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Richard HILLMAN

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Manifestations of Folly in Henry Medwall's Morality Play Nature

Olena Lilova

Zaporizhia Classic Private University, Ukraine

Folly is the second name of Sensuality, one of the central characters in Henry Medwall's play *Nature*. Sensuality is the principal negative figure that competes with Reason in their struggle for influence upon Man. As is well known, in early Tudor morality plays the concept of evil was embodied in allegorical figures of the Seven Deadly Sins. In Medwall's play, besides the Sins themselves, we come across the character of Sensuality, who is supposed to direct them in order to have the necessary effect on Man. Making Sensuality the Sins' leader and equating it with Folly opens an interesting angle for reflecting about the essence and consequences of human depravity, as it is depicted in the early Tudor drama. Such a perspective also allows us to consider the playwright's involvement in the philosophic debates of the time.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that *Nature* was composed in the last years of the fifteenth century by an author who was in service to the chief religious authority in England—John Morton, who occupied the position of Archbishop of Canterbury in the years 1486-1500. John Morton is known to have taken an active part in the political events of the last quarter of the century. Among other opponents of Richard of Gloucester, he helped Henry VII to ascend the throne in 1485 and thereby found the Tudor dynasty in England.

This is worth remembering while reading Medwall's drama because Man here appears to be not only the personification of the human race, that is, the apex of creation—"Byfore all other chyef of hys [God's] creance" (Medwall, l. 74)—but also someone "predestinate / To be a prynces pere" (ll. 893-94), that is, one endowed with power over other creatures on the earth. A parallel is thus drawn between the image of Man as a King of Nature and the idea of the secular power of the monarch over his subjects. A number of remarks made by the characters of *The World and Worldly Affeccyon* support this understanding of the figure: "And where ye shew unto me that thys Man / Is ordeyned to reygne here in thys empyr, / . . . He to take upon hym as mighty governer, / Havyng all thing subdued to hys power" (ll. 425-26, 430-31); "Also he must nedys do as the Worlde doth / That intendeth any whyle here to reygne" (ll. 453-54); "Fyrst me semeth necessary to provyde / What maner folkys your sarvauntys shall be, / For surely ye ar nothyng accompanyde / Accordyng to a man of your degree" (ll. 533-36). Likewise, *Worldly Affeccyon* says, "Eke yt ys necessary for that behoye / That there be made some maner of purvyaunce / Wherby ye may bere out your coun-tenaunce" (ll. 700-2).

Having yielded to various temptations that *The World* (secular life) lures Man with, at the end of the play the central character gets rid of the Sins led by Sensuality and finally submits himself to Reason. That is what Nature expected Man to do from the very beginning, but it is only due to his age that Man succeeds in getting free from Sensuality's devastating influence. The age of such liberation is pegged at forty. It is noteworthy that when the play was written and performed for the first time, that is, in the very last years of the century, King Henry VII, born in 1457, had reached the age of forty years. It is worth mentioning that in medieval Europe, with life expectancy lower than it is now, forty years was considered to be quite the autumn of one's life.¹ In *Nature*, for instance, the period after forty is referred to as "croked old age" (l. 331). It is documented that, in those days people were believed to achieve their best form at the age of thirty to thirty-five.²

The implied possibility offered viewers of perceiving the character of Man as a monarch or a wielder of worldly power, and not just as a representative

1 See, e.g., Shakespeare's Sonnet 2: "When forty winters shall besiege thy brow. . . ."

2 It is interesting that Medwall was probably of the same age as the monarch, while John Morton, who might have used Medwall as a mouthpiece for his ideas, was twice as old.

of the human community as a whole, furnishes the playwright with a means of garnishing the timeless and spaceless storyline of the morality play with the topical, and consequently more specific, discourse of secular authority. “The point of political activity” (Соколов, p. 223)³ in Medwall’s play thus consists in the potential for explaining extravagancies that the king might have committed in his immaturity. At the same time, the playwright could have been expressing the hope that as soon as the monarch reached the age of forty years, he would no longer be ruled by his passions or emotions but would truly become an adherent of reason.

If we imagine the two opposed moral capacities of a human being—those of Reason and Sensuality—as two poles of a fixed axis of coordinates, then Man’s successful progression along this axis will be effected in terms of submission and dominion. His success would depend upon the choice of relations made with these two antagonistic forces. With regard to Reason, Man should take the subordinate position. In Medwall’s drama it is emphasised more than once that Reason is supposed to lead Man and govern him—witness, for instance, Nature’s first monologue: “Lo, here Reason to govern the in thy way, / And Sensualyte upon thyn other side. / But Reason I depute to be thy chyef gyde” (ll. 101-3); “yt ought to be overall / Subdued to Reason and under his tucyon” (ll. 164-65).

As far as Sensuality is concerned, Man should harness it. Otherwise he can lose his manlike image, turning into a wild animal, as Nature and Reason admonish him: “And yf thou abond the to passions sensuall, / Farewele thy lyber-tye—thou shalt wax thrall” (from Nature’s introductory monologue, ll. 167-68); “For Sensualyte in very dede / Is but a meane whyche causeth hym to fall / Into moche foly and maketh hym bestya / So that there ys no difference in that at the lest / Bytwyxt man and an unreasonable best” (from Reason’s first monologue, ll. 292-96).⁴ In this way, Folly can be interpreted as a logical consequence of one’s submission to Sensuality, or as the state of submission to the senses and inability to be governed by common sense.

Folly’s most evident manifestation in the play involves Man’s captivation by his new friends—the allegorical Vices, companions of Sensuality—and his eventual beating of Reason in the tavern, described vividly enough at the end

3 All translations from Russian are my own.

4 Also see Reason’s remark: “Of all hys gydyng I shuld take the enterpryse / When he lusteth not to follow my / But foloweth the appetytyes of hys sensuall affeccyon / As a brute best that lakketh reson?” (ll. 1344-47).

of the first half of the play.⁵ Before that the Vices hold their own and, as is traditional for morality plays, seem to be the most attractive characters in the work not only for Man but for the audience as well.

One may distinguish several ways by which Sensuality and the companions of Man exercise their receptive attractiveness for viewers of the performance. To begin with, no one knows better the etiquette, the do's and don'ts of polite manners accepted as norms in the world where Man finds himself to be the prince, than the Vices. Pride, for instance, teaches him a lesson in fashion trends, looking really funny in his role of a trickster who pretends to be a true expert in various spheres of worldly life. Secondly, the spectators' merry laughter could also be provoked by the Vices' free-and-easy, playful manner of talking⁶ and behaving when they do not show themselves to Man but spin intrigues behind his back or sort out their own relationship (as in, for instance, the farcical debate between Pride and Sensuality making clear which of them is the servant of the other [ll. 843-48]). Besides, a particular comic situation (which the audience couldn't but enjoy) is created when the Vices adopt new names to deceive Man as to their true nature. Thus Glotony becomes Good Felyshyp, Slouth turns into Ease, Wrath represents himself as Manhode, and so on. Pretending to be characters and qualities that they are not would have given the performers of the Vice-roles additional material for comic acting, much to everyone's delight.

Definitely, the most laughter-provoking comic situation in the play is the episode of the Vices' final mobilization to fight for Man. Sensuality, who was so willing to keep Man under his control, fails to convene his army to oppose Reason. The Vices demonstrate rivalry and lack of solidarity within their company. They turn out to be unready to renounce their personal comfort for the sake of the common cause.⁷ To Man's request to get together at one place, Bodyly Lust replies: "I had lever kepe as many flese / Or wyld hares in an opyn lese / As undertake that" (ll. 2146-48). Slouth, Envy and Glotony offer no more

5 "And wyth an angry loke, to my semyng, / Drew out hys sword wythout more taryeng / And smote Reason so on the hed / That I have great marvayll but he be now dede" (ll. 1190-93).

6 Colloquialisms are not rare in the speech of Sensuality when he talks to the Vices: "Hark, cosyn fyrst spede thys mater, / And yf yender man make the not good chere / As ony man that ever cam here, / Let me therefore be dede" (ll. 883-86); "Japes. Why say ye so?" (l. 1829); "He ys besy—harke in your ere..." (l. 1834). The same can be observed in the Vices' speeches.

7 Thus Glotony produces some cheese and a bottle of wine as his weapons in the military campaign (ll. 286-88).

help to Sensuality in this final struggle with Reason. Thus, it is only logical that the latter easily gains the upper hand in the confrontation.

In this way, the playwright makes himself clear enough, showing how man in general, and a person endowed with power in particular, should use his two inherent capacities—to reason and to sensuality. This opposition makes explicit the essential change in presenting the dichotomy of man’s nature that occurred in early modern thinking. As is well known, medieval Christianity considered man as a contradictory creature, who is inherently divided between two conflicting substances—the higher one being the rational soul, which seeks to know God and do his will, and the lower one being the sinful body, which engenders man’s craving for fleshly pleasures. Thus man was believed to have rational soul and irrational flesh.⁸ It was up to him to determine his existence in the next world by deciding how to go through his earthly endeavours—whether to prefer a spiritual or a sensual life. But even those human beings who consciously intended to devote their lives to God’s service not infrequently had to fight with various manifestations of the body, that is, the senses and temptations they arouse.

In all fairness, it has to be added that the Christian Middle Ages treated the corporeal senses in rather an ambiguous way. On the one hand, they were acknowledged to provide man with the ability to perceive and to know the world and thus formed the individual by serving as “chief vehicles of cognition” (Nichols, p. vii). But at the same time, as S. G. Nichols shows by quoting St Augustine, St Paul, St Jerome, Guillaume de Deguileville and other authors in the “Prologue” to the collection of essays, *Rethinking the Medieval Senses* (2008), they were condemned as deceitful and foolish. An exception was sometimes made for hearing, which was believed to inform the understanding (Nichols, p. vii). This contradiction in understanding the role of senses in man’s life makes another contributor to the same collection, H. Gumbrecht, describe the Middle Ages as “a time of extreme sensual starvation and of high sensual intensity” (Gumbrecht, p. 2). He concludes that, with regard to the medieval senses, one is dealing with a field of conflicting forces rather than a homogeneous discourse (p. 3). The medieval treatment of the senses is considered to be based on two conflicting premises: the Aristotelian sense-oriented approach to the material world as a means of survival, and “the Christian-Paulinian condemnation of the senses as making permanently present the original sin as an unavoidable road to perdi-

8 See Walker, “Cultural Work”, pp. 78-79.

tion” (p. 7). What makes the two medieval approaches similar is, in J. Küpper’s opinion, their vehemence in either praise or denunciation of the senses. Indeed, Küpper states that “the Christian Middle Ages had a hysterical relation to the senses” (p. 122), which became less strict with the early modern period’s increasingly intense preoccupation with *ratio*.

To return to *Nature*, it is obvious that the conflicting forces in Medwall’s play—those of Reason and Folly / Sensuality—can hardly fit in the medieval opposition of Soul and Body. Folly here correlates with man’s doubtful ability to cope with the capacities he possesses (sensuality, in this case), and not with his physical being. As to “the rational soul”, in the play it gives way to Reason, a transformation which reflects the prominence of rationalism in the European philosophy of the New Age, with reason treated as the principal criterion of esteem for all human intentions or achievements.

Thus, by focusing our attention on the more abstract level of the Sensuality-Folly combination in the play and reflecting on the meaning of sensuality in the system of philosophic views of the transient period of the Renaissance, we can make some interesting observations about the play’s message. Sensuality is known to have played a great role in the receptive aesthetics of the Renaissance. This concept’s predomination in the system of the epoch’s aesthetic principles had considerable impact on the aesthetic thinking of the time. For one thing, projective geometry—the science based on the principle of perspective bias, which would be formalised later on, in the seventeenth century—is rooted in Renaissance man’s sensual perception. This proves the thesis that sensual, or, to be more exact, visual perception can be given scientific (that is, mathematical) form (Юсев, pp. 55-57).

The key role of the senses and sensuality in forming an individual as well as in unlocking his creativity is emphasised in the writings of Italian humanists, both early ones and adherents of the Platonic Academy in Florence. The efforts to retrieve bodily pleasures as the highest good given to a human being were placed within the epicurean tradition by such scholars as Cosma Raimondi in his speech in defence of Epicurus (1530s), Lorenzo Valla in his dialogue *On Pleasure* (*De voluptate*, 1431) and Giannozzo Manetti in his work *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man* (*De dignitate et excellentia hominis*, 1452-53)—a rebuttal of Pope Innocent III; similar ideas are conveyed in the works of Poggio Bracciolini and others.⁹ Leon

9 See Горфункель, pp. 42-49.

Battista Alberti, in his major work on the art of building (*De Re Aedificatoria*, 1452), relies greatly on sensuality when speculating about beauty as a display of harmony (Лосев, pp. 279–80). The artist’s understanding of the beautiful is deemed to be based upon mathematically regulated sensuality.

The significance of sensuality in both the private and the social life of Renaissance man can hardly be overestimated.¹⁰ As the German scholar Eduard Fuchs shows in his illustrated history of morals, an enormous quantity of folk songs, Easter plays and novellas, private letters and legal papers, governmental decrees and rules of professional guilds, compiled in different European countries during the Renaissance, touched upon sensuality in its various forms and manifestations. Fuchs concludes that revolutionary epochs, like the Renaissance, cannot but be periods of “ardent sensuality”, with man as a creator of a new world, possessing remarkable power in the sphere of sensuality—erotic sensuality, in particular (Фукс, pp. 177–81).

As the prominent Russian philosopher and scholar of the last century A. Losev puts it, in the aesthetics of the Renaissance sensuality appears to be active and self-confident (Лосев, p. 57), while man, endowed with sensuality, “delights in his self-absolutisation and anarchism” (p. 65). Such a man is capable of producing Renaissance aesthetics of quite a different order from the ideals proclaimed by humanism or neo-Platonism. The anthropological focus of this different type of Renaissance aesthetics can be found in the essentially immoral personality that, in his “endless self-assertion and uncontrolled spontaneity of passions, affects and whims, engages in self-admiration and forms of wild and animalistic aesthetics” (Лосев, p. 120). Analysing this kind of Renaissance aesthetics, Losev originates the notion of “the dark side of titanism” as a phenomenon grounded in the uncontrolled individualism of the Renaissance (Лосев, pp. 120–22).

In Medwall’s *Nature*, we have a play written in the transient period when humanist ideas were just starting to draw the close attention of English intellectuals.¹¹ At the same time, the threats that the absolutely unfettered individual without any restrictions poses to himself and those around him were already the focus of attention for artists in those cultures where Renaissance tendencies

10 Evidence of poetic reflection on the topic can be found in the works of Italian authors from Dante on, e.g., “the wings / Of reason to pursue the senses’ flight / Are short” (*Divine Comedy, Paradise, Canto II, ll. 56–58*).

11 On the role of early Tudor drama as a forum for topical intellectual discussions or burning political disputations, see Walker, “Plays”, pp. 222–36.

developed earlier than in England—in Italy, for instance.¹² Given the intensity of the intellectual exchange between England and continental Europe in those days, popular ideas could spread easily in the lands where the Renaissance blossomed somewhat later. So the playwright's message in his morality that man should be ruled by reason to avoid ruin or mischief (see, for instance, Man's words: "I was forbyd by Reason / On my own fantasye to ron" [ll. 1005-6]) sounds quite prophetic as regards the early modern personality and society in general. In this larger epistemological context, too, Sensuality-Folly embodies the uncontrolled power of passions that has the capacity to conquer Man.

To conclude, Sensuality in *Nature* is characterised by a high degree of social and cultural referentiality, which makes it a salient example of the use of the Vice-figure as a basic generic marker of the Tudor interlude. It can be perceived as conveying an admonition to a monarch or to any person in general not to indulge in sensual pleasures. And, at the same time, one can see in it an artistic reflection on the spreading in late fifteenth-century Europe of "the dark side of titanism".

Thus the Vice-figure, notorious as a character with no definite identity, in *Nature* acquires considerable interpretative potential linked to the social and cultural realities of the day. Sensuality comes out as an excellent communicator, who knows the audience well enough to control the intensity of their perception of the performance. Folly is represented here as the consequence of Sensuality getting out of Reason's control, something that can be harmful for anyone, a sovereign in particular, by turning a person into an embodiment of vanity in search of bodily gratification. The play can also inspire reflection on sensuality, free from reason's control, as a force that forms specific attitudes to the world and man's self-positioning in it. In late Renaissance art, these "man-world" relations are represented as carrying great danger for man and society as well.

Either of the two levels of the Sensuality-Folly interpretation suggested here proves that allegorical figures in early Tudor drama were not so abstract as to be fully separated from their real-life context. In fact, they were often topical enough to mirror social reality and the intellectual debates of the time.

12 See Виппер, p.77; Бицилли, pp. 152, 169; and Лосев, pp. 613-14, among others.

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