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### Responsable de la publication

Philippe VENDRIX

### Responsables scientifiques

Richard HILLMAN & André LASCOMBES

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# Is Everyman a Morality Play?

## An Exploration of Genre and Provenance

Peter HAPPÉ

University of Southampton

Jean Michel's *Le Mystère de la Passion* was performed in 1486 down the Loire at Angers in 1486. It was largely derived from Arnoul Gréban's *Le Mystère de la Passion*, but the process of derivation involved a fascinating method by which two large one-day sections of Gréban's four-day play were expanded line by line by Michel, so that the old text is still embedded in the new and yet the new takes on a different identity. That process in itself is a sort of model for what I am going to consider about *Everyman*, as you will see. Moreover, Michel's play was printed at least thirty times in the next half century, for, as with *Everyman*, we are here right at the beginning of the process of printed drama. But there is yet another way in which I might reflect Michel's work. It begins with a Prologue Capital—of 888 lines. This takes the form of a sermon in four chapters, each one of which is devoted to one of the words in the phrase VERBUM CARO FACTUM EST. I originally thought that I would imitate Michel in my paper and divide the question IS *EVERYMAN* A MORALITY PLAY? into four parts (leaving out the indefinite article) and offer an exegesis upon each of the four words. But the plan proved too restricting, as I wanted to dodge about as I went along. However, I put

it to you that each of these words—*IS-EVERYMAN-MORALITY-PLAY*—needs careful attention.

*Everyman* is the most famous of all English medieval plays, and it has had a most extraordinary life and influence since the beginning of the twentieth century both as text and performance, as well as having some intriguing earlier manifestations in several countries since its original conception. There is no doubt that it is still alive today, though the reasons for its continuing interest are a matter for separate consideration. It is significant that it has become so famous that it is often taken as typical of morality plays, and that is a concept which I should like to question. Such an enquiry involves looking at several aspects of genre and provenance as well as some bibliographical features in what is a complex history and one we shall find is also frustratingly incomplete in some respects. The approach to genre also involves performance indicators in the text.

The play's typicality comes much into question when we look at the very small number of English plays which are its approximate contemporaries and which we are obliged to compare with it. It lacks many of the characteristics which have perhaps been over-generalized in that very small surviving sample. It contains no clear conflict between the forces of good and evil, and no battle between matched Vices and Virtues. Though temptation is occasionally mentioned as having taken place, it is not the main business of the action. Instead of a battle over the soul of one representative human being who is essentially a site of conflict, we find that the hero is a sentient being who is changed by what he learns, and who passes through a number of different states of concept and feeling. This view means that there is still a sense of right and wrong which is material to the main business of the play: a road to salvation. At least one of the changes is self-motivated by the protagonist, so that although to an extent *Everyman* is subject to inexorable external forces, including the summons of death, he is also at least partially a controller of his own fate. Along with the universality of this person who is *every man*, this centralizing of the self-awareness in a common humanity of the protagonist is a persistent and dominating feature.

The play has very little comic content, and that which it does have avoids the low, notably crude escapades found in *Mankind*, showing instead a restrained use of dramatic irony which directly stimulates our perception of the protagonist. I am thinking here of the audience's state of mind as Friendship, Kindred and Cousin assert their durable loyalty to *Everyman*, unaware that what is threatened is the coming of Death, a prospect the audience has been emphatically made aware of.

Friendship is notably ebullient in his overstatements, even promising to go to hell with Everyman (232), and, in similar vein, Cousin promises to live and die together with him (324).<sup>1</sup> Nor does the action of the play comprise the whole-life narrative found in *Castle of Perseverance* and some outstanding contemporary French examples.

This leads us to consider exactly what we are dealing with in our encounters with this text. I want to suggest that in doing so we have to be aware not of one play but of several and in this process to distinguish four somewhat different contexts. There is now no doubt that the English play is a translation from the Dutch *Elckerlijc*. I don't intend to investigate that argument further here: it has dominated the scholarship about the play for rather too long. Yet I do make the point that it is very difficult to discuss the English version without some consideration of its predecessor, not least because the process of change reveals much about what is now in front of us and thus enriches our response.

So, running the two plays in tandem for the moment, we may identify four phases:

1. The original date of *Elckerlijc* has to be somewhere about the middle of the fifteenth century, probably before printing began in 1460. It is difficult to identify a performance context for such an edition. Suggestions have been made that it was written for a school environment.<sup>2</sup>
2. In its next phase the Dutch play is more clearly identifiable with the culture and practices of the Rhetoricians, and it is reported to have won a prize at one of their competitions in Antwerp in 1496. What is not clear, however, is whether the play was originally intended for such an environment, and I would like to bear in mind that there is much about it which does not closely match many of the surviving Rhetoricians plays. In saying this we should admit that an adaptation from an earlier version to a Rhetoricians performance is a possibility, though we cannot be certain which form of the play actually won the prize.
3. At about the same time as this competition the play was printed, apparently first by Snellaert at Delft in 1495, and there were other printings at Antwerp in about 1496, and about 1501. This development enables us to recognize what

1. References are to *Everyman and Its Dutch Original Elckerlijc*, ed. by Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007). This edition provides a reprint of *The Somonyng of Everyman* (London: John Skot, 1525-30; STC 10605), *Den Spyghel de Salicheyt van Elckerlyc* (Antwerp: William Vorsterman, c.1496), and a translation of the latter into modern English.

2. G. Cooper and C. Wortham, eds., *Everyman* (Nedlands: Western Australia Press, 1980), p. xlvi.

we might describe as a literary existence to the play, since it now existed as something to be read.<sup>3</sup> We should remember too that the idea of printing a play for reading as distinct from being a performance text implies a different intention and a new kind of reception. Nor should we underestimate the importance of the innovation of actually printing a play.

4. The fourth phase is the translation into English from a Dutch text which is thought to have been the edition printed by William Vorsterman at Antwerp (c.1518–25).<sup>4</sup> The English version is found in four surviving editions, which can be dated after 1510, but it is likely, as we shall see, that these were later than 1521. We may suppose that these editions are undoubtedly the result of one translation, but the interconnections between the surviving texts, as W. W. Greg has shown, require the hypothesizing of at least three other versions to explain the relationships between them and the presumed original English version.<sup>5</sup> But we must also pause upon this word *translation* because much was changed and a good deal added, suggesting that the translator/adaptor/author had a different agenda from that discernible in the early Dutch versions. In addition, we may well be talking about a date in the 1520s, perhaps two generations after the original Dutch version in the mid-fifteenth century. Instead of the earlier pre-Reformation Catholic context, we would now be in post-Lutheran England, where the religious environment was in a process of profound, even cataclysmic change. The English text thus stands within a long line of evolution, and as such it contains within it marks, scars even, which give us clues about what might have happened to it. It seems that the Dutch original cannot now be entirely disregarded. Nor is it clear that the English version was ever acted during this period when the printed editions were so frequent, even though, as we shall see, there are distinctive performance characteristics which can be identified

3. The texts of at least two other Dutch plays surviving from the period have been investigated as to the priority of their status for reading or performance, especially with regard to the woodcuts in the printed texts: see the introductions to *Mariken van Nieumeghen*, ed. Dirk Coigneau ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1982), and Matthijs de Castelein (attributed), *Pyramus ende Thisbe*, ed. G. A. van Es in *Piramus en Thisbe: Twee rederijkersspelen uit de zestiende eeuw* (Zwolle: Willink, 1965).

4. A. C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. xii, citing J. van Mierlo, 'De Prioriteit van Elcklerlijc tegenover Everyman gehandhaafd' (Antwerpen: Standaard Boikhandel, 1948), p. 22.

5. *Materialien zur Kunde des älteren englischen dramas* (Louvain: Uystpruyt, 1910), pp. xxviii, 62–65.

in the text. It can hardly be supposed indeed that the frequency of the printed English editions was determined by a market consisting of potential performers or directors. Rather, it seems much more likely that these texts were printed for sale to readers who might bring different requirements to the book. Amongst these we can identify a need for devotional literature, particularly that associated with the *Ars Moriendi*, the craft of dying.

I should like here to interject that the term “morality” needs some careful handling in connection with *Everyman*. The word was not used commonly about the plays it has come to designate at this early period. The title page does have its own formula, “a treatyse . . . in the maner of a morall playe”, but, as we shall see, that has some interesting implications about the status of the text. On the other hand, the term “moralité” did have some currency in France at this time. But even there a difficulty arises because some of the French plays so designated turn out to be more like mystery or biblical plays. The one instance of the word in Scotland in 1503, recently noted by Priscilla Bawcutt, may have been influenced by French examples.<sup>6</sup>

I have pointed out that the English version is a translation, and this is substantiated by many details once the priority is accepted. This reveals a closeness of incident and also many stretches of text where the where the detailed structure of the speeches is clearly the same in the Dutch. Both versions share a common cultural background which, as Cawley noted, includes the *Danse Macabre*, the *Ars Moriendi*, manuals of confession and the *Legenda Aurea* (containing the story of Barlaam and Josaphat).<sup>7</sup> As to changes, I want to concentrate here on four which are substantial in themselves and which have the cumulative effect of re-orienting the play. These are the introduction of the Messenger as a Prologue; the re-naming of Good Deeds, Everyman’s principal supporting character; the significance of penance; and the change of gender for Confession.

*Everyman* begins with the speech by the Messenger, which has no counterpart in *Elckerlijc*. On the one hand, it has a purpose in drawing the attention of Man to the need to take heed of his ending, however gaily he may begin. Noticeably, it calls upon Man to do this rather than simply referring to the protagonist Everyman. It takes brief notice of the plot by telling how all will fade when he is summoned to the reckoning by God. The list given includes names from both halves of the play,

6. Priscilla Bawcutt, “A Note on the term ‘Morality’”, *Medieval English Theatre* 28 (2006): 171-74.

7. Cawley, ed., pp. xv-xix.

before and after the critical completion of the act of penance. But this speech has another purpose which seems closely aligned to performance. It matches the phrase on the title-page in referring to the “fygure of a morall playe”.<sup>8</sup> But the attention to performance is even closer because the Messenger, addressing the audience, tells how they will *see* how the other characters will fade and also how they will *hear* how Everyman is called to the reckoning and what God says to him. This opening speech is thus distanced from the dramatic action, but in a Brechtian way it draws attention to what is about to be enacted, thus separating stage time from real time. The word “audyence” appears twice in the speech, but it is used as a way of referring to the act of listening rather than as the more modern generic term for all the listeners: “I pray you all gyve your audyence / And here this matter with reverence” (1-2).

The play ends with a speech by the Doctor, in which he directs the listeners’ attention to the need to make a good reckoning, and once again he is talking to “ye herers” (903), a phrase not in the original.

Perhaps the next feature of the English version is even more pervasive. In contrast to all the other characters, whether well or ill-intentioned, who leave Everyman, the one to support him best in going with him into the grave is called Virtue (Duecht) in Dutch, but she is renamed Good Deeds in the English version. This is a systematic change throughout the English text and presumably it is meant to give a different function to this character. This strategic re-naming is backed up tactically through interpolations in the text. The Dutch version may indeed mention good deeds but only briefly, as when Virtue says he will testify that Elckerlijc has done a good deed (“weldaet”, D583), but it is likely that this refers to his having gone to confession on Virtue’s prompt, and there is also one reference to giving to the poor (D653-55). It may well be that the translator has noticed these details and been prompted to make more of the concept for his own purposes than the original author did. At the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the play he certainly uses items about good deeds which were not present in the Dutch text. Thus Death, as he takes up his divinely appointed mission at the beginning of the play, notices, as Doot does, that Everyman shall suffer for loving riches, but he adds that he will separate him from heaven, “Excepte that almes dedes be his good frende” (78), and force him to dwell in hell for ever. Later, at the critical moment when Friendship,

8. It seems to me possible that the phrase in the text at l. 3 might have come first and that the printer imitated it for the title-page.

Cousin and Kinship have all deserted him, Everyman turns to Good Deeds of his own volition:

I thynke that I shall never sped  
Tyll that I go to my Good Dede. (481-82)

Near the end of the play, as Good Deeds accompanies Everyman to the grave, the translator has moved the idea from one line in the Dutch from Everyman himself to Good Deeds, who says, "All fleeth save Good Dedes, and that am I" (873).

This change of emphasis allows us a further insight into the context in which *Everyman* was created, and it seems that it helps to place the play in a post-Lutheran context. For Luther, emphasizing the doctrine of *sola fides*, rejected the concept of good works as a way to salvation. That being so, it would appear that the deliberate emphasis upon good works means that the translator was interested in re-asserting the traditional and orthodox Catholic position.

I should like to add two further interrelated points of corroboration. In his concluding speech the Doctor refers to Judgement Day and says that to those whose reckoning is not clear God will say, "*Itē maledicti in ignem eternum*" (915). This phrase derives from Matthew 25:41, where those who have not carried out the works of mercy are separated from those who have, and are condemned to the fire. This seems to reinforce the idea that it is only Good Deeds which will count at the last. Moreover, in the English dramatic tradition exemplified by the York cycle, this sequence from Matthew is dramatised as the central item in the episode of the Last Judgement.<sup>9</sup> The York text is thought to have been transcribed between 1463 and 1475. It thus appears that the pro-Catholic translator had both scriptural and dramatic precedents upon which he could draw. His play might thus be part of a resistance to Reformation thinking. Although we are not certain about the dates at which it was printed, it is quite possible that it followed the clamp-down on Lutheran books initiated by Cardinal Wolsey in 1521. That Richard Pynson, who was responsible for two of the known editions, was actually the King's printer reinforces the possibility of orthodoxy. We also find that it was about this time that King Henry, probably assisted by Sir Thomas More, was granted the title of *Fidei Defensor* by the Pope in recognition of his treatise *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, a refutation of some of Luther's work.

9. It has also been pointed out that there was a commonplace relationship between the notion of Friendship, Good Works and the Last Judgement; see John Conley, "The Doctrine of Friendship in *Everyman*", *Speculum* 44 (1969): 374. Conley also notes (375) that l.78, added in the translation and quoted *supra*, specifically refers to friendship.

The treatment of the sacraments in the two plays is indeed remarkable and it merits further consideration. For some reason *Elckerlijc*, in listing them as seven, leaves out Penance and in fact gives only six (D675-79). It is hard to tell whether this omission was deliberate or accidental, but the translator apparently noticed it and added Penance to his list of sacraments at the end of his line 725. Once again there is a possible context for this change, in as much as Luther had questioned the value of confession to a priest and it would appear that the translator was interested in underlining or restoring its value. In addition he draws attention to the character of Confession by making him male—"Where dewelleth that holy man Confessyon? (539)—presumably because only a male who was a priest could hear confession, whereas the Dutch author saw Biechte as "mother of health".<sup>10</sup> But, as it happens, the translator is not consistent, in that he left Confession as female when translating this line (cf. 552 with D505).

The treatment of the priesthood invites comment from a slightly different standpoint. It seems to me that in this respect the author of *Everyman* followed his predecessor closely. He noticed and stuck to the aspects of the priesthood previously outlined, placing priests above the angels, in particular in the ability to make Christ's body in flesh and blood by means of five words at the altar ("Hic est enim corpus meum"), an affirmation of transubstantiation (738, following D692) in the face of its denial by Protestant interpreters. He also keeps to the original condemnation of the buying and selling of spiritual matters (simony), and cohabitation by priests, as evidenced by their offspring (755-63, from D711-18). Possibly these sentiments were part of an Erasmian wish to reform the church from within when *Elckerlijc* was originally composed, but for the author of *Everyman* they might have had a new urgency.<sup>11</sup> The useful implication would be that even if priests themselves were corrupt their office remained of primary significance in the way to salvation.

In what I have said so far I have made some references to performance aspects of *Everyman*: I should now like to turn to this question more directly. We have seen that there is some external evidence, however slender, that *Elckerlijc* was performed. Alternatively it may be that the text as printed reflects some details of actual performance, but for *Everyman* there is nothing external to support the possibility of

<sup>10.</sup> C. J. Wortham, "Everyman and the Reformation", *Parergon* 29 (1981): 24-25.

<sup>11.</sup> There is a possibility that the origin of *Elckerlijc* lies in the critical or discerning attitude to the Roman Catholic Church under the aegis of *Devotio Moderna*; see the article by Luc Bergmans in the present collection.

an actual performance. We shall have to rely instead upon what can be gleaned from the text. We have already noted that the chances are that the frequency of printing was more likely due to the perception of a reading market rather than a performing one. The title-page, as noted, seems to offer the former in its use of “treatyse” and yet there is also some sort of modification in the phrase, “in the maner of a morall playe”, which sounds as though the printer needed to make some excuse or apology for the dramatic form.<sup>12</sup> Yet even if this is so, the designation still reveals that there was a consciousness here of dramatic form and one which might be aligned with other aspects of other plays. Such similarities in respect of performance are not very convincing if we consider the extant corpus of moralities, which vary in scope and size and can hardly be described as of a similar dramatic mode to *Everyman*. *Castle of Perseverance*, for example, demands a panoramic stage with many locations and much movement between them; *Wisdom* requires an elaborate musical and dancing presentation; *Mankind* requires a cast of resourceful players competent in comedy which is verbal and visual. Thus the phrase is not very illuminating as to the “maner” in question, though it might have been, had more plays survived from the period.

We can derive some ideas about performance from the text in two ways: its overwhelming sense of presenting its material through dialogue, which, taken with its structure, implies a dramatic experience; and the details which are embedded in the text implying that what has happened is a theatrical action perceived by an audience.

For the former I am impressed by the structure of the play, which seems conceived to show an unfolding experience. This is enhanced by the use of the Messenger and the Doctor as commentators upon what us about to be seen and what has been seen. The structure of the play turns upon the central episode of penance, preceded by the desertion of those who have nothing to offer the protagonist—Friendship, Kindred and Cousin—and followed by the contact with those who do—Beauty, Strength and Five Wits—but who in the end may not go with him into the grave in spite of their supportive disposition and ability to help him. Very possibly, as André Lascombes has suggested in this paper included in the collection, the change depends upon the ambiguous function of Goods, who may be used evilly but can provide a good warning.<sup>13</sup> As to dramatic experience, it seems to me that

12. This is not in the Dutch text.

13. I have discussed the generic ambiguity of wealth in an article entitled, “Wealth in Interludes” (forthcoming).

there is no doubt that these two groups are meant to reflect upon one another, even though they are presented in linear narrative. The framing commentary serves to set this off. Further support for a theatrical experience also comes in the dramatic irony, as the audience see the first group condemn themselves in the light of what the audience already knows about what is to happen. In addition, we have already noted that the writer is interested in the concept of seeing and hearing.

When we come to the details embedded in the text, we should first take notice of the dramatic style of this play. It is not written with a great deal of detailed attention to external characteristics. Much of the content, including the monologues as well as the dialogue exchange, is concentrated upon spiritual matters. It is hardly, one might say, a realistic drama, but, in spite of this, it is a drama in which things are represented in a physical dimension, even though this is done with restraint and discrimination. These features are reflected in what can be found in the play regarding practical details of performance. They include information about locations and movement between them, a change of costume, some physical properties, some music, and some opportunities for enactment and action. There are indeed striking opportunities for acting. These may be associated with the elaboration of allegorical significance, but some of them are distinctly performable, as in showing how Everyman grows old before reaching the grave, as well as the ebullient, even boastful behaviour of Fellowship.

Even for a reader, as distinct from a performer, there are three indispensable places in the text, as well as a more general area. The first is the initial location for God, who sets up the intervention of Death by sending him to Everyman. It is not certain that he was placed in an elevated position from which he might overlook the main events of Everyman's pilgrimage, though Knowledge's words, "God seeth thy lyvynge in his trone above" (637), suggest that he might have been. He speaks of himself as "in my majestye", which rather suggests that he is enthroned. He does not take a specific part at the end of the play when Everyman's soul is received into heaven, but it does seem likely that this later episode might be associated with God's original initiative.

Separate from this location is the more general space where Death perceives Everyman and approaches him. This would seem to be an undesignated area, but at times it appears that Everyman moves around this space. In particular he goes to the two other fixed locations: the House of Salvation, where Everyman carries out his penance and receives the sacrament, and the grave where his body must lie as his soul ascends to heaven. The House of Salvation is named by Knowledge in the text as the place where he will meet Confession, and when they reach it she tells Everyman

to kneel and ask for mercy (540-44). While he submits to Confession, he receives the scourge of Penance (571). The scourge is apparently an indispensable prop, as he then scourges himself: “Take this, body, for the synne of the fleshe! . . . Therfore suffer nowe strokes’ (613-16). This has a specific effect upon Good Deeds, and once again there is a sense of stage space in which action takes place. Initially, for both Goods and Good Deeds, location has some significance. The former explains that he is trussed and piled in corners, locked in chests and sacked in bags “thou mayste se with thyne eye” (396), so that he cannot stir. For the reader this produces a complex image in the mind’s eye, but it raises interesting implications for staging, since it implies that the audience can see him in his plight, even though it does not tell us precisely how it might have been presented. Nor is it clear how Goods is withdrawn from the action, since Everyman does nothing to release him and he does not act as a companion on the pilgrimage. On the other hand, the treatment of Good Deeds is complete and coherent. She also begins immobile:

Here I ly, colde on the grounde  
Thy synnes have me so sore bounde  
That I cannot stere. (489-91)<sup>14</sup>

But events lead to her recovery, as she turns instantly more healthy when Everyman scourges himself (619-21), and she becomes his close companion physically, entering the grave with him at the last (879).

This grave forms the third fixed location, and once again it seems as though it must have had a presence on the stage, not least because Everyman and Good Deeds must enter it and remain there while the soul moves up into heaven. Moreover, it is noticed beforehand, when Everyman says, “into this cave must I crepe” (792), and Beauty recoils from it and leaves Everyman. Perhaps more strikingly, after he has made his confession and received the sacrament, Everyman takes the initiative and leads his companions to the grave in what was probably a procession. Before he does so he asks them to put their hand on “this Rodde” (778). Though doubts have been expressed about exactly what this is, it seems likely that he is carrying a cross which he presents physically to his companions. In this way it looks as though there is a visual and enacted dimension to the point of view which advises the pilgrim on the way to the grave to keep the cross in sight.

In considering these physical features of staging which the text seems to require, we should notice that the author has visualized or imagined them. It is

14. Duecht is in a bed, D441.

quite possible that no one ever performed them in the way I have suggested, but the imaginative process I have described still takes place within the mind in a way which cannot but be described as “dramatic”, even if the purpose of printing the work was primarily aimed at reading. We should also notice that certain other physical aspects of performance appear in costume and properties and in the music. Everyman’s clothing is not described in detail, but Death’s query about going gaily (86) suggests a bright costume of some sort. Later Knowledge gives him another garment, which is called Sorrow and Everyman accepts that in wearing it he shows true contrition (650). The properties are few, but they have powerful symbolic resonances. Besides the cross noticed above, there is the book of Everyman’s reckoning. At first, Good Deeds points to them (books in the plural at 503) lying underfoot, but later, when the reckoning has been improved (“clere” [652]), he carries it on the pilgrimage. Other properties seem to be required in the scourge, and possibly bags and chests for Goods to be imprisoned in at his first appearance.

As to the music, we find that Knowledge says that she hears angels singing after Everyman has entered into the grave, and if the play were performed this would have to be provided to justify the line. However, the ending of the play raises an interesting doubt about how it might have been performed. Notably, Everyman has no words after his death, and although the Angel bids his soul welcome to the heavenly sphere, there is nothing in the text to suggest that it was necessarily visible at this point: the Angel’s speech, the music and then the comments of the Doctor could have ended a performance in an appropriate manner.

The topics I have discussed in this paper suggest to me that to come to terms with *Everyman* one has to take account of a number of different contexts, literary and dramatic, and that its originality lies largely in its economy of language and theatricality. The English author appears to have used the work of his predecessor in *Elckerlijc* with great resource and sensitivity, but he was working to his own agenda in terms of doctrine and performance.