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Responsable de la publication

Philippe Vendrix

Responsables scientifiques

Richard Hillman & André Lascombes

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Doing Allegory Otherwise in Everyman

Richard Hᴵʟʟᴍᴀɴ

Université François-Rabelais - CESR/CNRS

The basic definition of allegory, as mandated by the word's
Greek origin, is saying things otherwise, one thing in terms of
another. That is conspicuously to leave undefined, however,
the relation between the two "things" in question—argua-
bly for good reason, since it is allegory's business to define
and redefine that relation. As Carolynn Van Dyke puts it
in her stimulating 1985 book on the history and develop-
ment of the trope, "Allegory, the narrative of universals,
envisions human life as a continual interchange between
temporal event and eternal pattern".[1] Still, the common
modern understanding, which sometimes employs the
demeaning name of "naïve allegory", or the falsely
complimentary one of "pure allegory", is to presume
a constant and stable link based on the subordination
of vehicle to tenor, medium to message, sign to sig-
nified. To invoke this last dichotomy is effectively to
renounce all pretence of stability, from the point of
view of post-Sussurean linguistics, but the illusion
persists, no doubt because the attraction of what
James I. Wimsatt, speaking of *Everyman,* terms "beau-

[1]   Carolynn Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory*
(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 63.

tifully simple allegory",[2] is strong: in this light, an allegorical character appears "transparent",[3] in Wimsatt's phrase, with his or her identity determined onomastically. Hence a character designated as Truth derives existence, form and meaning wholly from the way the quality thereby indicated is defined, explicitly or inferentially—by its actions or interactions. This would be so, moreover, regardless of the fact that Truth in the occidental tradition is overwhelmingly likely to be female—as in the grammatical gender of Veritas, as in the proverb holding Truth to be the daughter of Time, as in the tradition of the four daughters of God.[4] There is, of course, no Truth in *Everyman*. (There, by the way, am I speaking allegorically or not?—the question is not wholly frivolous.) But as it happens, there are three allegorical figures gendered feminine—Good Deeds, Knowledge and Beauty—and we obviously cast away some part of what is signified by them, however indefinite, if we suppose that such an individualising element has nothing to with it.

Any notion of allegory as transparent signification is vastly oversimplified in itself, and, especially since the important work in the 1960s of D. W. Robertson and Rosamund Tuve, a substantial body of criticism has developed to prove the point.[5] Some of this criticism, moreover, is particularly to the point here, because it returns to that much-cited but little-read fountainhead of medieval allegorising practices, the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius. Van Dyke's book opens with a chapter devoted to "The *Psychomachia* and the Nature of 'Pure' Allegory", whose conclusions functionally inform her subsequent reading of *Everyman*;[6] a full-length study of Prudentius' "Poetics of the Soul" by Marc Mastrangelo, published in 2008, takes a typological approach to the *Psychomachia* under the rubric, "Christian Theology and the Making of Allegory".[7] The latter work, in particular, decisively dispels another widespread

2.   James I. Wimsatt, *Allegory and Mirror: Tradition and Structure in Middle English Literature* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 47.

3.   Wimsatt, p. 47.

4.   A notable exception occurs in *Mankind*, where Mercy (himself a masculine character, contrary to tradition, assures the despondent protagonist that "Trowthe may not so cruelly procede in his stryt argument / But that Mercy schall rewle the mater" (*Mankind*, *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975], ll. 841-42. The figure of Truth is not actually brought on stage, however.

5.   See esp. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), and Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Mediaeval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

6.   See Van Dyke, pp. 25-63, 127-39.

7.   Marc Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity: Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 82-120.

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misconception—namely, that "transparent" allegory, if it did or could exist, with the concrete simply folding itself into the abstract, would be compatible with medieval thought.

The reason for the incompatibility should be recognised as a substantial semiotic one, if one hopes to define the specificity of *Everyman*. A reductively theatrical reading, such as that expressed by A. C. Cawley, cannot fully accommodate the issue either (and, indeed, Cawley surprisingly skirts it by applying a "realism" every bit as anachronistic in its own way):

> Although several of the characters in *Everyman* are vividly personified and have a very real existence on the literal plane, they also have a theological meaning underlying their surface liveliness.[8]

Although virtually every term in this statement is problematic, it is nevertheless useful in returning us to the semiotic starting point, that is, that the symbol in medieval iconography retains its "very real existence on the literal plane". This is the basis of allegorical interpretation of the Bible, whose literal truth is never in question; as Robertson puts it, with reference to St. Paul's use of the term (in Gal. 4:22 ff.), "The word *allegory* here means, as it does among the grammarians, 'saying one thing to mean another', but the thing said in the first place is also true".[9] The point has been more largely formalised by Julia Kristeva in terms of an episteme, precisely as a way of distinguishing premodern from modern perception, the universe of the symbol from that of the sign, in her important essay, "Le texte clos".[10]

But in this case there is also—and here, too, Cawley points the way, however unwittingly—a theatrical factor. Whatever the precise circumstances (if any) in which performance of *Everyman* was envisaged, it is other than a narrative to be read or listened to. It obeys and exploits the universal theatrical principle by which character successively defines itself action by action, speech by speech—in effect, writing itself on a blank slate—before an audience's eyes and ears. The vernacular medieval theatre in general abounds with evidence that characterisation tends, as if by centrifugal force, to individualise and particularise, hence to slip around on (if never to topple off) its inevitable base of spiritual significance. This adds an instability and a tension to the signifying process, given that in allegory generally, as Tuve has pointed out,

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8.   A. C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. xx. References to *Everyman* are taken from this edition.

9.   Robertson, p. 291.

10.   Julia Kristeva, "Le texte clos", *Semeiotikè. Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Collection "Tel Quel" (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 113-42.

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it is often knowledge of the meaning that animates the particular representation.[11] In the theatre, symbolism becomes, in a sense, a moving target: now one clearly glimpses the referent; now it is blurred again; always, however, one *knows* it is there. This form of *knowledge*, proper to the medieval didactic theatre, is arguably included in the multiple meanings of the character so named in *Everyman*, whose mediating function for Everyman—chiefly, no doubt, as a doctrinal informant ("What must I do to be saved?")—is explicitly transferred at the conclusion to an audience yet to come to grips with its mortality:[12] "Now hath he suffered that we all shall endure" (888).

More than incidentally, this essentially metatheatrical dimension of the role of Knowledge points to what I see as the distinctive self-consciousness of the allegorical procedures in *Everyman*. The basic principle of a variable relation between concrete existence and abstract signifying—between, in effect, the letter and the spirit—extends, however, to the Miracle (or Saints) Plays and even to the biblical figures of the Corpus Christi cycle pageants. This is clear from comparison, notably, with the liturgically derived enactments staged within the churches, where anything that might be called characterisation is minimal. The tendency towards theatrical particularity in the cycles extends, indeed, to substantially embroidering biblical personages (such as the wife of Noah) or supplementing them (by developing Christ's executioners, for instance), to say nothing of sheer inventions, such as the subplot of the Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play.

In the case of the allegorical figures, who, of course, dominate the Morality Plays, there is little initial anchoring in a concrete entity—apart from certain standard iconographic attributes (the Dart of Death), generic attributes (angel wings, devilish fireworks) or coded traits of speech (dignified preaching for the virtues, rough colloquialism or brash obscenity for the vices). There is also a fundamental *décalage* involving the status of many of them. To stage the psychomachia around an Everyman figure, as most Moralities do, is to put outside what must simultaneously be understood to be inside, and this effect is further complicated where generic inward misleaders shade into particularised outward ones, as in *Mankind*. Such theatrical doubleness is not foreign to *Everyman*—far from it, given the inward-outward shifting of such figures as Good Deeds, Knowledge, Strength, Beauty and Discretion—even, arguably, Death, who is sent from outside but obviously oper-

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11.   Tuve, p. 26.

12.   The most systematic treatment of the figure of Knowledge is by Michael J. Warren, "*Everyman*: Knowledge Once More", *Dalhousie Review* 54 (1974): 136-46. Cf. Van Dyke, pp. 133-34.

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ates from the inside out. The cumulative effect in such plays is to turn Everyman's theatrical space into a virtual No-man's land, neither here nor there, and conspicuously suspended between life and death.

The scope for "jeu" in the Derridean sense, then, between the particular and the universal is greater in the Moralities than in the other medieval dramatic forms. One can push quite far towards creating the sense of a character without impairing his or her capacity to signify spiritually. In fact, in most of the English medieval drama, such double signifying is understood to come with the territory, taken for granted, even if the balance varies case by case and widely varying degrees are possible. The effect is possible to trace—and especially to the point, of course—even in the Everyman figures of the other surviving moralities. On the one hand, in the case of Humanum Genus in *The Castle of Perseverance*, whose entire lifespan is traced from infancy to death, the individualizing takes the form of spinning off into the successive phases of life, with their characteristic temptations. On the other hand, Mankind in the play so called, who spends his entire career as a young man tempted by a young man's vices, is identified with considerably precision in terms of local geography and social milieu.

Everyman, nevertheless, stands out not just for installing these signifying procedures at the centre of the play but for actually making them the object of play in selfreflexive metadramatic fashion. The structural principle is hardly in doubt—witness Michael J. Warren on Fellowship and Kindred, who, he says, "have a dual quality; at times they appear as Everyman's friends in their particularity, and at others in their abstract roles as representative figures and aspects of Everyman's thought".[13] More elusive is the effect aimed at or achieved. Here, to Warren's aesthetic reservation ("The first attendant problem, however, is that the separation is never exact")—and it is tempting to see this as evidence that the play exerts its destabilising power across the centuries—Van Dyke responds with a claim for didactic functionality: "That 'problem' is not the playwright's lapse, but his point. Everyman must learn to see beyond the promises and evasions of his own friends and kin to the laws of the categories whose names they bear".[14]

The claim is generally persuasive, and it may be bolstered by recognising that the functional tension between particular and categorical is enhanced by the confusion between inward and outward—in short, over ownership. We can see this in the

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13.   Warren, p. 137; cited by Van Dyke, p. 130.
14.   Van Dyke, p. 130.

universal properties—Beauty, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits—that Everyman supposed were properly his. Fittingly, the pivotal instance is that of Goods, property itself, whose relocation to the exterior is accompanied by his disclosure of himself as the play's closest approximation of a diabolical vice, the only character in this decidedly bleak landscape who is actually enjoying himself:

Goods.	What, wenest thou that I am thyne?
Everyman.	I had went so.
Goods.	Naye, Eueryman, I saye no.
	As for a whyle I was lente the;
	A season thou hast had me in prosperyte.
	My condycyon is mannes soule to kyll;
	. . . .
	Marry, thou brought thy selfe in care,
	Whereof I am gladde;
	I must nedes laugh, I can not be sadde. (437-56)

This movement is ironically complemented by the inverse transfer of Good Deeds from outside, repudiated and enfeebled—"Here I lye, colde in the grounde; / Thy synnes hath me sore bounde, / That I can not stere" (486-88)—to become Everyman's indeed: his only companion through to the end, who "shall make all sure" (889). The recurrent "my" that was originally fraught with desperate disaffection—"My Good Dedes, where be you?" (485)—becomes a token of the glorious possession of enduring assets: "Welcome, my Good Dedes! Now I here thy voice / I wepe for very sweteness of loue" (634-35).

Yet when Van Dyke enfolds the primordial encounter of Everyman, the one with Death, into the heuristic pattern of learning how to read allegorically—"Everyman responds to the visible agent and the particular encounter, not to the concept they embody"[15]—her reading reveals its limitation and short-changes the play's theatrical daring and power. For on this point Everyman is conspicuously not wrong. Death is pointedly established for the audience, on God's own authority in the extraordinary opening monologue, as at once particular and universal, and, moreover, as a punishment at once synchronic and diachronic, infinitely repeated through human history from the Fall to the Day of Doom. From the typological perspective of the original audience, the expression "Drowned in synne" (26) would be bound to evoke the retributive Flood, while the promise of mercy conveyed by the rescue of Noah resounds with God's representation as at once Father of his "creatures" (23) and suffering Christ ("To gete them lyfe I suffered to be deed; / I heled theyr

15.   Van Dyke, p. 129.

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feet / with thornes hurt was my heed" [32-33]), now come to Judgement. Particularity here, moreover, extends to insisting on Christ's assumption of humanity—in effect, of Everyman's sin and punishment—so far that the Omnipotent appears helpless in the face of humanity's free will: "I coude do no more than I dyde, truely" (34). (In that adverb, by the way, Truth makes a cameo appearance after all.) The duality of particular and universal, then, is thoroughly bound up with, hence anchored in, a verbal and visual enactment of the mystery of the Trinity.[16]

Moreover, if it is true that Everyman must learn how to read allegorically, his own double signifying is equally signalled, before the character appears, through a mingling of references to him in the singular and plural: "I perceyve, here in my maiesty, / How that all creatures be to me vnkynd" (22-23); "Euery man lyveth so after his owne pleasure, / And yet of theyr lyfe they be nothynge sure" (40-41); "I hoped well that euery man / In my glory sholde make his mansyon, / And thereto I had them all electe" (52-54). This, again, is an anchoring of semiotic duality in impeccable authority, but since the Trinitarian mystery does not apply to humanity, the frankly theatrical effect remains uppermost. That theatricality is seconded and foregrounded by Death, who, in responding to the divine command with the play's most concrete evocation of the *danse macabre*, couples his own double function with that of his victim—or victims:

> Lorde, I wyll in the worlde go renne ouer-all,
> And cruelly out-search bothe grete and small.
> Euery man wyll I beset that lyveth beestly
> Out of Goddes lawes, and dredeth not foly. (72-75)

In sum, by the time Death (guiding the audience's perception) physically perceives Everyman as an individual—"Loo, yonder I se Eueryman walkynge" (80)—and asks whether he has forgotten his "Maker" (86), not only has the basic double perspective been established, but so has the principle of continually shifting from one to the other, as if in an anamorphic painting. Thereafter, all interplay between particular and universal, concrete and abstract, outward and inward, depends on and participates in that principle, so that it seems misleading to see the dynamic in moral terms, as one that must be mastered or transcended by Everyman as part of

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16.   The conflationary effect is akin to, but carried well beyond, what is found, for example, in the York play of the *Judgment* (printed in *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. A. C. Cawley, ed., pref. and bib. Anne Rooney, new ed. [London: Dent; Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1993], pp. 181-94). There, despite some linguistic boundary-crossing, which makes the synchronic point, the Father and Son appear separately in distinct roles.

his journey towards salvation. Rather, he himself is caught up and functions within it, to the point where, as the only character who might lay claim to subjectivity in something like the psychoanalytic sense, one may see him as emerging alternately as subject (in his particularity) and object (in his universality). One might even find him, from this point of view, illustrative of the evolution of Kristeva's medieval universe towards the modern one, in that he shifts back and forth between aiming to constitute meaning as a sign and being constituted as a signified.

Such linguistic terminology highlights the role played by a double discourse in the anamorphic representation of Everyman—again, an effect without an exact parallel elsewhere in the other surviving medieval English drama. As I have stressed in a previous study of self-speaking and subjectivity, his language moves insistently, often abruptly, between "personal" expression and the ventriloquising of the universal through proverbs, generalities, and spiritual tags,[17] as when he reacts to the blunt desertion of Strength, shifting from the first to the third person:

> I had wende surer I sholde you haue founde.
> He that trusteth in his Strength,
> She hym deceyveth at the length. (826-28)

And if Everyman's last words, inevitably, echo those of Christ in the transcendental language of prayer—language in which he is spoken, effectively, as the redeemed soul parting from the body and its fallen discourse—it is nonetheless on this level, too, that Knowledge symbolically remains mortal and confronts the audience with its mortality. For she anticipates the Angel's definitive declaration in the language, not of certainty, but of perception and deduction:

> Me thynketh that I here aungelles synge,
> And make grete ioy and melody
> Where Everymannes soule receyued shall be. (891-93)

This is, I take it, confirmation that the spectators are interpellated as Everyman. They at once recuperate his collective identity as "the people" (25) of whom God spoke warningly at the outset and are invited to apply as individuals the lesson that has just led, before their very eyes and ears, to the precarious saving of a single soul. The interpellation and the lesson depend on the ongoing doubleness of the signifying process, the unstable relation between particular and universal, temporal and eternal, until the end of time. That relation is shown to be inherent in the symbolic

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17.   Richard Hillman, *Self-Speaking in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama: Subjectivity, Discourse and the Stage* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1997), p. 46.

functioning of the divine creation itself, not a semiotic anomaly to be resolved by any man's mastery of allegorical technique. That is perhaps the most fundamental message that the play, through its "myghty messengere" (63), succeeds in conveying by doing allegory otherwise.