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When Naming Is Performing: Folly's Children in absentia in Mundus et Infans

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Mundus et Infans, a play of 976 lines which “has not much plot” (MacCracken, p. 487), according to one of its first critics, is an early Tudor interlude presenting man’s whole life from birth to old age. Its thin plot shows man’s successive fundamental stages of childhood and adolescence (innocence), youth and manhood (corruption), and old age (repentance). The interlude has the same narrative scope as *The Castle of Perseverance* but has nothing of the flamboyance of that complex moral play; neither has it the older play’s vast range of characters. Actually, as many critics have observed, two actors only can play it: one in the human protagonist’s role, the other in the roles of Mundus, Conscience, Folly and Perseverance. While *Infans* nearly always remains onstage, the others come and go, never meeting one another, so that one actor can play them all. From their names, it is evident that the four are equally divided between the “goodies” and the “baddies”.

In spite of the compression of the plot and the strictures possibly caused by the casting paucity,¹ typical

I I am here assuming that only two actors perform the interlude. Of course this might not always have been the case, but certainly the suppression of the Deadly Sins as active characters also comes out in favour of this hypothesis.

tempter characters, such as the seven Deadly Sins, “act” in the play *in absentia*, simply through the speeches of the other protagonists. Naming them in this way gives them stage life, and Folly’s family is thereby shown in its entirety.

Context, Content, Criticism

The only extant early edition of *The Worlde and the Chylde otherwise called Mundus and Infans* was printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1522, as the colophon testifies, but very probably the date of its composition is earlier. Ian Lancashire, after studying what he recognises as topical allusions, dates it around the end of the first decade of the sixteenth century: “[it] must have been performed in a noble or well-off household celebrating Christmas ca. 1506–09” (p. 100). He also recreates the possible environment and the auspices of the play’s performance: the household of Richard Grey, thirteenth earl of Kent, a man dangerously indebted to King Henry VII and greatly embittered toward the royal power (p. 101), issues on which Lancashire grounds some topical allusions in the play. Lancashire’s argument cannot be more than “a tentative one” (p. 101). Hence Davidson and Happé, the editors of the most recent edition of the play, while considering these hypotheses, do not finally accept them but opt for an earlier date of composition, the last decade of the fifteenth century (p. 4).² Nevertheless, when analysing the allegorical features of this interlude, they write that it was “apparently composed in the first years of the sixteenth century” (p. 15), thus leaving the question of the exact date unresolved. In any case, de Worde’s edition fixes the printing date as 1522, just a few years after the same printer had issued a second edition of Henry Watson’s prose translation of Sebastian Brandt’s *Das Narrenschiff* (1517), that is, at a time when Fool literature was still highly fashionable with its range of moral allegories, after Alexander Barclay’s verse translation of the same in 1509 and, of course, Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* in 1511.

Before focussing on the particular issue identified in my introduction, I think it may be helpful to give a brief summary of the play and of its reception by modern criticism. *Mundus et Infans* could be labelled a “small *Castle of Perseverance*” because it deals with more or less the whole life of man, his successive ages and the various sins to which he is allured by World, a character very similar

2 Quotations from *Mundus et Infans* will be drawn from *The Worlde and the Chylde*, ed. Davidson and Happé.

to his namesake in the *Castle*. Nevertheless, the reduced length of the text, the small number of speaking parts (and, more definitively, the ingenious doubling allowing only two actors to perform it), have attracted critics' interest in their own right, without the need to look for parallels in the fifteenth-century, and much longer, moral play. After all, a plot journeying through the ages of man, with more or less numerous processes of fall and redemption, toward final salvation is typically medieval, and many traces of these themes are also found in poetry. Thus MacCracken studies the interlude's affinity with *The Mirror of the Periods of Man's Life*, an early fifteenth-century verse allegory.

The "Infans" of the title is successively dubbed Wanton, Lust and Liking, Manhode, and Age (but also Shame and Repentance) by the other protagonists of the play, that is, by World, Conscience, Folly and Perseverance. From the last four names, it is not difficult to understand that these characters belong to the two opposite fields of virtues and vices (even though the Vice had not yet been introduced on stage as a character). Thus the allurements of World bring the protagonist—in his successive ages—to sin, from which he is redeemed first by Conscience and, after his second fall, by Perseverance. The protagonist's death is not shown (contrary to what happens in the *Castle*), but from Perseverance's last speech, the last in the play, we understand that mankind is saved: "Ye, and now is your name Repentaunce / Through the grace of God Almyght" (ll. 971-72). What can also be understood from the plot and from these words is that *Mundus et Infans* is still a Catholic work, where salvation is warranted by means of God's mercy and the sinner's repentance, albeit late.

Of course, Folly is a representative of evil, together with World, even more so because while World shows Infans many, albeit morally dangerous, opportunities in life, Folly is the one who tempts the protagonist and brings him to sin. Folly is not accompanied by minor evil characters, such as the seven Deadly Sins; nevertheless, the latter are mentioned in the play and made as lively as if they were present on stage. (This effect will be dealt with below.)

David Bevington, having studied the doubling machinery, the structural value of the monologues, and the general compression of plot events and of characters, considers *Mundus et Infans* a clear example of popular dramatic structure (pp. 116-24), while T. W. Craik highlights the parallel changes in the protagonist's names and costumes (pp. 82-83). Richard Southern (pp. 126-42), on the other hand, after dividing the text into five episodes (according to the human protagonist's interlocutors), analyses the play from the point of view of its stag-

ing, whether outdoors or indoors, arriving at the conclusion that it was staged indoors (p. 142). More recently, Suzanne Westfall has grouped *Mundus et Infans* with those early sixteenth-century interludes “concerned with various theories of pedagogy; all attempt to delineate the process a foolish nobleman goes through in order to learn good governance” (p. 190), and therefore fit to be performed in a noble household, in this case Richard Grey’s, according to Lancashire’s previously mentioned hypothesis. In other words, together with *Youth* and *Hickscorner* and other early moral interludes, *Mundus et Infans* might be considered a sort of chapter in a hypothetical—and yet at the time non-existent—*Book Named the Governor* (of course without the topical references Greg Walker has seen in Sir Thomas Elyot’s later work).³

Davidson and Happé, in their rich introduction to the play, delve into the iconographic tradition of the theme of man’s ages, in order to show how deeply it was ingrained in medieval culture, and also to show possible scenic solutions for *Infans*’ costumes. The meaning of allegory is also studied, in a successful attempt to redeem it from its centuries-old condemnation when compared with a realistic theatrical rendition of events. The editors claim, in fact, that the allegorical methods used in the interlude “provided dramatizations of perceived experience and were regarded as reflecting a reality beyond and above the literal sense of the words or the physical gestures of the action” (p. 11).

“These seuen synnes I call folye” (l. 460)

As mentioned above, both World and Folly represent evil in the play, but while the former only speaks and may remain fixed on his throne (perhaps resembling the image printed by Wynkyn de Worde on the frontispiece of the text⁴), merely furnishing *Infans* with new clothes fit for his various ages (ll. 1–236), Folly arrives on stage at l. 521. This entrance occurs after *Manhode*’s encounter with *Conscience*, as if Folly had been announced by *Conscience*’s repeated allusion to him, especially when the good counsellor advises *Manhode* to avoid evil:

Manhode. Folye? what thyngest thou folye?
Conscience. Syr, it is Pryde, Wrathe and Enuy,

3 See Walker, pp. 141–89.

4 The image, reproduced from the original print, can be seen at <https://books.google.it/books?id=m2pbAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=it&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed 29 July 2015).

Slouthe, Couetous and Glotonye, —
 Lechery the seunte is:
 These seuen synnes I call folye. (ll. 456-60)

He leaves the stage at l. 698, but it is as if he remained part of the action, since his name will often be rehearsed in the following lines. It is interesting to compare the occurrences of the other main words which emerge as *Dramatis Personae* (DP):⁵

Table 1. Mentions of the characters in the play

	Speech headings	Mentions before a DP's entrance	Mentions after a DP's exit
Conscyence	31	0	29
Folye	35	7	18
Mundus	12	0	0
Perseueraunce	13	3	0
Worlde	0	0	20
Man (various ages)*	89	—	—

* Figures referring to the protagonist are calculated only for the occurrences in speech headings.

From the table it is evident that Folye has more turns at talk than the other speakers, apart from Manhode. This shows him to be an active interlocutor who avoids long speeches, on the one hand, and speaks in quick repartee, on the other, especially if we consider that Folye is on stage for 177 lines only, while Conscyence is present during 232 lines in his two interventions. Still, he is mentioned a little less frequently than Conscyence, whose name is pronounced by Folye himself, in particular when sneering at him as an enemy for the conquest of Manhode. Before his entrance, Folye is mentioned seven times in Conscyence's caveats to Manhode against him. After the character leaves the stage, he is named eighteen times as the evil which has assailed Manhode, before the latter's admission: "Folye falsely deceyued me" (l. 969). Such analysis does not only concern the quantitative aspects of a text, but also involves the theatrical relevance of a character (and especially of what he stands for). To give a Shakespearean parallel, one thinks immediately of Julius Caesar, who, in spite of being killed in Act Three, Scene One, remains an "acting" character, so to say, to the end of

5 The search for Table 1 was made by using the AntConc concordancer applied to the text of the interlude (<<http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software.html>> and <https://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/drama/comedy/Mundus_et_Infans_Basic.txt>, respectively; accessed 9 July 2015).

the play, being mentioned many times in the second part of the tragedy, besides appearing as a ghost twice. In other words, Caesar, albeit dead, still works on the plot till its end.

If Conscience is mentioned in the text more frequently than Folye, the discrepancy between the occurrences of the two names is balanced by the number of times what we may think of as Folye's "children" are evoked: Covetous (14), Envy (6), Gluttony (6), Lechery (8), Pride (17), Sloth (7), and Wrath (7). While Mundus is clearly one of the dangerous triad of the World, the Flesh and the Devil, that is, the basic enemies against whom man has to fight in order to gain salvation according to Christian teaching, Folly is the name generally given to man's attitude when not complying with God's and the Church's precepts, that is, when sinning.⁶ Therefore, the relationship between Folly and the seven Deadly Sins is close, because folly means sinful behaviour, and by sinning man manifests his folly. The famous woodcut representing Mère Sotte with two of her children in the printed edition of *Le jeu du prince des sottz et mere Sotte* by Pierre Gringore (1512) well mirrors the parental relationship between the Deadly Sins and Folly.⁷

The Seven are not characters in *Mundus et Infans*, and as a consequence, the audience is deprived of the physical, three-dimensional presence that is so vivacious in other moral plays because of the sins' colourful language, lively stage behaviour and body language. But is this totally true? What follows will examine this issue and demonstrate how, in my opinion, the dramatist succeeds in making the "Children of Folly" visible, and their action tangible in spite of their absence.

The Double-sided Seven Deadly Sins

Once Wanton (the name given by Mundus to Infans at the beginning of the play) reaches fourteen years of age, he returns to World's throne and receives another new name (Lust and Lykyng), together with a new garment, since he boasts of being "proudely apperelde in garmentes gaye" (l. 134). Only when he comes of age

6 On Folly both as a concept and as a character, see Happé, "Fancy and Foly".

7 The frontispiece of Gringore's play can be seen at <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k70260t/f3.image>> (accessed 29 July 2015).

(at twenty-one, according to l. 155)⁸ is the protagonist named “Manhode” (once again by Mundus). The latter also explains on what his own power depends, namely on “seuen kynges [who] sewen me, / Bothe by daye and nyght” (ll. 170-71):

The kynge of Enuy, doughty in dede;
The kynge of Wrathe, that boldely wyll abyde,
For mykyll is his myght;
The kynge of Couetous is the fourt[h]e;
The fyfte kynge he hyght Slouthe;
The kynge of Glotony hath no iolyte
There pouerte is pyght;
Lechery is the seuenth kynge,
All men in hym haue gret delytynge,
Therefore worshyp hym aboue all thyng,
Manhode, with all thy myght. (ll. 172-83)

One “king” is missing in Mundus’ enumeration. As a consequence, Manhode asks him for an explanation, which comes soon afterwards: “The fyrste kynge hyght Pryde” (l. 188). The audience immediately recognises the seven Deadly Sins in this list and feels the discrepancy between their being called “kings” and their religious significance: if they are kings, they are kings of evil. But Manhode is not aware of this and thanks Mundus for his gifts, which also include “robes ryall, right of good hewe”, the bestowing of knighthood (l. 199) plus a sword (l. 210), beauty (l. 201), and also wealth “Of the wronge to make the right” (l. 203), as the text adds with a satirical touch.

So well “equipped” is Manhode that, as soon as Mundus leaves the stage (at l. 236, after a boastful oration starting at l. 216), he begins his own proud and bragging speech. It is fifty lines long (ll. 237-87), and, while allowing the actor performing Mundus to change into Conscience’s costume, thus effecting the first doubling in the play, it also offers a particular image of the human protagonist. Even before Folye enters, through and in Manhode’s words we see and listen to the Deadly Sins “in action”.

Manhode starts by addressing the spectators themselves: “Peas, now peas, ye felowes all aboute” (l. 237). The style of this speech mirrors that of Mundus in its heavy alliteration and boastful phrases⁹ and shows the playwright’s ability in

8 The treatment of time (and of time passing) in the play is extremely compressed. See Lester, pp. xxx-xxxii, and Southern, pp. 132-34.

9 See Lester, p. xxxiii.

varying words, rhythm and register for each character. On this point, Davidson and Happé write that “the choice of appropriate registers to match characterization is remarkable in the play . . . it seems that the difference of the individual voices may have been of particular value as part of the staging” (p. 21). Manhode’s speech consists of five quatrains of lines of various length, plus two tail-rhyme stanzas (ll. 267–82) and three five-line stanzas, the latter as well with lines of different length.¹⁰ Lester notices that some verbal forms such as “I have” become relevant at this point, “as Manhood, at the peak of his worldly powers, recounts his achievements” (p. xxxiii). To “I have” I would also add “I am” as an emphatic assertion of individuality and proud self-awareness; this verbal form is repeated seven times in the whole speech, but particularly six times in ll. 267–74, five in a strong anaphoric position:

I am worthy and wyght, wytty and wyse,
 I am ryall arayde to reuen vnder the ryse,
 I am proudly aparelde in purpure and byse,
 As gold I glyster in gere;
 I am styffe, stronge, stalworthe and stoute,
 I am the ryallest redely that tenneth in this route,
 There is no knyght so grysly that I drede nor dout,
 For I am so doughtly dyght ther may no dint me dere. (ll. 267–74)

While Manhode speaks, the spectators “see” the Deadly Sins of which he is culpable. When vaunting his victories and killings, his territories and his fame, he becomes Pride, Wrath and Covetousness at the same time; when recounting that “many a lady for my loue hath sayd alas” (l. 257), he performs the role of Lechery, till—just before the end of this speech—he claims to be a liveried retainer of all the seven “kings”, who are listed at ll. 275–82. Performing this monologue (and especially the lines devoted to the seven “kings”), an actor might put all his skill at characterization even into the pronunciation of the individual names, so as to bring these absent but powerful *dramatis personæ* to life.

Of course, Manhode does not call the seven “sins” at all, but by the title conferred on them by Mundus: they are “kings”. Manhode narrates what these kings have done for him, in other words, their actions apparently in favour of Man. For the sake of dramatic economy in this short text—whose purpose is

10 See Davidson and Happé, pp. 21–22, and, on the verse structure of the play, Appendix I, pp. 113–16, in their edition.

mainly to represent the ages of man rather than other thematic issues—the seven are only “told” and not “shown”. Nevertheless, they are virtually onstage and efficacious through other characters’ voices. The offstage action is summarised in short sentences that list the events of which the kings/sins have been protagonists. Lechery “hath sent” (l. 276) letters to Manhode; Pride, Lechery himself and Wroth have promised to accept him as their liege-lord in a feudal system which also includes Covetous, Glotony, Slothe and Envy; “all those sende me theyr leuery” (l. 281), Manhode sounds proud to relate.

Later, once Conscience has arrived, Manhode spontaneously says he is ready to behave according to what Conscience himself has just told him—namely, to live “after me”—but only if “it to Prydes pleasynge be” (ll. 337–38). That is, Manhode recognises Pride as his major guide in life. Conscience cannot accept this condition, of course, and explains to Manhode the real nature of this “king”: “For pride, syr, is but a vayne glorye” (l. 344). The dialogue between the two goes on with Manhode, on the one hand, exalting the qualities of each Deadly Sin and naming them all, and with Conscience, on the other hand, passing judgment on and turning down each of them. At the end of this skirmish, Manhode is conquered to repentance and brought to accept the ten commandments (briefly rehearsed by Conscience at ll. 424–39), till a word new to him—as new and unknown as those belonging to the semantic field of good, like “conscience” itself, “spirituality”, “mercy” and “measure”, because of the protagonist’s moral blindness—is introduced by Conscience as an admonition to behave properly: “For doubte of foly doynge” (l. 455). It is the first time the word “folly” appears in the text, and Manhode, unable to distinguish between good and evil because of his moral ignorance, asks, “Folye, what thyng callest thou folye?” (l. 456). It is at this point, after Conscience’s answer, that Manhode becomes aware of the real nature and perilousness of the seven “kings”:

Conscience. Syr, it is Pryde, Wrathe and Enuy,
 Slouthe, Couetous and Glotonye,—
 Lechery the seunte is:
 These seuen synnes I call folye.
Manhode. What, thou lyst! To this
 Seuen the Worlde deluyered me,
 And sayd they were kynges of grete beaute
 And most of mayne and myghtes. (ll. 457–64)

Now the “kings” are unmasked, and Manhode is advised to “beware of folye” (l. 481) and, furthermore, to “beware of Folye and Shame” (l. 489). The meaning of the latter word is not investigated by Manhode, since it has already been used twice by Mundus (at ll. 163 and 166) albeit according to its worldly and secular application. Later it will clearly show its spiritual and religious meaning when Manhode is called Shame by Folye (“I shall clepe you Shame” [l. 682]). Age, as the protagonist’s speech headings call him from l. 763 onwards, laments this new epithet at least three times towards the end of the interlude, and he is renamed “Repentaunce” by Perseveraunce at l. 854 (“I clepe you Repentaunce”), but the speech headings still identify him as “Age” to the end of the play. Furthermore, Age still calls himself “Shame”—“Than Shame my name hyght” (l. 970)—just six lines from the end, perhaps to underline his deeply felt shame for his own sins. The name “Repentaunce”, given from the outside rather than interiorised by the protagonist, shows the effect of God’s mercy and the final salvation of the hero.

Manhode’s Second Fall

Up to l. 489, the text has shown Manhode first as obedient to World, then as redeemed by Conscience, but the moral-play structure would not be complete without a relapse, for which another evil-doer is necessary. This is the function of Folye himself, as is especially clear when Manhode, in his monologue after Conscience’s exit, declares that he will “hym [World] not forsake / For mankynde he doth mery make” (ll. 510-11). Manhode’s inclination to mirth and merry-making in spite of his previous repentance offers the opportunity for Folye’s appearance and his possible domination of Man’s soul. The character arrives on stage addressing the audience (ll. 523-24), rather than Manhode, and declaring who he is: “My name is Folye, I am not gaye?” (l. 522). Shortly after a brief exchange made up of insulting phrases on the part of the newcomer, there is a sword fight between the two, though with no final winner. Then Manhode asks Folye for information: “where was thou bore?” (l. 566). (Incidentally, the use of the second person singular pronoun manifests from the beginning the protagonist’s feeling of superiority to Folye; actually, Folye first uses the plural pronoun, then passes to the singular form at l. 540, before the duel.)

The moral scope of the interlude reaches the audience more directly, localising not only the speaker, but the whole action, by way of Folye’s answer:

By my faythe, In Englonde haue I dwelled yore,
And all myne auncetters me before;
But, syr, in London is my chefe dwellynge. (ll. 567-69)

Folye becomes an Englishman and a Londoner on top of that, so that even previous textual words and phrases acquire “a local habitation and a name”.¹¹ This is also reinforced by the various London places mentioned by Folye, such as Westminster, London Bridge, the stews on the South bank of the Thames, Lombard Street and Pope’s Head in the City: the physical world, evoked in Manhode’s boastful monologue and encompassing Salerne, Florence, Calais, Picardy, Flanders and the whole of France, has now dwindled to a single town, to *the* town for the English, so that allegory turns into less esoteric and hidden meanings. This effect is further enhanced later on when Manhode/Age tells Perseveraunce of the misfortunes which led him to Newgate prison. London, for Manhode, has been revealed as a place of perdition, where he has perhaps learnt “reuel” (l. 702), but where his behaviour has reduced him to a foolish prey of the seven Deadly Sins.

Actually, on reentering at l. 763, Age recounts all his life, showing his despair and desire to end it after failing to obey Conscience’s teaching. Once again the “seuen deedly synnes” (l. 774) are evoked:

Pryde, Wrathe and Enuy and Couetous in kynde, —
The Worlde all these synnes delyuered me vntyll, —
Slouthe, Glotony, and Lechery, that is full of false flaterynge.
All these Conscience reproued both lowde and styl. (ll. 775-78)

Manhode calls them by their real names, having experienced their dire effects. The audience, this time, hears Manhode’s biographical narration and “sees” the Deadly Sins in the protagonist himself; not only is Folye the summary incarnation of the sins, but Manhode has become him/them: he/they have revelled in London, have drunk in inns and taverns, have played dice and frequented the stews. They have perhaps been acquaintances of the spectators, or even the spectators themselves.

The interlude ends with the protagonist’s salvation after Conscience’s second intervention and the arrival of Perseueraunce. Talking to the latter,

11 For other early sixteenth-century interludes interpreting London as a place of sin, see *Youth* and *Hick Scorer*.

Manhode/Age recollects all his life twice (ll. 763-806 and 824-50), with its falls into sin because of his service to Folye and the Seven. As Repentaunce (the name given him by Perseuraunce, as mentioned above), he listens to “the twelue articles of the faith” (l. 905), that is, the Nicene Creed in twelve points, rehearsed by Perseuraunce, who also salutes the audience, offering them a metaphorical “mantel perpetuall”, a garment of salvation through the Catholic faith, the definitive and only clothing to wear after all the various attires (and names!) put on by Manhode.

Mundus et Infans highlights, then, its own didactic purposes and a structure in line with the dramatic tradition of the moral play, in spite of the strictures imposed by the limited number of possible performers. The anonymous playwright, so attentive to the possibilities, or need, for doubling in his work and to the combination of verse and register for the various speakers, thus reveals his skill by reducing the number of actors drastically, by multiplying the sonorous nuances of the spoken parts, by alternating and enriching meanings for the same words, and by showing man’s life in a sort of time-lapse sequence. While abandoning (or, having to abandon) the idea of the physical onstage presence of such plot agents as the seven Deadly Sins, he nevertheless succeeds in creating the illusion of their immediate reality, their “here-ness”. It is, so to say, another type of doubling: it is a case not of an actor performing many roles visibly, but of the inner transformation of one character into another who is only mentioned, but in such a way as to emerge from within extant protagonists. This is also due to the allegorical characterisation, which allows personages to be what they claim to be through their words and behaviour and to be interpreted by the audience on the basis of the abstract principles they embody. So Manhode himself, with respect to his morals and to the actual staging of *Mundus et Infans*, becomes a child of Folly, and the absent figures are given an almost palpable performative power because their corruptive influence is quite discernable in the title co-hero and protracted throughout the whole play.

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