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Identity and the Seven Sacraments in Everyman

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Everyman belongs to a tradition of Christian literary tragi-comedy in which a charted journey takes the allegorical mankind protagonist away from a state or moral ruin and near-despair toward redemption and life in union with the Lord. *Everyman* differs from most of the moral drama of the early sixteenth century in that the focus of the play is on the last stage of the tri-partite pattern (innocence-sin-redemption) that typifies the majority of the increasingly secularised moral plays of the period. The purpose of this paper is to explore the way in which Roman Catholic Christian doctrine is embodied in the art of the play, and to examine the extent to which *Everyman* depends on the sacraments for its creation of an *Everyman* character who acts in accordance with what O. B. Hardison has called a "sacramental psychology".[1] The structure of *Everyman* participates in the fall-rise movement of the Mass, which progresses from a state of sorrow to one of joy, as death is overcome, heralding a new birth achieved through reconciliation and salvation. Analogously, as John Cunningham puts it, "The reluctant jour-

1. O. B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), p. 289; quoted by John Cunningham, "Comedic and Liturgical Restoration in *Everyman*", *Comparative Drama* 22 (1988): 162.

ney of Everyman's contrite soul toward God as judge becomes a glad pilgrimage toward God as Savior".[2]

In the opening lines of the play, the Messenger reminds the audience of the transitory nature of human life and of the necessity to remember one's mortal being and to bear in mind the fact of life's ending: "The story sayth: Man, in the begynnynge / Look well, and take good heed to the endynge, / Be ye never so gay" (10-12).[3] This is the Messenger's advice, given as the audience is drawn into the didactic play-world to witness the lesson taught to a certain Everyman (and to every man in general), when the day of reckoning comes and one is obliged to give an account of one's good deeds.

God is then overheard by the audience having a moan about the contemporary sinful state of the world. He is highlighted as being, in turn, God the Father, God the Son, and God come to judgement as a Doomsday Christ-figure. God, functioning as an expository character, describes the religious landscape of the day, wherein man was seen to traffic as a theologically determined being, unlike the modern individual, whose being is biologically and psychologically determined, and bound by social influences and constraints. As God ends his long speech, and beckons his messenger Death onto the stage, it becomes clear that the play will be about Doomsday and the judgement pronounced upon those who live "without fere" (62) of God. God's main complaint throughout his expository monologue is that mankind has disappointed him in not accepting the "grace" or sonship that he had proffered all: "I hoped well that euery man / In my glory sholde make his mansyon, / And therto I had them all electe" (52-54). One important aspect of the play's message is that the divine gift of "mercy" (58) is expressed and implemented in the form of the seven sacraments.

God expresses his discontent with the way mankind has largely ignored this gift and that "fewe there be that asketh it hertly" (59). God points out the way man bases his identity on earthly goods and pleasures, neglecting all thought of the after-life: "Euery man lyueth so after his owne pleasure, / And yet of theyr lyfe they be nothynge sure" (40-41). As the play unfolds, the embodied doctrine concerning the sacraments comes to the fore as a controlling device in creating the dramatic character of Everyman, who personifies the entire human race, as well as, at times, an individual human being. In him is conflated the judgement each individual

2. Cunningham, p. 168.

3. I cite, by line numbers given parenthetically, *Everyman*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961).

will meet at death with the Last Judgement, when the destiny of the soul will be decided. The pilgrimage that he is invited to undertake before coming to judgement is staged as a form of preparation for his death and for the reception he is likely to be given beyond. So observes Cunningham, who goes on to remind us that this strongly resembles the Christian's preparation for receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist: entering the sacramental presence of Christ when such a rite is carried out is analogous to entering the heavenly presence of Christ.[4]

Everyman begins with metaphors depicting a world in a state of spiritual sickness. Mankind, because of the priority given to worldly goods, is on the brink of what Cunningham terms "moral death"[5]; because, in any case, "eche lyvnge creature / For Adams synne must dye of nature" (144-45), and since "In worldely ryches is all theyr mynde" (27), "they leve of aungelles the heavenly company" (39). The danger is that "In theyr lyfe and wycked tempestes, / Veryly they will become moche worse than beestes, / For now one wolde by enuy another vp ete" (48-50). The character Everyman is endowed with the qualities of the universal sinner, but also with attitudes particular to his personal moral death: like the majority of his contemporaries, he is "combred with wordly ryches" (60) but is told by a personal contact, Goods, that his love for worldly possessions has marred his chance of providing a satisfactory record in his book of reckoning:

> For bycause on me thou dyd set thy mynde,
> Thy reckenynge I haue made blotted and blynde,
> That thyne accounte thou can not make truly. (418-20)

When Death accosts Everyman, he is unable to answer the questions, "Whyder arte thou goynge / Thus gayly? / Hast thou thy Maker forgete?" (85-86). His hand goes to his pocket, as he thinks he can rid himself of the disconcerting intruder by bribing him with a substantial amount of money. Death underlines the fact, once again reiterating God's words and those of the Messenger, that life and worldly goods are only lent to Everyman (161-64). Death tells him to be ready shortly, casting Everyman into a state of despair, whereupon he insincerely and briefly turns to God, whom he invokes casually, as if swearing, but then to earthly companions. The pilgrimage that will lead him to contrition and to turning back to God begins with a dramatic enactment of the stripping of the self. The road to contrition and ensuing salvation involves loss of a kind which enables Everyman to find himself through a final

4. See Cunningham, p. 164.
5. Cunningham, p. 167.

reconciliation with God. The playwright/translator goes on to demonstrate how far every man's existence is lent to him by God; the life and goods which he deems to confer identity upon an individual are shown to be of no value in the divine order. Everyman finds this out as he tests each of his boon companions in turn.

It is interesting to note how proverbs, tenets of worldly wisdom, are put to the test. First, Fellowship, his friend "in sporte and playe" (201), reveals how "a good frende at nede" (229) cannot in fact keep his promise, ironically fulfilling his own words in the proverb, "for he that wyll saye, and nothynge do, / Is not worthy with good company to go" (237-38); in fact, he brings Everyman to the realisation that the reverse is true, as is proved by the inverted form of the saying: "'in prosperyte men frendes may fynde, / Which in aduersyte be full vnkynde'" (309-10). Everyman still continues his journey, knocking at the door of earthly companions instead of directing his steps towards heaven. Kinship's ties, he feels, lie deeper and will not snap, "for kynde wyll crepe where it may not go" (316). Once again, Everyman is brought to the brink of despair, as he comes to the doleful realisation, "Lo, fayre wordes maketh fooles fayne; / They promyse, and nothynge wyll do, certayne" (379-80). The question that he finally asks himself is, "What frende were best me of to prouyde?" (385). At this stage, however, he does not turn to God, but again to the riches that he has loved all his life. He hopes to find consolation in Goods. We witness the further stripping of fleshly self, and a kind of flaying process is in progress. Another proverb is put to the test, as Everyman wrongly thinks that his book of reckoning can been cleared with the help of money: "'money maketh all ryght that is wronge'" (413). Everyman is made to realise that his excess of love for earthly riches has damned him. His uncharitable ways have brought his soul to its present state of ruin, to this really "grete sorowe and care" (434), as Goods is prompt to tell him. He also learns that the exterior trappings that he has hoarded up cannot be taken with him, because like his life, they are "lente" (440). Goods admits to him that his very *raison d'être* is to destroy the soul of man—"mannes soule to kyll" (442)—and hardly to comfort or save anyone. Goods appears like the Vice-character of the more conventional moral play, a prototype of the Faustian Mephistopheles whose role is made explicit in the lines that Everyman pronounces in soliloquy at the turning point of the play: "For my Goodes sharpely dyd me tell / That he bryngeth many in to hell" (474-75).

As Everyman learns of how little value are the things of this world, he turns to Good Deeds, the mediator between the temporal and the spiritual. Having recognized that life is not all that matters, Everyman moves out of the category of

those "Lyuynge without drede" (24), who had provoked God's anger. Earlier God bemoaned that few people asked "hertly" (59) for the mercy that he readily granted; from this point on in the play, an ascending journey is charted, as Everyman learns to plead for mercy "hertly", and the moral drama's basic pattern of sin, contrition and forgiveness is worked through.

Everyman's recognition of the perilous state of his soul is the pivot on which the play begins to turn towards a comic resolution and saving grace. This occurs when he is able to say, "Than of my selfe I was ashamed, / And so I am worthy to be blamed" (476-77). Becoming aware of his need for spiritual aid, his soul turns toward God. In true medieval fashion, God is ready to intervene. Divine intervention first initiated the movement from attrition to contrition, when God, the alpha and omega, source of all life, paradoxically sent Death to instil new life into Everyman. Despite man's degenerate state, God's "ryghtwysnes" and "sharpe rod" (28) remain instruments of correction and instruction, as well as of punishment.

The construction of a new identity for Everyman is dramatised by heavy borrowing from the Roman Catholic liturgy. After Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods refuse to go with him, and Good Deeds, too weak, refers him to Knowledge, we realize how the rising structure of the play accords with the orthodox Augustinian doctrine of penance, which specifies that salvation cannot be obtained by Good Deeds alone. The fact that Everyman cannot read anything in his book of reckoning is due to his despair, as Good Deeds points out: "There is a blynde rekenynge in tyme of dystres" (508). Good Deeds is weighed down by Everyman's sins ("sore bounde" [487] by the "heuynes" [505] of his "workes and dedes" [503]) but is nonetheless willing to help in giving guidelines on how to receive the sacraments. For his own and Adam's sin, Everyman must come to a "general" (20) and "dredefull rekenynge" (521). If, at the beginning of life, Everyman was cleansed of sin by baptism, when he turns to Good Deeds, we learn that his "rekenynge" is "blynde" (508).[6] If he dies in this state, Death's "darte" will "blynde" his "syght" entirely, causing him to dwell in hell, separated from his Creator (76-79).

Good Deeds sends Everyman to Knowledge, who then recommends that he go to the "hous of saluacyon" (540), the Church, to find Priesthood, whom, by the sacrament of ordination, Christ "setteth... in his stede amonge vs to be" (748). For, as is held by the Roman Catholic church, a priest "handeleth his Maker bytwene his handes" (739) and

6. On the "[m]etaphors of uncleanness and blindness", cf. Cunningham, p. 166.

> . . . of the blessyd sacramentes pure and benygne
> He bereth the keyes, and therof hath the cure
> For mannes redempcyon—it is euer sure—
> Whiche God for our soules medycyne
> Gaue vs out of his herte with grete pyne.
> Here in this transytory lyfe, for the and me,
> The blessyd sacramentes s vii. there be:
> Baptym, confyrmacyon, with preesthood good,
> And the sacrament of Goddes precyous flesshe & blod,
> Maryage, the holy extreme vnccyon, and penaunce.
> These seuen be good to haue in remembraunce,
> Gracyous sacramentes of hye deuynyte. (716-27)

The author makes it clear that the sacraments are a continuing remedy ("soules medycyne") with which the priest, compared to a surgeon, is able to cure "synne deedly" (744). The priesthood is eulogized and defended by the character Five Wits. The necessity to reinforce Roman Catholic doctrine seems to have been felt in the period because of Lollard hostility to the sacramental system, especially in that region deemed to be a cradle of drama, East Anglia, where historians have documented the appearance of several baptismal fonts depicting the seven sacraments.[7]

Everyman is told by Knowledge that the necessary grace comes from the sacrament of penance, which he approaches by way of Confession and the garment of contrition. The different rites of the sacrament of penance—contrition, confession, absolution, satisfaction—are all woven into the play. When Everyman is led to confession by Knowledge, he is told: "Aske God mercy, and he wyll graunt truely. / Whan with the scourge of penaunce man doth hym bynde, / The oyle of forgyueness than shall he fynde" (570-72). For the medieval Christian, repentance was crucial to the operation of grace; without it no one may see God. Everyman implores God's mercy and protection from Death, his enemy, and asks the intercession of Mary, that he may "Of your Sones glory... be partynere" (603) by means of His passion. After this, he scourges himself, and as a sign of the genuine repentance of Everyman, Good Deeds suddenly recovers (632) and promises to accompany him on the rest of his journey (633).

The next stage involves putting on the garment of contrition, which symbolizes sorrow for sin, hence his increased detachment from the things of this world. However, to speak of Everyman's change of heart—for it is literally in these terms that the play presents his experience—is to be unduly negative, and to

7. See Ann Eljenholm Nichols, *Seeable Signs: The Iconography of the Seven Sacraments, 1350-1544* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), pp. 92-94.

neglect the text's presentation of the effect of penance as a virtual conversion, that is, the constitution of a new and positive identity. This must begin with contrition, a term which Thomas Aquinas applied in full cognizance of its figurative sense: "the breaking of something which is hardened".[8] Alexander of Hales conceived of contrition as involving the annihilation of the self, followed by God's annihilation of his or her guilt in the remission of sin. For Saint Bonaventure, contrition was a condition of conversion and the possibility of a "new life". The rhetoric of "contrite hearts", of the need to be "heartily" sorry for one's sin, survived through the Reformation into the *Book of Common Prayer*, and on good authority. For behind it lay the biblical rhetoric of conversion—Saint Paul, of course, with his image of the new man, but also the Old Testament, notably Psalm 51:17 ("A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise") and Ezekiel 11:19: "And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh".

Everyman himself figures his penance in essentially the same terms when he thanks Knowledge for providing him with a scourge, saying, "This hath reioysed and lyghted my herte, / Though the knottes be paynful and harde, within" (575-76). And in this light we may give full measure to the joyous effusions he utters. These are not mere formulas but affirmations of a new identity, sealed next by the key sacrament of the Eucharist. The fact that the character is seconds away from his stage-death should not obscure, though it must render dramatically ironic, the sense of new life achieved by this obtaining of a heart of flesh—the same flesh that, nevertheless, is grass. And behind this idea, in turn, is that of the recovery of Everyman's identity as *imago dei*—a God whose visible sorrow in his opening monologue foregrounded the failure of his erring creature to ask mercy "hertly".

8. My discussion here draws on the article "Contrition" in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, gen. ed. David Lyle Jeffrey(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 157-58.