THE 'MORALITY PLAY': Dead End or Main Street?

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The terms 'morality play' or 'morality', to describe a certain kind of fifteenth– and sixteenth–century English play, were — as is well known — invented in the eighteenth century, but there is still uncertainty as to the boundaries of the genre both in space and time.

A recent discussion by Pamela King,[1] for example, provides a usefully succinct definition but at the same time reinforces a commonly held but perhaps unnecessarily narrow view of the genre. In her discussion of the morality play, Professor King includes only five surviving English texts, which, in her view, 'constitute the entire corpus of an apparently influential genre'; she goes on to note that 'what these plays have in common most obviously is that they offer their audiences moral instruction through dramatic action that is broadly allegorical'.

This is a very handy definition (and her comments on the plays in question are illuminating), but there are, I believe, two difficulties with it when one looks at these plays in a broader context.

First, there are — as many critics have taken for granted — plays which, while not primarily 'moral' in their orientation, fulfil all one's other expectations of a morality play, whether the particular subject matter be concerned with governance (John Skelton's *Magnyfycence*), the process of education (John Redford's *Wit and Science*), or some other issue. Certainly, the five plays discussed by Professor King are influential, but the later substitution of (to make a rather crude distinction) secular for moral subject matter is less important, I suggest, than the continuity in these later plays' formal characteristics.

Secondly, there are many plays of the same period but outside England that exactly fit Professor King's useful definition. The close dependence of *Everyman* on a Dutch play, *Elckerlijck*, is enough by itself to suggest that the boundaries of the genre might be extended geographically as well as chronologically; moreover, *Elckerlijck* is only one of dozens of Dutch plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which address moral/spiritual questions by means of dramatised allegory. How may this larger genre — extended in both time and space — be described?

In terms of their content, morality plays (broadly understood) deal quite explicitly with *issues*, matters of contemporary interest and importance (often, but not always, of a religious nature), and present these issues in a manner which is intended to persuade the audience of the rightness, indeed the inevitability, of the position taken in the play. The form of these plays is — obviously — dramatic: actors, dialogue, developing action, emphasised by costume, make–up, music and, where appropriate, stylised movement.

Their mode is allegorical, to a greater or lesser degree: in this mode, character is subservient to theme and argument. The characterisation and dramatic action may reflect a tightly organised argument, as in Redford's *Wit and Science*, or a more flexible scheme that also incorporates human types, as in *The Castle of Perseverance* or *Everyman*.

Have we now established a reasonably leak–proof genre or category? If we have, how far does it allow us to go before it becomes so inclusive as to be useless? Let us test this somewhat redefined genre by considering in some detail two extreme examples from the southern Netherlands (extreme both in the explicitness of their arguments and in the tightness of their allegorical schemes); if they are found to fit, the next question is whether the genre must still be considered to be confined to parts of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. If, however, even these two plays can be shown to have some basic characteristics shared by a much broader class, then the 'morality play' becomes a sub–class of a much larger theatrical family rather than relics in an historical dead–end.

The two plays in question are *Prologhen*, short plays written for and produced on the occasion of the grand *Landjuweel*, a festival of rhetoric, drama, and display held in Antwerp in August 1561, when the leading Chamber of Rhetoric of the city, *De Violieren*, acted as host to fourteen other Chambers of Brabant. Prizes were offered in twelve categories, beginning with the formal Entry into the city and including such items as the best presentation of the Chambers' devices or *blasoenen* and the best *sot* or fool: four of the categories required scripted plays, and two of those, the *Prologhe* and the longer *Spel van Sinnen*, were on set themes. These themes had formed part of the official versified invitation that had been sent out just over three months before.[2]

On this occasion, the participating Chambers were asked to compose a *Prologhe* on the theme, *Hoe oorbooirlijck ons sijn die cloecke Engienen, Cooplieden, die rechtveerdich handelen eenpaer* ('How beneficial to us are those clever spirits, merchants, who regularly act honestly' — in this context, *rechtveerdich* includes the ideas of honesty, fairness and justice). In framing

these plays, they are asked to follow the guidelines provided in *dic voorgaende Caerte* ('the previous invitation', possibly referring to the *Landjuweel* in Diest in 1541), a document that does not appear to have survived — in the 1561 invitation, the only specific hint as to the formal requirements is the marginal gloss, *200 Regulen* (200 lines), a stipulation that is closely adhered to by the participants. Another requirement appears to be reflected in the fact that all but one of the *Prologhen* have three dramatic characters.

What is not explicitly stated or required, but seems to be taken for granted, is that the set theme will be approached in the allegorical mode: to use our terminology, these playlets would take the form of 'moralities'. How else, one may imagine a participant asking, would one present a dramatised debate?

The first prize went to the play devised and presented by the Chamber *De Lelikens uten Dale* ('Lilies of the Valley') from Leeuwen. The three characters are Needy Nature (*Behoeflijcke nature*) 'a poor man', Divine Dispensation (*Goddelijcke dispensatie*) 'a woman', and Just Merchant (*Rechtveerdich Coopman*) who is an idealised representation and representative of all such individuals.

Needy Nature immediately sets up the problem that is to be addressed, stating that his life is wretched and his heart torn by conflicts, with no sign of relief. Divine Dispensation assures him that she hears his complaints, and after some reluctance and scepticism on his part, persuades him to tell her of his troubles. He complains that every kind of animal is provided for 'without labour' (*sonder arbeyt*), while humans are oppressed and miserable.

She gently warns him that this kind of lamentation looks like blasphemy and rebellion against God's ordinance; the appropriate response, she suggests, is that *wy met liefden souden conuerseren Minlijck accorderen met peys eendrachtich* ('we should relate to one another with love, coming to friendly agreements in peace and unity'). She asserts that although humans are born naked and helpless into the world, they are the only ones who can find true fulfilment. People should love, help, and support one another: *nature eyscht charitate* ('nature requires charity').

Needy Nature humbly repeats his point that need brings suffering. When Divine Dispensation hears who he is, she proceeds to the next step in her argument, which is that God has arranged the world in such a way that different countries and regions provide various products of benefit to people (wine, corn, meat, etc.), and that it is therefore essential that there be peace and unity among nations so that they may help and complement one another. Needy Nature is grateful for this explanation of God's providence,

especially when he learns that the lady is Divine Dispensation herself. However, he hesitantly points out that he himself is in no position to travel among the nations to obtain what he requires.

This, of course, is the cue for Divine Dispensation to introduce the third and key figure in this scheme, the Just Merchant. On hearing Needy Nature's complaint, the Just Merchant graciously informs him that his wishes are answered, by means of the Merchant's ship:

> Noch sal ick v vertoonen int openbaer bly
> Weest daer af danckbaer // my / tot alder heure
> Siet hier Tschip / daermede ick labeure
> Met pijnen dure // om v te staen in staden
>
> 'I will show it to you openly — be thankful to me for it at all times. See here the ship with which I carry out my work with severe labour, in order to bring help to you'.

Divine Dispensation suggests to the Merchant that he expound all the features of his ship, for the benefit of Needy Nature, which he proceeds to do. (In the volume of texts printed the following year, there also appears an annotated illustration of this ship.) The vessel itself, for example, is called God's Guidance (*Gods gheleyde*), its ballast is Good Works, its mast is Perseverance, its cargo is Livelihood and Increase (*neeringhe en wasdom*) etc. Without this cargo, claims the Merchant, *Soo moet behoeflijcke natuere vergaen* ('Needy Nature will inevitably perish').

Needy Nature confirms that he understands and agrees with this analysis and says that at the approach of the Merchant his heart rejoices and he hears music. From her point of view, Divine Dispensation asserts that:

> Sonder den Coopman soude van aermoe versmooren
> Die behoeflijcke natuer der menschen cranck
>
> 'Without the Merchant, the needy nature of weak humanity would not survive'.

The Just Merchant pays tribute to Antwerp for providing the conditions in which merchants may go about their useful business, and asks for God's support so that:

> den Coopman blijue varende in fleure
> Tot oorboore van behoeflijcke natuere.
>
> 'the Merchant may continue to flourish, to the benefit of Needy Nature.'

Versions of these arguments are to be found in virtually all the *Prologhen* on this occasion, and in the *ommegangen*, or regular processions of the period,[3] but this entry from Leeuwen has several features that may have especially pleased the judges.

Many of the other *Prologhen* at this *Landjuweel* present the set theme through straightforward assertion, with the three characters virtually joining in a chorus of praise of the Just Merchant. The Leeuwen playlet, however, begins with a problem, the problem of poverty, which has in everyone's interest to be resolved; the argument is not given out at once, but develops in stages, as the poor man mildly pursues his complaint — the potential for conflict between the haves and have–nots is clearly presented by Needy Nature and Just Merchant, with Divine Dispensation providing the broad and authoritatively presented context. The Just Merchant appears on cue, together with his ship in some form (perhaps a large model), to resolve the matter on the socio-economic level, as Divine Dispensation has done in the theological context. The text makes clear, as one would expect, that Needy Nature is poorly clothed while Divine Dispensation appears to him to be *van grooten estate / Van rijcken huyse* ('of high estate, from a rich household'); the Merchant is presumably dressed very much in the style of the judges themselves. The play provides, therefore, a clearly developed argument represented through three appropriately defined characters, with a certain amount of visual interest.

The second prize was won by one of the two Chambers from Mechelen, *The Peony*. Their play is the only one to have only two characters: the name of the first, *Stichtinge*, carries a range of meanings connected with building and development, and, as she carries in her hands both a trowel and a book, I translate her here as 'Edification'; the second is Common Profit (*Ghemeyn profijt*), 'a man with a weaver's spool and wool over his arm'.

Unlike the Leeuwen play, this piece does not present a developing argument, with the resolution beginning to emerge only half–way through. Neither of the two characters has a speech of more than four lines, and most of them are of two lines or one; very few of their utterances, moreover, are specifically fitted to the speaker, but essentially make up one continuing speech. They launch immediately into a barrage of assertions supporting the set proposition, a barrage whose eloquent and relentless comprehensiveness presumably made up, in the judges' view, for the lack of dramatic development, in terms of either plot, character or visual interest.

This *Prologhe* begins with a circular sequence of brief arguments or, rather, assertions: human beings were created to see to one another's

welfare; to engage honestly and justly in trade is a virtuous action; to carry out virtuous actions is to be like God; to be like God is to show charity. Having thus established the interdependence of honest trade, the common profit, and God's ordinance, the two alternating speakers elaborate in considerable detail upon this pattern. The just merchants, for example, engage in a variety of essential works of charity, pleasing to God and society; because no single country provides for all human needs, the merchants travel over land and sea to bring back various necessary goods, *Dwelck sy wt vercoopen / om redelijck ghewin* ('which they re–sell at a reasonable profit'); they support the government with advice and materially; they bring plants and seeds for the farmers, weapons, raw materials for craftsmen and artisans; they avoid monopolies or fraud, love virtue, and generally act for the common good. People who do not behave in these ways *tsijn gheen rechte coopmans* ('are not real merchants'). Just merchants, however, will have their reward in heaven.

To judge by the award to this *Prologhe* from Mechelen, the Rederijkers seem to have been quite satisfied to be entertained by ideas, if expressed with elegance and ingenuity. If within the range of 200 lines (or, in the case of the *Spel van Sinnen*, 700 lines) there could also be some exploitation of the more specifically theatrical possibilities of the occasion, so much the better, but the play of ideas was the thing.

The dozen other Chambers of Rhetoric taking part in this festival used a variety of sometimes ingenious devices to give staged expression to the set theme. In terms of content and analysis, however, the same topics, definitions, and priorities recur: the contrast between common profit and private gain, between the socially constructive behaviour of the just merchant and the subversive effects of fraud and selfishness; the risks and hardships of the merchant's life; the spiritual benefits of socially responsible behaviour; the sources and history of Antwerp's prosperity; above all, the mutual dependence of the classes or estates.

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The *Prologhen*, written to order on a set theme, present an extreme example of the morality, in which the boundary between argument and drama has just been crossed. If, then, we can find a critical language for dealing fairly with these self–serving mini–polemics, such a language may prove useful in approaching 'moralities' in general, and for finding connections with a broader theatrical tradition. The two dominant features of moralities, both of which have been points of difficulty in modern critical approaches to such

plays, are, first, that their core and foundation is the discussion, demonstration, and elaboration of an idea or set of ideas (and not only 'moral' ideas); secondly, that these ideas are expressed and dramatised through the abstractions of allegory. Let us take these two points in turn, to see if, in dealing with them, we may find a route out of the morality's present cultural ghetto and back into the main street of our culture.

As Bob Potter pointed out in 1975,[4] the morality is one manifestation of the 'theatre of ideas'. But what *is* a play of ideas? Just as we have come to recognise that ideological assumptions are everywhere, whether admitted or not, so there can be no play, even the frothiest farce, without ideas of some sort, however second-hand or silly. What distinguishes the play of ideas, however, is that an argument or assertion is up–front and unavoidable, a deliberate structure of ideas for which the dramatic action serves as a vehicle or convenient expression.

One may confidently say, for example, that *Everyman* is 'about' the art of dying and *The Apple Cart* is 'about' the art of governance, but there are many intellectually stimulating plays in which the sense of a developing argument is inextricably embedded in the dramatic action, and one becomes uneasy at the suggestion that, for example, *Bartholomew Fair* is 'about' the nature of authority or *The Tempest* 'about' reconciliation — not all intelligent plays are appropriately labelled 'plays of ideas', and the outer limit of the category is always likely to be arguable.

There have, however, been developments in the course of the last couple of generations which may make it easier for us to recognise the links and shared features which late medieval Western European morality plays have with the theatre of other times and places, especially our own. Agitprop, guerrilla theatre, street theatre, community theatre, people's theatre, protest theatre — these are some of the terms that have been coined to categorise the thousands of plays of dramatised argument or instruction that have been devised and performed in recent times, in response, one may surmise, to circumstances of exceptional uncertainty and unpredictability in both broadly social and personal relations.

Just as, looking back over the last few decades, we may see that we have moved decisively into a time of difference, uncertainty, and exploratory eclecticism that has been labelled 'postmodern', so the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (at least in north–west Europe — there may be regional variations), a time of radical questioning of social and economic relations, religious assumptions, and cultural and personal identities, may, I suggest, usefully be called 'post–medieval' rather than either 'late medieval',

'Renaissance' or 'early modern',[5] and it is surely no accident that this was the flourishing time of that class of plays of ideas that we call 'moralities'.

What are the characteristic and effective features of a play of ideas in general? There are, I suggest, two mutually dependent dimensions in the devising of a play of this kind, whether in the fifteenth century or the twentieth. First, the subject matter itself must be thoroughly analysed, so that its most important points, its primary structure, are revealed, and it is not cluttered with matters which, though relevant, are not essential. At the same time, it is necessary to find an appropriate language of dramatic action that underlines, clarifies, and makes memorable the ideas, argument or information to be conveyed. To find a convincing match between ideas and action is an unusual creative achievement, at whatever period. The continuing playability of, for example, *Mankind*, *Everyman/Elckerlijck* or *Wit and Science* derives, I suggest, from, in general terms, their choice of very basic themes — i.e. dying, the ordinary temptations of everyday life, and the process of learning — and then a clear analysis of the issues and an imaginative choice of dramatic representation or 'figuring'.

The connections between plays such as these and a wider genre or family may be illustrated from some recent examples. In the Western Cape, in South Africa, in 1994, a local community–oriented theatre group,[6] devised and presented two plays on pressing current issues, one on AIDS and the other on how and why to go about voting in a democratic national election, the first ever held in the country. In both cases, the information had to be accurate, reliable, and clear, and the appropriate expertise was called upon in order to help establish the substantive frameworks of the two pieces.

For the dramatic representation of these ideas and sets of information, there already existed a set of conventions that had been developed through the many protest plays of the 1980s, of which the best known is *Woza Albert*. These conventions include the use of type–characters and type–situations, not allegorical, but moving in that direction; these crystallise and exemplify the relevant values and issues and demonstrate the potential for conflict and the possibility of its resolution. Songs, comic incident, and direct address to the audience are essential aspects of the presentation. I need hardly labour the similarities to 'moralities'. These plays, making use of English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa in varying proportions according to the nature of the audience, toured dozens of suburbs, towns and villages; they were received with an often noisy appreciation of their dramatic and entertainment value and a keen recognition of the importance of the

subject matter, reflected in questions, argument, and discussion during and after the performances.

Plays of this general type will be familiar to many people in North America and Europe, especially from the late sixties and the seventies (in Toronto, for example, one thinks of Toronto Workshop Productions and Theatre Passe Muraille). The 'morality play' may therefore be critically and historically recuperated or rehabilitated by demonstrating its links with two large critical and creative enterprises, one of them being the play of ideas and in particular its revival in popular forms since the 1960s.

The other diagnostic feature of the postmedieval morality play, and one which has constituted a critical blockage for many generations, is its dominant mode of expression, namely allegory, and I wish to suggest that recent developments in literary theory and cultural studies have opened the way for a radical and positive revaluation of this formal and expressive aspect of the morality, just as the revival of the play of ideas enables one to look freshly at its characteristic content and emphasis. Allegory is, of course, not a specifically dramatic mode; as is well known, seeing and explaining the world and its works by means of allegory was, in the late Middle Ages, almost an obsession, and this vision is expressed in virtually all literary genres, treatises, and sermons, and in the visual arts. For the purpose of categorising or defining, therefore, moralities may usefully be approached not as allegories that happen to be plays but as plays that happen to be primarily allegorical because that was at the time the dominant mode of approaching, analysing, and discussing important ideas and concepts in the public domain.

Nevertheless, the particular characteristics and strengths of allegory deserve to be reviewed. A notable feature of postmodern criticism and the postmodern imagination is the increased interest in and appreciation of the artifice of art and the necessity of form — myth, romance, fantasy, metaphor, and, increasingly, allegory, are being approached with less condescension than in the modern past and with a more sympathetic appreciation of their creative possibilities.

Language in general, and artistic form in particular, are not inherently transparent, no matter how 'natural' and based on commonsense they may seem at any given time. Critics and observers have been taking more serious note of the unavoidable conventionality of artistic form, and recognising the vital participatory role of the reader or audience in reading the code. In this contemporary context of the foregrounding of convention, the striking conventionality or stylisation of the morality play

may be seen to be not different in kind from other forms of artistic expression, such as naturalism, but merely different in degree. All forms of discourse require decoding, but some codes or sets of symbols are more or less buried or natural–seeming than others. To the postmodern observer, allegory presents itself — or might do — as a potentially creative mind–game, a deliberately self–conscious playing with the possibilities of encrypted communication.

Post–Derrida, indeed, allegory has particularly attractive features: it is an expressive mode which unites the discursive and the figurative or poetic like two sides of a coin, as was clearly recognised by the author/translator of *Everyman* who refers to it as 'by figure a moral play'; that is to say, the play deals quite openly with ideas and values, but presents them through the 'figures', metaphors, emblems, or images of a particular convention. This assured interplay of idea and image, argument and fiction, the discursive and the figurative, assumes a natural and equal partnership between reason and 'fancy', between, if you like, left– and right– brain activity. Out of this partnership arises a particular form of knowledge — exemplifying and experiential, not merely theoretical.

The audience of the *Prologhen*, for example, were clearly able and willing to 'read' or de–code the dialogue and action of these plays — while enjoying and appreciating the artifice of the medium, they could also appreciate the ways in which the ideas thus represented formed part of a debate on matters of vital interest to them. In other words, form and content make up a partnership which, at its best, is both aesthetically and intellectually satisfying.

To sum up: postmedieval morality plays are plays of ideas and argumentation, whose mode of expression is primarily allegorical. If, then, we wish to undertake a re–assessment of the morality as seen from the 1990s, it may be illuminating to bear two points in mind: first, that plays of ideas are a form of drama that comes and goes in response to changing social conditions, making use of whatever conventions of expression are current at the time. Secondly, that the particular convention of allegorical expression, so popular in the postmedieval period, is an entirely appropriate formal response to the needs of such plays; it is not, in its obvious artifice, an unique oddity, but takes its place at one end of an unbroken spectrum of conventionality whose other extreme is the artifice of naturalism.

To make the effort of entering into the spirit of the moralities is to rediscover and reaffirm the power of artifice in giving shape to our

aspirations and our fears, and the power of theatre to move, entertain, and instruct.

Appendix on Periodisation

Periodisation is a way of trying to make sense of our world, often retrospectively, by giving it one kind of order, pattern, and meaning. This kind of intellectual construction must, of course, always be provisional, and subject to revision, as its particular forms and labels are perceived to have become less satisfying and useful. This is surely the case at present with respect to the terms currently in use to refer to the 'period of transition' from about 1400 to the late 1600s in (at least) western Europe. Let us consider these terms.

Renaissance: this exclusionary term was at first applied in a quite limited context and for clearly polemical and self–affirming purposes. Its application was, however, subsequently extended to an increasingly broad range of times, places, and cultural, economic, and personal manifestations and phenomena; its use has become so naturalised that it is at times presented as being impartial, objective, and 'simply' descriptive. Underlying its usage throughout, however, have been the connotations of the 'renaissance' metaphor itself, reinforced by the later and still popular dichotomous image of Dark Ages/Enlightenment. In its more recent usage, the term 'Renaissance' carries a freight of condescending intellectual baggage based on assumptions of general progress; not only does its continuing use in both popular and more specifically scholarly contexts obscure — as has by now been frequently pointed out — the many kinds of continuity throughout the period(s), but the implied notions of linear progress are difficult to sustain in the light of the manifold personal, social, and ecological traumas of the last few centuries.

I suggest therefore that in scholarly discourse the term 'Renaissance' has — except in very particular and defined circumstances — reached the end of its useful life. There have been at least two attempts to meet these objections.

Late Medieval is of very narrow usefulness — it merely extends a particular boundary without calling into question the fundamental and problematic imagery of medieval/Renaissance. *Early Modern* has become quite widely used, but has some highly problematic underlying assumptions. In particular, it distractingly and (again) condescendingly foregrounds the 'modern' as that which gives meaning to what preceded it, as if there has been an uncontroversially interpretable line of historical

inevitability leading to the present. More specifically, an historical analysis employing the term 'Early Modern' will tend to privilege those factors, elements, or phenomena which can be seen with hindsight to have been especially important for our sense of historical identity and significance. While such an interpretative enterprise does have a limited kind of usefulness, it cannot form the basis for a more comprehensive and less self–centred approach to the 'period' in question.

As broadly periodising terms, therefore, 'Renaissance', 'Late Medieval' and 'Early Modern' all have, I suggest, more or less disabling defects. The term *postmedieval*, on the other hand, like 'postmodern', is dynamic and open–ended in its implications and the possibilities of its usage — at least for the time being.

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NOTES

1. Pamela M. King 'Morality Plays' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited Richard Beadle (Cambridge UP, 1994), 240–264: see page 240. It should be pointed out that contributors to *The Cambridge Companion* were given a cut–off date of 1500, so Professor King's coverage was necessarily restricted.
2. See John Cartwright 'The Antwerp *Landjuweel* of 1561 — a survey of the texts' in *The Centre and the Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor John Leyerle* edited Robert Taylor (Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo, 1993), 69–84; 'The Politics of Rhetoric: three plays by Willem van Haecht (1561)' *Comparative Drama 27* (Spring 1993) *1* 54–63.
3. See John Cartwright 'Forms and their Uses: the Antwerp *ommegangen*, 1550–1700', in *Festive Drama* edited by Meg Twycross (D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1996), and 'Regulating Identity: the Antwerp *ommegangen*, 1559–1566' in *Moving Subjects: the Semiotics of Processional Performance* edited Kathleen Ashley (Indiana University Press, forthcoming).
4. *The English Morality Play* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975), 244.
5. See Appendix on *Periodisation*.
6. The New Africa Theatre Association.