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Afterword: Everyman as a Dual Play

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On reading the programme some two weeks before the event and realizing that I was last on the list of speakers, I rejoiced that I might be able (everything useful having been said already on the environment and the nature of the play) to dispense with introductory developments and immediately concentrate on my topic. In the event, I felt on the evening before my paper was scheduled that my expectations had been more than fulfilled and that, in fact, little useful and new remained for me to offer—an impression further confirmed by three other brilliantly demonstrative arguments the next morning. Yet apart from the fact that I could hardly be so impudent as to withdraw my paper altogether at such short notice, had I done so I would have abdicated the pleasant privilege of thanking in my own name colleagues and students for what they all have brought to us, first in attending and in bringing their rich contributions, and no less importantly in getting involved in our performance of the play *Everyman* (by taking parts in the play and by creating an encouraging audience). I therefore decided at the very last minute to compromise and restrict my initial paper to a set of two remarks on questions that possibly deserved further comment.

On the Disputed Nature of the Play *Everyman*

I would like to return briefly to a question which has several times been alluded to during these two days: that of *Everyman's* proximity to (or distance from) the morality drama as we know it in the English corpus. I would like briefly to insist, before we leave the play, on what strikes me as being its basic *dual* and even *ambiguous* nature, further claiming that its generic affiliation deserves further critical debate. Peter Happé and Richard Hillman, in particular, have today underlined the importance of both its resemblances to and differences from the other morality plays in its dramatic structure and its allegorical mode. Clifford Davidson and the other editors of the 2007 edition of *Everyman* also recognize in their commentary that an intricate and major question is involved.¹ These references prompt me to suggest what, at this stage, certainly remains a peripheral and partial answer but may hopefully help put the problem in a different light. “Genre” being now recognized as an invention of the Age of Enlightenment, it does seem something of a critical delusion to pose affiliation to any of today’s genres as *the* defining rule for any medieval aesthetic product. That is what the Canadian medievalist Paul Zumthor suggested years ago about medieval poetry.² It is even more enlightening to note that a similar approach is adopted to deal with non-European theatrical artefacts belonging to a still largely oral culture. Critics studying traditional aspects of African culture assert that what goes there by the name of theatre must be regarded as one *individual item* in a cultural compound likely to incorporate singing, dancing, gesturing and speech, and, more importantly still, as *one moment* of its overall effect and significance. What the Adioukrou of the Ivory Coast define as “play” precisely refers to such a product, defined as “a cultural activity embodied by a living collective actor performing to a united community that share the same body of cultural beliefs and aesthetic emotions, and (it is added) thereby rehearsing what amounts to collective instruction.”³

1. Clifford Davidson, M. W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos, eds., *Everyman and Its Dutch Original: Elckerlijc* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007); see Introd., p. 3, where the editors acknowledge the impact of Enlightenment prejudices upon subsequent later to present day’s assessments of the play’s relation to morality drama.

2. Paul Zumthor, “Poésie et théâtralité: l’exemple du Moyen Âge”, *Le théâtre et la cité dans l’Europe médiévale*, Actes du V^e Colloque international de la Société internationale pour l’étude du théâtre médiéval, Perpignan, Juillet 1986, ed. Jean-Claude Aubailly et Edelgard E. DuBruck, *Fifteenth Century Studies*, vol. 13 (Stuttgart, Hans-Dieter Heinz Akademischer Verlag, 1988), pp. 3-12.

3. *Le Théâtre négro-africain*, Proceedings of the Conference held at the University of Abidjan, 15-29 avril 1970, and prepared by Bernard Mouralis (Paris, Editions Présence Africaine, 1971). My quotations

If we remember that medieval theatre in Europe (and in England at the period of the publication of *Everyman*) was functionally connected with the dissemination and defence of the dominant religious and political ideology and ethos, we may more willingly regard the play in question as structurally reflecting such a dual function: one that provides physical and emotional on-the-spot enjoyment of a performed action, but which also offers, wrapped up in it, as it were, and preserved for later intellectual assimilation and memorial consumption, an article of the socio-political faith. That *Everyman* could be such a “double-barrelled event” should, it seems to me, be a serious hypothesis. It is in fact what the Messenger’s description suggests (ll. 3-9 and 20-21 of the play as we have it),⁴ together with some oblique addresses both to characters *and* audience (l. 694 as well as ll. 867-69), and lastly the explicit bracketing of the play-text between the initial and final exhortations of the Messenger and the Doctor. Could we not, therefore, consider that the play structurally assumes the quasi-constant superposition of two reception attitudes by a special category of consumers: the “spectators-readers” that Greg Walker, among others, analyses as that of its possible, or probable, addressees.⁵

The Semantic and Theatrical Structure of the Play

My second very brief point primarily concerns the function in the play of the character Goods as the decisive agent of the hero *Everyman*’s moral change, and it has therefore to do with the semantic and theatrical structure of the play as a whole. Having to keep here to essentials, I will just call attention to the very particular nature and function of that allegorical character, whose exceptional status feeds what I feel is the central paradox of the play, one upon which the dramatic action and the whole ideological lesson crucially revolve and which inevitably determines

are from B. Kotchy, “Discours inaugural”, p. 10, and Harris Memel-Fote’s paper: “Anthropologie du théâtre négro-africain traditionnel”, pp. 26-27.

4. Both in A. C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), and in G. Cooper et Charles Wortham, eds., *The Summoning of Everyman* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1980). The importance of the Messenger’s warning has been pointed at already by Bob Godfrey in “*Everyman* (Re)Considered”, a paper given at the 4th International Conference on Aspects of European Medieval Drama, Camerino, 5-8 Aug. 1999, in *European Medieval Drama* 4, ed. S. Higgins and A. Lascombes (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 155-68.

5. Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); see chap. I.

the immediate impact of the play, as well as its long-term significance. I must also say that if I had, before seeing the play performed by my colleagues, entertained any doubt about the exceptional status of Goods, the impressive rendering of that character given by Peter Happé, as by anticipation it emerged as the antagonist of Sarah Carpenter's Good Deeds, would have won me over to the view I am trying to put forward here. Some brief remarks about that allegorical couple will probably suffice to highlight the structural and semantic significance of the dramatic paradox they embody at the core of the play.

No one is likely to question the importance of the dense net of both echoes and contrasts which the anonymous author has carefully woven between the two figures. Such oppositional repetitions enforce upon the audience's minds the parallelism, both visual and linguistic, which has been widely noticed (the verbal echo of their respective names, to begin with) but, to my knowledge, never totally accounted for. Visually, they both appear on stage (and are correspondingly evoked in the dramatic text) as fettered—by material links for the former, and by the accumulation of sins for the second. Dramatically, these two oppositional figures, standing out as the representatives of the two opposite parties (black side and white side) on the moral checker-board of the play, purposely figure the central theological issue mentioned in the parable from Matthew 25:14-30 which V. A. Kolve has so usefully applied to the play.⁶ But even more profoundly, I would suggest that they cryptically illustrate the basic dogmatic tenet of the function of the Fall in the process of Redemption. I would add, moreover, that the tension thus created extends into the whole play, in both its dogmatic and socio-political aspects, but also (and even more importantly, I would say) in its formal dimension, which until now has been unduly underestimated.⁷

6. V. A. Kolve, "Everyman and the Parable of the talents", *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 316-40.

7. The role of the Demon in that process has been endlessly dealt with through centuries of patristic and theological commentary. It has also been successfully dramatized in medieval preaching and drama, especially in the Cornish *Passio Domini*, when the devil visits Pilate's wife (ll. 1907-55) and later deplores his mistake (ll. 3031-98). But the same episode also features in the *N-Town Play* (Play 31, ll. 1-77) and in the famous mock sermon called Satan's Prologue (Play 26, ll. 1-124).