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The Rituals of Passage in Everyman

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In his study of the English Morality Play, Robert Potter expresses the idea that "the traditional morality play is not a battle between virtues and vices, but a didactic ritual drama about the forgiveness of sins."[1] However, the conflict present in the plays which he calls "morality plays" often takes the form of a struggle, if not a battle, which is the dramatic representation of a tension between the sinful nature of man and his fate––which, according to Catholic doctrine, is to be saved through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in *Everyman*, God expresses the idea that all shall be saved:

> I hoped well that euery man
> In my glory sholde make his mansyon,
> And thereto I had them all electe. (52-54)[2]

Salvation, however, can only occur given certain conditions linked to what Robert Potter describes as the ritual of Penance. He says:

> The morality play is acted out on the stage of a
> world where man is born to rule, bound to sin, and
> destined to be saved. To its audiences, and to their
> consciences, the plays reveal that the fall out of

1. Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 57.
2. **All references to the play are from** A. C. Cawley's edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961).

innocence into experience is unavoidable, theologically necessary, and solvable, through the forgiveness of sins.[3]

That it is man's destiny to be saved is, indeed, evinced by the conclusions of the plays Robert Potter categorizes as "moralities". Because this term has been questioned by critics, I will, from now on refer to these plays as "moral plays". However, these plays differ considerably in their approach and representation of a common subject, as well as in their structure. *Everyman*, which was once considered as the most representative moral play, is now often viewed as an exception when compared to such plays as *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mankind*, or *Youth*, or other moral interludes. Indeed, it is said that it lacks the dramatic tension usually provided by the active agents of temptation, agents representative of the World, the Flesh and the Devil, as characters engaged in plots and subterfuge to bring about the fall of the protagonist, often trying to reverse a situation established by the agents of salvation, or, indeed engaging in fights against them, as when, for instance, Riot, Pride and Lechery, with the help of Youth, put Charity in fetters.

This, however, does not mean that dramatic tension is absent from *Everyman*, and anyone who has seen the play may witness to the fact that it does exist, but it simply lies elsewhere, in an action which presents a double ritual.

Although the notion of "pilgrimage" is evoked several times in the play through the repetition of the word "pylgrymage" (eight times)[4] or "pylgrym" (once)[5] the play does not dramatize what is usually understood as the "Pilgrimage of Life", but rather the "Pilgrimage of Death". In that sense, of course, the play is linked to the various treatises usually called *Ars Moriendi*, which seem to have flowered during the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century. As Helen Thomas rightly suggests:

> This advice on how to learn to die was based not on a fear of death itself, but on the Church's fear of man's "undisposed dethe" or sudden death while not in a state of grace.[6]

However, we cannot rightly say that *Everyman* simply dramatizes such treatises. Indeed, if we follow Phoebe Spinrad in her analysis of the stages of the *Ars Moriendi*, we can see the analogy with the play; the "temptation" stage, in particular, is very

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3.   Potter, p. 57.

4.   Ll. 68-146-331-550-565-673-784-818.

5.   L. 629.

6.   Helen Thomas, "Some Analogues of *Everyman*", *Mississippi Quarterly* 16.2 (1963): 97. For an analysis of the six stages of the *Ars Moriendi*, see Phoebe Spinrad, "The Last Temptation of Everyman", *Philological Quarterly* 64.2 (1985): 185-94.

subtly traced throughout Everyman's journey. Yet, because this stage represents the various temptations awaiting man at Death's door, the dying man being assailed by the devil's last attempts at damning his soul, we might expect a struggle, in the presence of agents of sin, as, indeed, we find in other moral plays. Yet this is not the case, and even if we can see the relationship between Goods and the World, Beauty and the Flesh, or Five Wits and the Devil, yet they are not shown as tempters, but simply as elements that Everyman must leave behind and learn to do without, since none of them can help him reach eternal bliss. The insistence, then, is less on temptation than on instruction. Since the play follows a fairly strict Catholic doctrine, the possibility of salvation is present from the start, and the comic structure of the play ensures that this "Pilgrimage of Death" will eventually be turned into a "Pilgrimage to Eternal Life". This is achieved by the double ritual which closely follows the two-stage structure of the play.

Naturally, the sacramental rites of Confession, Penance and Extreme Unction, which figure in the second part of the play, form the Catholic expression of the last rite of passage embodied by Death and the grave. However, in order to reach this rite and effect the passage with success, Everyman has to undergo a primary ritual during which he suffers a mock death, an experience which eventually leads him to knowledge. Although Everyman is "every man", for the spectator, he is a character, an individual embodiment on stage. In the text, the change from "they", in God's speech, to "he" in Death's speech, as Everyman approaches, causes the spectator to see an individual being subjected to an ordeal. Death is presented as a messenger, but he soon becomes a guide, instructing Everyman, answering his questions, initiating Everyman's journey. His role is also to isolate Everyman, to separate him from the community of the living. To Everyman's question, "Shall I haue no company fro this vale terrestryall / Of myne acqueyntaunce, that way me to lede?" (155-56), Death's answer leaves little doubt as to the issue:

> Ye, yf ony be so hardy
> That wolde go with the and bere the company. (157-58)

Once Death has departed, Everyman is left alone on stage and bemoans his lonely state. At that stage, he is aware of his isolation, yet he has to experience it more deeply in order to understand what it really means. Indeed, in his monologue, he not only rejects God, giving way to a form of despair, but also turns to worldly companions to help him in his need:

> Alas, I may well wepe with syghes depe!
> Now haue I no maner of company
> To helpe me in my iourney, and me to kepe;
> And also my wrytynge is full vnredy.

> How shall I do now for to exscuse me?
> I wolde to God I had neuer be gete! (184-89)

Having thus blasphemed against God and His creation, he proceeds to break the second and third Commandments when he takes the name of the Lord in vain ("Lorde, helpe, that all wrought" [192]), when, in fact, he turns to Fellowship for help, then to Kindred and Cousin, and finally to Goods. Albeit true to their nature, these false friends abandon Everyman, who then finds himself alone for the second time. The notion of "mock death", always present in rites of passage, is represented first by Everyman's encounter with Death. Although Death refuses to give him any respite, he does not strike him dead immediately, but simply states that he may strike at any moment:

> Naye, thereto I wyll not consent,
> Nor no man wyll I respyte;
> But to the herte sodeynly I shall smyte
> Without ony advysement.
> And now out of thy syght I wyll me hy.
> Se thou make the redy shortely,
> For thou mayst saye this is the daye
> That no man lyvynge may scape a-way. (179-83)

The very same notion of "mock death" is also implied in the way Fellowship, Kindred and Cousin and then Goods abandon Everyman, while evoking his "former" life. Take, for instance, Fellowship's proposal:

> And yet, yf thou wylte ete & drynke & make good chere,
> Or haunt to women the lusty company,
> I wolde not forsake you whyle the daye is clere,
> Trust me veryly. (272-75)

The idea of "life" being left behind is expressed in Everyman's question and Kindred's answer:

> *Everyman.*   Now shewe me the very effecte of your mynde:
>   Wyll you go with me, or abyde be-hynde?
> *Kynrede.*   Abyde behynde? / Ye, that wyll I, and I maye!
>   Therfore farewell tyll another daye. (365-68)

At this stage, one might think that Everyman is now ready for the actual passage, having been separated from the community of the living, and having undergone reduction to a form of *tabula rasa*. However, his second monologue starts as a repetition of the first (compare, for instance, "To whome were I best my complaynt to make?" [196] and "O, to whome shall I make my mone / For to go with me in that heuy iournaye?" [463-64]), and then proceeds by taking stock of the situation. Still, Everyman seems to have learnt something, since his moan is not turned against God but against himself, and since what he is looking for now is a new guide:

> Than of my selfe I was ashamed,
> And so I am worthy to be blamed;
> Thus may I well my selfe hate.
> Of whome shall I now counseyll take? (476-79)

It has, of course, been noticed by the critics that this monologue marks a turning point in the play. What Everyman has left behind, so far, is presented as external elements of his "former life". What he has to shed now is linked to his being. That he should turn to his "Good Deeds" depends on doctrine, but also on the fact that "Good Deeds" provides a connection between the external and internal movement. Good Deeds were exercised during his life, but come entirely from him; moreover, they affect his eternal life. In other words, they have an action and an effect on both sides of the passage. What follows next is a dramatization of two of the Last Rites: first Confession, then Penance. Everyman's knowledge of his sins brings him to acknowledge and to repent them. In his speeches he now really turns to God, to the Redeemer, and to at least one intercessor: Mary (581-604). This suffices to restore his Good Deeds. Like any initiate, before he enters the heart of the mystery, he is deprived of his clothes and given a new garment (that of Contrition). At this point, more "companions" are introduced to him. However, they are presented as "counseylours" rather than mere companions. Without false promises, it is also made clear to him that they will eventually leave him. The limit is clearly put by Beauty:

> *Strengthe.* And I, Strength, wyll by you stande in distres,
> Though thou wolde in batayle fyght on the grounde.
> *V. Wyttes.* And though it were thrugh the worlde rounde,
> We wyll not departe for swete or soure.
> *Beaute.* No more wyll I vnto dethes houre,
> What so ever thereof befall. (684-89)

The scenes between Everyman and his new companions represent a fairly close dramatization of the *Ars Moriendi*, bringing Everyman step by step to his grave, with "helpe and comforte" (676).

Much has been said about the next step, which is Everyman's going off stage for the first time to receive the "holy sacrament and oyntement togyder" (709), that is, the Extreme Unction. This episode has been seen as a digression to bring in a criticism of bad priests and point to some need to reform the Church, a reform which, as Murdo William McRae puts it, should come from within.[7] We must bear in mind that the Church had been under this kind of criticism for some time and

7. Murdo William McRae, "Everyman's Last Rites and the Digression on Priesthood", *College Literature* 13 (1986): 307.

that the Reformation movement had already started when *Everyman* was written, and was well on its way when it was first published in England. McRae tries to explain Everyman's absence from the stage for these Last Rites, and argues that the very tension between "V. Wyttes' lofty valuation of priests" and Knowledge's condemnation of "sinful priests" is the cause of his absence:

> That is, it might be in keeping with the goal of the *devotio moderna* to show Everyman, every Christian man, to receive the last rites from a character who represents V. Wyttes' lofty evaluation of priests. But in this possible encounter, the play's universalizing allegory would then teach that every penitent Christian is always attended by an exemplary priest, a lesson which all that Knowledge says about sinful priests would deny. Were Everyman, on the other hand, to receive the last rites from a Presthode such as Knowledge describes him, then V. Wyttes' veneration of that office would seem incongruous. This second possibility would make the allegory defeatist, even cynical, for the play would then teach that all Christians seeking their final rites are always attended by priests who serve only their own mercenary desires, never the needs of the faithful.[8]

However, it seems that the text makes a distinction between "preestes", who might be good or bad, and "preesthode" as instituted by God, and which implies the necessary presence of the Church to minister the sacraments. If, as I believe, this is the case, then McRae's argument does not really hold water. Confession is the sacrament which includes Penance and Reconciliation[9] and it is fully staged in *Everyman*. However, this is the sacrament which leads to the actual heart of the rite, that is to say the Eucharist, here followed by the Extreme Unction, since we are dealing with the passage from earthly life to eternal life. The first official document which lists the seven sacraments is the Profession of Faith of the Emperor Michael Paleologus for the second council of Lyon in 1274. This is what we can find about the Extreme Unction in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

> 1524 In addition to the Anointing of the Sick, the Church offers those who are about to leave this life the Eucharist as viaticum. Communion in the body and blood of Christ, received at this moment of "passing over" to the Father, has a particular significance and importance. It is the seed of eternal life and the power of resurrection, according to the words of the Lord: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." [140] The sacrament of Christ once dead and now risen, the Eucha-

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8.   McRae, pp. 307-8.

9.   **The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church are Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Con**fession (Penance and Reconciliation), Anointing of the sick (Extreme Unction), Holy Orders (Ordination), and Matrimony.

rist is here the sacrament of passing over from death to life, from this world to the Father. [141] 1525 Thus, just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called "the sacraments of Christian initiation," so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life "the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland" or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage.[10]

The notion of sacrament as "mystery" is at the heart of the Eucharist, and the Extreme Unction marks the last stage before the passage. In that sense, it seems that their stage representation would transgress the realm of fiction by bringing the actual ritual on stage. Such moments of mystery, it seems, would either take place off stage, or be represented as a metaphor.[11] This is the case, for instance in *Youth*, when the text dramatizes the mystery of transubstantiation at the moment of Youth's conversion.[12] For what the stage, or acting area, represents is not the locus of mystery, but the locus of the actual passage, whereas the near off stage represents earthly life or eternal life, depending on the different parts of the play.

It is often said that the voice of Christ during the sacrifice is heard in Everyman's last words. Indeed, according to Saint Luke, these are Christ's last words: "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost."[13] Everyman speaks the same words twice in the play, once in English, and then in Latin:

> In to thy handes, Lorde, my soule I commende (880)

> *In manus tuas*, of myghtes moost
> For ever, *Commendo spiritum meum*. (886-887)

It seems that the words "of myghtes moost", interpolated by Everyman in the Latin text, come from the widely known, though apocryphal, Gospel of Nicodemus, which has the same phrase in different forms in the four manuscripts of the Middle

10.   Catechism of the Catholic Church: http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/heal2.html#VIATICUM.

11.   **The same applies to Matrimony. The actual rite was never shown on stage, and what is rep**-resented is the celebrations around the rites, such as a masque or a wedding feast.

12.   See *Youth*, in *Tudor Interludes*, ed. Peter Happé (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), ll. 689-703. Voir Francis Guinle, "*Youth* : les limites de la parodie et de la satire", in *"Divers toyes mengled". Études sur la culture européenne au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance en hommage à André Lascombes* (Tours: Publications de l'Université François-Rabelais, 1996), pp. 125-36.

13.   Luke 24-46. I quote from the Authorised Version (1611). This tradition is not found in the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark or John. It is, however, present in the Gospel of Nicodemus.

English version: "of mightes maste" (*Galba*); "of myghtes mast" (*Harley*); of myght mast" (*Sion*); "of myghtes most" (*Additional*).[14] Christ's voice is thus heard in Everyman's, and this may give us the opportunity to investigate the play in terms of voices, by which I mean musical voices.

Somehow, the question of voices has to do with the paradox of One and Multiple voices. The music of the Middle Ages, which eventually leads to that of the Renaissance, is an attempt at finding a resolution to this paradox: how can a polyphonic composition (multiple voices), sound like one piece (one voice), and not simply like a collection of voices? From the earlier polyphonic compositions, the conduit or organum to the motet, and then to the polyphonic compositions of the sixteenth century (sacred polyphonic music, freemen songs, madrigals, ayres, chansons polyphoniques, etc.), several techniques will be used. A few of these are illustrated in the treatment of the voices in *Everyman*.

At the beginning of the play, Everyman's voice and Christ's are united in what I suggest would be the Gregorian tenor ("teneur"): this is achieved through Christ's sacrifice, as recalled in God's speech. It is clear, however, that this Gregorian tenor has been replaced by a secular tenor sung by Everyman. Indeed, it had become usual in religious compositions to dispense with a Gregorian tenor and replace it by a secular composition. Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods are mere ornamental voices, which do not actually "follow" Everyman's voice and no longer come into consonance with him. Instead, as with the purely ornamental voices, they come into false relation with the tenor. What has to be restored is the Gregorian tenor, accompanied by consonant voices: this is achieved after the ritual of Penance, when Everyman's new companions duly accompany him to the grave. When, eventually, they leave him, Everyman's voice becomes the true tenor, now joined again with Christ's voice, as it were in unison. In turn, it becomes the tenor of a celestial choir when Everyman's soul is received with "grete ioy and melody" (892).

14.   For the texts and an account of these manuscripts, see *The Middle-English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*, ed. William Henry Hulme, EETS Extra Series C (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1907), esp. pp. 64-65.