about the dating of both works, but the priority of the *Moralité* is heavily favoured by the circumstantial evidence. With regard to Rastell's play, likewise undated, Devereux proposes its printing *circa* 1520; Axton suggests "early or late in the 1520s".[5] Moreover, whatever the precise years of printing or, conceivably, of performance, it is intrinsically improbable that the author of the French work was responding to the English one, while the contrary is highly likely. The reason is not merely the dominant direction of linguistic, bibliographic and more largely cultural influence in the period, but also Rastell's personal familiarity with France, acquired through at least two visits: the first, perhaps, in 1520, when he was involved in technical and artistic preparations for the Field of the Cloth of Gold; another around 1525, during which it is recorded that the stage built into the house he had had constructed for himself in 1524 was let out to companies of players and the costumes degraded.[6]

I

Even if there were no more connection between the two works than a certain common—and commonplace—intellectual, moral and indeed dramaturgical ground, the effect of juxtaposing them is to throw into relief the humanist impulses to both intellectual and actual adventure that Rastell's treatment of his themes is generally held to exemplify. For the *Moralité*, by comparison, appears a resolutely medieval and introverted production: its plot features Satan ("Sathan") as instigating Worldly Pleasure ("Plaisance Mondaine") to corrupt its mankind figure ("L'Homme"), who is at last restored to (or from) his senses by Right Reason ("Droicture Raison") and Knowledge ("Congnoissance"), then purified by Confession and Penitence before being stricken by Death ("La Mort") and subjected to a trial by "Le Juge". The outline's broad resemblance to numerous French and English

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le nom et la vie, sauf qu'il mourut après 1550. Il se donnait le titre de notaire royal de Pont-Saint-Esprit". It should be stipulated that *Four Elements* was also published anonymously, but the ascription to Rastell (first made by John Bale) has never been seriously questioned; for Rastell as a pioneering printer of English plays, see Axton, ed., 1979: Introduction, 1-3.

3 This despite the dating of Recueil Trepperel No. 22 between 1511 and 1522 in the BnF general catalogue. See Biblissima at <https://data.biblissima.fr/entity/Q16404> (accessed 15 November 2021).

4 <https://www.ustc.ac.uk/editions/57491> (accessed 15 November 2021).

5 Devereux, 1999: 105; Axton, ed., 1979: Introduction, 8.

6 Axton, ed., 1979: Introduction, 8.

moralities is evident.[7] These notably include *Everyman* (with the Dutch *Elkerlijk* behind it), where Knowlege (*sic*) is likewise specifically linked to the church's rites of redemption.

Distinctive on several counts, however, is the part played by the allegorised four elements in representing this typical struggle. Though eclipsed by the spiritual and moral allegories in the middle section, it is these literal embodiments of man's terrestrial nature that set the framework in place, at his own request, at the beginning and end of the piece. Indeed, their final intervention somewhat surprisingly displaces the expected question of the soul's salvation, since the concluding arguments before Le Juge simply argue the question as to which of the elements will receive the corpse, which none of them wants (but which La Terre, over his obstreperous objections, is finally obliged to accept). The elements' virtual usurpation of the spiritual dimension is all the more impressive for applying the structure of scholastic *débat*, inflated with arguments that border on the absurd, in place of the common biblically derived Parliament of Heaven.

Thus the conclusion abruptly returns to the level of the flesh: "Or estoit l'Homme et il n'est plus" (Now he was Man and is no longer)[8] (l. 798). So L'Air succinctly puts it, following L'Homme's equally succinct encounter with Death and dying prayer (ll. 790-795). This has the effect of affirming the predominance of the body, resoundingly identified with its mortality, within the spiritual near-tragedy. The essential lesson that the elements successively give L'Homme at the outset, and which is ratified by Doicture Raison (91 ff.), who warns him against abuse by "mondaine et plaisant follie" (worldly and pleasing folly) (l. 124), is one of balance and reciprocity within the divine creation: God has indeed placed them at man's service, as L'Homme affirms in his opening speech ("Bie[n] voy que Dieu, pour moy complaire, / Quatre beaulx elemens me livre" (I see well that God, to do me service, bestows on me four fair elements) [ll. 14-15]), but they, like Man, are part of the divine creation and have the duty of serving God. The (relatively) lengthy expositions of Hippocratic/Galenic humoral science delivered by the elements by turns, with their evocations of the temperamental effects of each, press home the need for moderation and balance during life.[9]

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7 The schema notably persists, with variations, into the era of Reformation and Counter-Reformation controversy—witness, on the Catholic side, *Le Gouvert d'humanité* (1540-48), attributed to Jehan d'Abundance, and the Protestant *Tragiqve comédie de l'homme justifié par Foy* (1554) by Henri de Barran. See the translation/edition of the latter, as *Mankind Justified by Faith: Tragicomedy,* by Hillman, 2021: Introduction, 16-17 *et passim*.

8 Translations are my own.

9 As pointed out by Devlaeminck, ed., 2016: n. 1, the text is clearly defective when the second sequence of self-expositions begun by L'Air at line 83 is broken off at line 90 with "Nous sommes deux seurs et deux" (We are two sisters and two...); it was no doubt continued in the complete version.

When L'Homme is seduced by the temptations of pleasure, he perverts the divine gift of the elements, arrogantly—through Outrecuidance (overweening)—forgetting its purpose and his subjection. This fall into sin, recapitulating the original one, is presented to him by Congnoissance in mortifying terms of fleshly weakness and corruption, the "creature" divorced from his creator, and in insistent hexasyllabics. Mortality is manifest in the subjection of his "faible matiere" (weak substance) (l. 644) to diseases, its origin in the earth to which it will return (ll. 646-648), the foul odours and excrement his body produces:

> L'Homme, se orgueil pre[n]s,
> Se n'est mie sens,
> Car to[n] corps peu dure.
> Advise et entens
> Quelz odeurs tu sens.
> Il n'e[n] vient que ordure,
> Vil, puante et sure,
> De la creature
> Par tous les conduis.
>
> (Man, if pride takes you, that makes no sense, for your body is of short duration. Consider and reflect on what odours you smell. There comes nothing but filth—vile, stinking and sour—from the creature: everywhere you bring it forth.) (ll. 673-681)

This inward (and downward) turning of the commonplace lesson of the soul and the body by concentrating on the latter is, of course, very much in tune with vividly physical evocations of mortality across the genres in the late fifteenth century.[10] The very brief appearance of Death with his lance is couched in unmistakable terms of the *Danse Macabre:* "Il n'est evesque, ne moyne, / Ne chanoyne, / Roy, duc, empereur ne pape, / Qui puisse passer ma bo[n]ne voye" (There is no bishop, nor monk, canon, king, duke, emperor or pope who can avoid me.) (ll. 784-787). But while, as always, Death is the executor of God's ordinance ("Dieu l'ordonne" [l. 788]), the *Moralité* manages to keep this point at a distance, not least in the discourse of Le Juge, who not only sounds more judicial than divine but founds his decision on a principle of nature:

> J'ay bien ouy la question.
> Sur ce je vous apointeray.
> Je declaire, à bonne action,

10 Hence, moreover, the parentage of Lymon ("silt") and "Terre" (earth) provided for the mankind figure (Chascun) in another Trepperel morality, which Devlaeminck, ed., 2016, presents as a virtual companion piece in her edition: *Moralité du lymon et de la terre, etc.*

La Terre est serve. Je vous diray
La cause pourquoy: il est vray
Que le corps de la Terre vient,
Aussi luy renvoyeray.
Terre, reçoy le, il t'apartient.
Toute chose, si t'en souvient [*sic*],
Se retrait à son element.

(I have attentively heard the issue on which I shall give you judgement. I declare rightfully that the Earth is constrained to perform a good deed. This is why: it is true that the body comes from the Earth, so I will send it back to him. Earth, receive it—it belongs to you. Everything, as you remember, withdraws to its element.) (ll. 1038-1047)

And Le Juge proceeds to apply the principle to air, water and fire, presenting each phenomenon as purely natural and not evoking the purpose it presumably serves within the divine creation.

Finally (and most remarkably), except for the conventional moral drawn by Raison, La Terre is given the last word, which is resoundingly grumbling, hardly expressing reverent acceptance of divine justice:

Il me semble q[ue] on me fait tort
A moy laisser du corps saizie,
Qui tant est meschant, vil et ort.
Je l'ay nourry avant la mort,
Et puis si me le fault ravoir.
C'est ung criminel desconfort
D'ung tel puant corps recevoir.

(It seems to me that it's wrong to leave me stuck with the body, which is so nasty, vile and dirty. I nourished it before death, and now I have to take it back. It's an unjust nuisance to receive such a stinking corpse.) (ll. 1102-1108)

It would seem that, despite the quasi-divine judgement, the war of the elements evoked by L'Air in rebuking La Terre has not been permanently averted: "Orre vous tastés sy plest? / C'est pour avoir à nous trois guerre" (Now will you please take your part? You're in the way of declaring war on us three) (ll. 836-837).

II

Whether or not Rastell was actually inspired by the French text, as seems probable, his expansively humanist treatment of the four elements and "science" more broadly, as well as his adaptation of the traditional moral framework, stands out more clearly against this background. However loosely such generic labels were used, it seems legitimate to take the two plays at their respective words and speak of a development from "moralité" to "interlude". This entails fundamentally reorienting a lesson about dying to one about living, with the elements serving as a pivot in the process.

In the *Moralité*, as has been seen, the elements constitute the beginning and the end of the human being, to the point where the pre-eminence of the soul is left to be inferred from the audience's confidence, assured by Congnoissance, of the benefits of Confession and Penitence. The elements also feature in the mechanism of the fall into pleasure: Outrecuidance, in spuriously assuring L'Homme that his long life is assured, cites God's provision of the elements to sustain his body, as well as the favourable influence of seven planets (ll. 219-225). Subsequently, the four rebuke him in turn for his disordered abuse of them, which extends to his selfish overindulgence despite the necessity of others; as Le Feu puts it, "Devez vous gaster ensement / Les biens et le gouvernement / Dont plusieurs autres ont desette ?" (Must you squander in this fashion the goods and provisions of which many others are in need?) (ll. 377-379).

Rastelle's handling of the elements shows both continuity and contrast. Most fundamentally, despite their prominence in the title, they are not allegorised as characters. Moreover, the elements figure only at the beginning, in the introductory discourses of the Messenger and Natura Naturata, though in ways that—to a point—recall their presentation and associations in the *Moralité*. In expounding the didactic thrust of the play, including its injunction not to amass wealth selfishly but "To releve pore people with temporall goodys" (l. 87), the Messenger argues for rising to knowledge of God by beginning with "Goddis creaturys that be: / As furst them that be of the grosyst nature" (ll. 94-95). It is this principle that justifies founding all knowledge on study of the elements:

> Me thynke for man nothynge more necessary
> Than this to know, though it be not vsyd
> Nor a matter more lowe can not be arguyd,
> For though the elementis Goddys creaturis be,
> Yet they be most grose and lowyst in degre.
>
> How dare men presume to be callyd clerkis,
> Dysputynge of hye creaturis celestyall,
> As thyngys invysyble and Goddis hye warkys,
> And know not these vysyble thyngys inferyall? (ll. 108-116)

Next, the expositor Nature (Natura Naturata), self-identified as the "mynystyr" (l. 154) of "The perfeccyon and furst cause of euery thynge—/ I meane that only hye nature naturynge" (ll. 151-152), begins his lesson with this theme, sounding very much like Le Juge at the conclusion of the *Moralité* ("Toute chose, si t'en souvient, / Se retrait à son element"), but evincing a greater power to subsume elemental corruption into renewed harmony:

> These elementis of them selfe so syngle be
> Unto dyvers formys can not be devydyd,
> Yet they commyx togyder dayly ye see,
> Wherof dyvers kyndes of thyngys be ingenderyd,
> Whiche thyngys eftsonys whan they be corruptyd
> Yche element I reduce to his furst estate...
> [...]
> For corrupcyon of a body commyxyd
> Ys but the resolucyon by tyme and space
> Of every element to his owne place.
>
> [...]
> . . . the ayre and fyre... naturally
> To their owne proper places wyll ascende,
> The water to the water, the yerth to ye yerth tende.
> [...]
> So the elementis can never be distroyed. (ll. 176-200)

This is the end of the formal presentation of the elements in Rastell, but their prominence in the title is nonetheless significant: they serve as a springboard for the extensive instruction of Humanyte in natural philosophy and cosmography, as delivered by Nature, Studyous Desire and Experiens (this last ruefully reflecting Rastell's personal familiarity with New World exploration). And while the planetary influence on the elements is part of the upward- and outward-tending picture, downward- and inward-tending humoral theory, as in the *Moralité*, is not. The planets' influence on the elements, moreover, may be negative as well as positive, according to Nature ("They cause here corrupcyons and generacyons" [l. 173]), contrary to the specious claim of the *Moralité*'s Outrecuidance, and it is up to Humanyte to "Remembre that [he is] compound and create / Of these elementis as other creaturis be" (ll. 205-206), as well as that his superiority to the beasts consists in his "soule intellectyve" (l. 210), which should warn him against preferring pleasure to the pursuit of knowledge.

The familiar fall-and-redemption pattern prescribes, of course, that this warning does not keep Humanyte from yielding to the temptation of Sensuall Appetyte, who, with his practical accessory, the Taverner, provides the occasion for introducing comic

business very much in the rough-and-tumble English tradition, as with the vices in the late fourteenth-century anonymous *Mankind*. It suits Rastell's emphasis on living well in the world according to rational moral principles that he eschews the *Moralité*'s conventionally medieval deployment of Sathan as the prime mover of evil, raging and finally discomfited in comic fashion, who employs a female figure of seduction as his instrument (Pleasance Mondaine).[11] But though the diabolical is relegated to the background, it is nevertheless present—witness Sensuall Appetyte's thin joke about a slip of the tongue, when he promises to keep Humanyte company:

> And yf that I ever forsake you,
> I pray god the devyl take you!
> *Humanyte.* Mary, I thanke you for that othe.
> *Sensuall Appetyte.* A myschyfe on it! my tonge, loo,
> Wyll tryp somtyme, what so ever I do—
> But ye wot what I mene well. (ll. 532-537)

And however evoked with "realistic" jocularity, song and dance calculated to please spectators, the Tavern implicitly retains its traditional symbolic association with spiritual as well as material corruption, as is explicitly the case in the *Moralité*.[12] There, Sathan eggs on Pleasance Mondaine – "Faictes bien devoir" (Do your job well) (l. 464) – as she promises L'Homme

> L'hypocras, le vin, les espices,
> Le rost, la saucette ensemble.
> Aurez vous bo[n] temps ? Que vous s[em]ble ?
> Et puis le lict, la courtinette,
> Et affin que on y assemble
> Le galant et la godinette.

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11 Again, the medieval pattern had considerable carrying power—cf. Satan and his daughter Concupiscence in Barran, ed. Hillman, 2021. While he inveigles Humanyte into sexual licence, however, among other kinds, Sensuall Appetyte himself is definitely male ("Why syr, I say, what man be ye?" [l. 453]), like the Satanic instrument Sensual Suggestion and all the other characters in Nathaniel Woodes's *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581). Apart from the possible reticence about staging female characters in certain interludes—in sharp contrast, for instance, with John Redford's *Wit and Science*—it seems possible that others, such as Rastell's, may eschew the seductive female figure as proffering too patent an allegorical scapegoat for deviation from inward guidance by Reason, Conscience, etc.

12 See Hindley, 1999: 454-473. The tavern, complete with a Taverner cast in the same mould, figures as the site of Mary's fall in the Digby *Mary Magdelen*, at which the Bad Angel and the devil rejoice (ll. 470-545).

> [Hypocras, wine, spices, roast meat with a little sauce. Will you enjoy yourself? Don't you think so? And afterwards the bed, the little curtain, so as to bring together there the gallant and the willing young girl.] (ll. 458-463)

For his part, Rastell's Taverner offers of his own accord "a stewed hen" (l. 581)—that is, one that "lay at the stewes all nyght" (l. 586).

Correction does not come for Humanyte, as in the *Moralité* and *Everyman*, in the form of the knowledge of what he must do to be saved, nor through a confrontation with death. Not only is there no such figure here, but mortality as such is never mentioned. Rather, Humanyte is shamed into repentance—though without formal penitence—by effectively being shown by Nature, as a conclusion, his increasing resemblance to Ygnoraunce and the contempt with which the world will treat him as a result:

> For if thou wylt lerne no sciens,
> Nother by study nor experiens,
> I shall the never auaunce,
> But in the worlde thou shalt dure than,
> Dyspysed of every wyse man,
> Lyke this rude best Ygnoraunce. (ll. 1438-1443)

He is shown a virtual mirror, like the literal mirror of Reason in which Wit is finally revealed to himself as a debased fool in John Redford's *Wit and Science*. Indeed, the links with that later interlude, which also features Reason, Study and Experience, as well as extended business between Ingnorance (*sic*) and Idleness, are specific enough to suggest its inspiration by Rastell.[13]

One may suspect that the ending, which seems abrupt as it stands, may not be the one Rastell originally wrote, but it certainly serves to highlight the pedagogical humanist adaptation of the medieval morality formula to the purpose of instruction for living "in the world", rather than preparing to leave it behind. And if the four elements seem to be lost sight of, the conclusion nonetheless reaffirms their centrality in Nature's initial lesson. The disorder of the tavern world, at once moral and physical, reflects their tendency to corruption, and the shaming of Humanyte into Reason operates most fundamentally at this level. The assumption, contrary to the message of the *Moralité*, is that

13 Bevington, ed., 1975: Introduction, 1029, dates *Wit and Science*, very approximately, *circa* 1530-1548. The device of the mirror also figures in the French morality tradition: in the *Moralité du lymon et de la terre*, Chascun is given a mirror by his parents, Lymon and Terre, to serve as a continual reminder of his mortality; they are supported by Raison, but it will take the stroke of Death to convert him.

L'Homme can and must master the tendency of the elements that compose him, as they do all living things, to produce internal disorder. The reductive bestiality of Ygnoraunce specifically harks back to this early warning from Nature:

> So by reason of thyne vnderstandynge
> Thou hast domynyon of other bestis all,
> And naturally thou sholdyst desire connynge
> To knowe straunge effectis and causys naturall,
> For he that studyeth for the lyfe bestyall,
> As voluptuous pleasure and bodely rest,
> I account hym never better than a best. (ll. 211-217)

The key to enabling Humanyte's exercise of "domynyon" over the unruly elements is education, as promoted by Studious Desire and extended by Experiens. Axton has rightly stressed that Rastell's presentation of what the Messenger terms "phylosophy naturall" (l. 9) is more popular than erudite.[14] This, surely, is part of the point, which consists less in conveying abstruse information than in setting in motion a dynamic of rational discovery of New Worlds of knowledge accessible to Humanyte at large. This is in sharp contrast to the closing down of exploration by Congnoissance in the *Moralité*, which simply removes L'Homme from the discord of the elements by removing him from the scene of life. Such discord, in Rastell, is part of an unending process of change—of generation and degeneration—and must be accommodated as the basis, however slippery, of all learning:

> Furst of all, thou must consyder and see
> These elementis, whiche do yche other penetrate,
> And by contynuall alteracyon they be
> Of them selfe dayly corruptyd and generate. (ll. 225-228)

The dynamism that fulfil's Humanyte's privileged place within Natura Naturata—and holds out the ultimate promise of coming to know Natura Naturans—paradoxically draws its energy from the very elemental flux that Reason enables it to transcend.

14 Axton, ed., 1979: Introduction, 11.

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