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► **To cite this version:**

Charles Whitworth. Feminine personification in *Everyman* and the english morality tradition. *Everyman*, Jan 2009, Nancy et Toulouse, France. pp.21-30. hal-02167463

HAL Id: hal-02167463

<https://hal.science/hal-02167463v1>

Submitted on 26 Jun 2024

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Feminine Personifications in *Everyman* and the English Morality Tradition

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Quatre des personnages de *Everyman* sont explicitement désignés comme féminins; deux d'entre elles, Good Deeds et Knowledge, jouent des rôles très importants. Beauty et Strength sont aussi identifiées par des pronoms féminins dans le texte. Nous proposons ici un sondage sélectif de pièces anglaises dans les genres des moralités et interludes moralisants des XV^e et XVI^e siècles, afin de reconnaître les principaux types de personnages féminins (certaines pièces n'en ont aucun – *Mankind*, *Mundus et Infans*, *Hick Scornor*, *Magnificence...*), et leurs fonctions dramatiques. Puis nous regardons de plus près les personnages féminins dans *Everyman*, et les effets dramatiques de leur présence. Nous prenons comme exemples de la modification par les metteurs en scène de cet aspect de la pièce, et des implications pour l'interprétation de ces interventions, la mise en scène de la Royal Shakespeare Company de 1996-97, et le film de Douglas Morse de 2007.

Four of the characters in *Everyman* are explicitly identified as female: Good Deeds, Knowledge, Beauty and Strength. (If Leo Carruthers is right and Discretion is the sister of Beauty and Strength, there are at least five female characters in the play, in a cast of seventeen).¹ The most famous and famously atypical medieval English morality play is atypical in this respect also. Few other among the shorter plays in the morality genre—however slippery its definition may remain—have such a large proportion of female characters. My very modest project here is to survey some of those female characters in other morality plays and sixteenth-century interludes, and then to conclude with a brief closer look at the female characters and the feminine presence in *Everyman*. I shall range beyond the 'famous five' group of so-called 'medieval moralities' proper: *The Pride of Life*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, *Mankind*, *Everyman* (pace Pamela King and many others).² Some critics would except *The Castle of Perseverance*, in view of its extraordinary volume and its peculiar outdoor performance requirements, and include *Mundus et Infans* (pre-1520), as G. A. Lester very reasonably does in his excellent New Mermaid anthology.³ All nine characters in *Mundus et Infans* are explicitly male.

¹ Leo Carruthers, *Reading 'Everyman'* (Neuilly: Atlande, 2008), p. 81.

² Pamela M. King, 'Morality Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 240-64. Professor King agrees that a 'genre' comprising the five plays in question is more a critics' construction than an objective phenomenon. The five are patently very different from one another.

³ G. A. Lester, ed, *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, New Mermaids (London: A&C Black, 1981).

Some morality characters are obviously and naturally female. Among the large-scale works in the genre and its derivatives, to begin with, we may include the Four Daughters of God in *The Castle of Perseverance*, and the 'Four Ladies', who are in fact the same daughters of God – Misericordia, Veritas, Justicia, Pax – in Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* (published 1553). So, in that remarkable, unjustly neglected play (still not unanimously attributed to Udall), are *Respublica* herself, 'a widow', and Nemesis, 'the goddess of redress and correction'. The Daughters of God also appear in the East Anglian *N-town* cycle pageant *Parliament of Heaven*. *The Castle of Perseverance* aligns the Seven Virtues against the Deadly Sins: the former are all addressed by Humanum Genus as 'ladyes in londe, lovely and lyt' (l. 1667).⁴ Among the Seven Deadlies, Luxuria (Lechery) only is female, the first in a long line of such misogynistic representations in English drama. Pride addresses her as 'my daughter so dear' (l. 999), and Avarice welcomes his siblings thus: 'Welcome ye be, brethren all, / And my sister, sweet Lechery' (ll. 1019-20).

In the earliest surviving, if fragmentary, morality, *Pride of Life*, Regina, the queen, is obviously a woman, albeit a generalized one, and not an abstract attribute, virtue or vice. Apart from *The Castle of Perseverance* among the fifteenth-century moralities, *Wisdom* is the most arresting in terms of the number of its female representations: at the beginning of the play, Anima, the protagonist, 'entereth as a maid'. Later, the Five Wits are five virgins, not a single personage as in *Everyman*. The character Will is accompanied by six women dancers, whereas the other members of the play's trinity, Mind and Understanding, are each attended by six men dancers. In the third play in the Macro manuscript, none of *Mankind's* seven characters is represented as female. More strikingly, none of the eighteen characters in Skelton's *Magnificence* (c. 1520) seems to be female; indeed, almost all are at some point addressed as 'sir', including Felicity and the virtues Good Hope, Redress and Circumspection, any of whom might have been conceived and dramatized as female. In Bale's *King Johan*, England is a widow, but Veritas is male, and not a daughter of God. Truth, or Verity, appears often in sixteenth-century plays, usually as female, as for example, in John Pickering's *Horestes* (1567) and *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (1594), where she makes cameo appearances as epilogue in the one and prologue in the other. Usually there is at least a residual morality aspect in such plays, even very late ones, including court masques as that genre developed in the early Stuart period. As late as 1606, Ben Jonson introduces, in the second night of his two-part masque *Hymenaei*, Truth and her double Opinion, who are described thus: 'out of

⁴ In David Bevington, ed, *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 845.

[a Mist made of delicate perfumes] did seeme to break forth two *Ladies*, the one representing *Truth*, the other *Opinion*; but both so alike attired, as they could by no note be distinguished' (ll. 681-6). A 250-line debate, or argument, follows, with a combat at barriers between their respective champions. Truth, of course, is hailed the victor, her triumphant re-entry heralded by an Angel.⁵

Amongst the second generation of moralities, or moral interludes (if we prefer to distinguish them thus from the few surviving, disparate fifteenth-century texts), that is, those of the first two decades or so of the sixteenth century, *The Interlude of Youth* stands out in casting Luxuria emphatically as a woman: Lady Lechery. This is of at least tangential interest, for as Ian Lancashire points out in his outstanding Revels Plays edition of *Youth* and *Hick Scornor*, a principal source for *Youth* is *Everyman*, though that is obviously not pertinent for the character of Lady Lechery. The play's slightly later stablemate, *Hick Scornor*, has no female characters.⁶ In *Youth*, she is a sister of Pride (l. 372) – another example of the Deadly Sins being represented as siblings – who fetches her at Riot's behest to keep Youth company. Youth, Riot and Pride agree to meet 'at the wine somewhere' (l. 376) in the company of Lady Lechery. She enters immediately: '*Intret Superbia cum Luxuria*' (l. 389). A brief, slightly steamy eighty-line scene ensues, at the end of which Lechery, in something of a 'coming-on disposition', promises Youth, 'My heart is yours, body and all' (l. 467), to which he replies 'On the same wise ye shall have me / Whenever ye please' (ll. 469-70). Upon which she exits and does not return. Lancashire surmises (p. 133n.) that the actor returned ninety lines later as Humility, an explicitly masculine character. *Youth*'s Pride-Riot-Lechery group owes more to another source than *Everyman*, namely, Henry Medwall's *Nature* (c. 1495).

At more than 2800 lines, *Nature* is on the grand scale of *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Magnificence*, more than twice as long as *Wisdom* and three times the length of *Mankind* and *Everyman*. It is divided into two parts of nearly equal length, and like Medwall's other, more famous play, *Fulgens and Luces*, was probably designed for performance in the 1490s in the household of Cardinal John Morton, whose chaplain Medwall was. Given its pre-1500 date – it is more or less contemporaneous with the Dutch *Elkerlijc*, the original of *Everyman* – *Nature* should logically be counted among the 'early', i.e. fifteenth-century moralities. That it is not is no doubt due to its being attributable to a named playwright, Henry

⁵ *Hymenaei*, edited by C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, in *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1941] 1970), VII, pp. 232-41.

⁶ Ian Lancashire, ed, *Two Tudor Interludes: 'Youth' and 'Hick Scornor'*, The Revels Plays (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1980).

Medwall, rather than being anonymous. It has however much in common with both *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Mankind*. Among its twenty-two characters are the Seven Deadly Sins and the corresponding Virtues, as in *The Castle of Perseverance*. Other abstractions, both virtues and vices – Reason, Nature, Sensuality, Innocency, Worldly Affection, the World itself, Shamefastness – vie for the soul of Man. Of them all, Nature and Innocency are female; both appear only in the first part of the play. Bodily Lust (Lechery) is clearly masculine, though he talks to Man much of a certain delectable Margery who unfortunately has entered the convent, then of the mistress of an inn, an *innupta mater*, neither of whom ever materializes. It is a sophisticated dramatic ploy on Medwall's part: Lechery is male, not the *object* of lust, like Lady Lechery in *Youth*, but rather the appetite itself, naturally masculine in a human male, playing on Man's desire, tickling his fancy, inciting illicit, unfulfilled passion. In performance, the dramatic force of one man's whetting the sexual appetite of another with titillating stories of willing wenches to be had not far away may be greater than that of the all-too-predictable cheap professional whore ensnaring her eager victim with suggestive talk.⁷

Of the Deadly Sins, Lechery or Lust nevertheless lent itself readily and early to representation in female form.⁸ In the mid-sixteenth century, R. Wever portrayed Abominable Living as a woman in his *Lusty Juventus* (c. 1550). She is the only female among the nine characters. Knowledge is male, unlike his namesake in *Everyman*, as is Good Counsel, the other Virtue. Later still, the anonymous author of *Nice Wanton* (c. 1560) embodies female promiscuity, not as an abstraction, but in the nice wanton

⁷ Of more than passing interest in connection with the present subject, and with English medieval allegorical literature more generally, is yet another source for *Youth*, Stephen Hawes' little known 2100-line non-dramatic poem *The Example of Vertu* (before 1509? Reprinted 1530). A very large number of abstractions are denominated as 'dames'. They include Prudence and her sister Discretion, Nature, Justice, Sapience (Wisdom), Fortune, Hardiness, Chastity (Cleanness), Sensuality, Perseverance, Charity, Prayer, Lowliness, Grace, Faith, Mercy, Penitence, Peace, Humility, Virginitie, and others. The protagonist / narrator is Youth. See the edition by Florence W. Gluck and Alice B. Morgan, in *Stephen Hawes: The Minor Poems*, EETS (London: OUP, 1974). One of ten woodcuts in the 1530 edition shows Nature with Death lurking behind a pillar at her back, holding his spear or dart: 'And at her backe I dyd fynde / Of cruell deth a dolfull ymage' (ll. 523-4).

⁸ Adolf Katzenellenbogen observes that the earliest manuscript illustrators of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, from the ninth and tenth centuries, lend Luxuria 'all the fascinations of a seductive woman'. *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art* (London: Warburg Institute, 1939; New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), p. 5. Strikingly, all of the Virtues and Vices in *Psychomachia* who confront one another in mortal duels are female.

herself, Dalilah. She, her over-indulgent mother Xantippe and the mother's virtuous counterpart, Eulalia, provide one-third of the nine speaking parts in this early Elizabethan moral interlude. The convention of personifying Lechery itself as a lewd woman persisted though: the last of the Seven Sins in the pageant conjured by Mephistopheles to entertain Doctor Faustus in Act II of Marlowe's play is addressed by the protagonist as 'Mistress Minx', already a common nickname for a prostitute.⁹

But there is no Lechery, nor any other of the Deadly Sins, among the *dramatis personæ* of *Everyman*. No Deadly Sins, no vices, no devils, but no fewer than seventeen speaking parts. The Sins are mentioned by God in his speech at the beginning, though only four of them are named: 'They use the Seven Deedly Synnes dampnable, / As Pryde, Covetyse, Wrathe, and Lechery / Now in the worlde be made commendable' (ll. 36-8).¹⁰ A few lines later, a fifth is mentioned: 'For now one wolde by envy another up ete' (l. 50); Envy's counterpart among the virtues, Charity, is evoked in the very next line. Although God names several sins when speaking of mankind in general—'all creatures' (l. 23), 'the people' (ll. 25, 35, 58)—and the plural pronoun 'they' recurs throughout, it is clear enough that the main sin that the play is concerned with is Avarice and the corresponding absence of charity and generosity: 'In worldely ryches is all theyr mynde' (l. 27); 'They be so cumbred with worldly ryches' (l. 60). When the individual, Everyman, is singled out by God, Death takes up the theme—'He that loveth ryches I wyll stryke with my darte' (l. 76)—and makes explicit the crucial proviso: 'Excepte that almes [dedes] be his good frende' (l. 78).¹¹ Death further mentions 'fleshely lustes' in a vague way (l. 82);

⁹ Authors of nondramatic works continued nevertheless frequently to represent Lechery as male. Examples abound throughout the sixteenth century, from William Dunbar's *Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins* to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Book I. For a brief survey of other late appearances of the Sins, see Charles Whitworth, 'A Medieval Topos in Elizabethan Prose Satire: the Seven Deadly Sins in Pamphlets by Nashe, Lodge and Dekker', in *Critical Approaches to English Prose Fiction 1520-1640*, edited by Donald Beecher (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1998), pp. 309-26. A particularly elaborate delineation of Lechery and its various manifestations is Thomas Lodge's ten-page passage in *Wit's Misery, and the World's Madness* (1596). Coincidentally, the earliest known occurrence of 'Mistress Minx' is in an earlier pamphlet by Lodge, *An Alarum against Usurers* (1584).

¹⁰ Quotations are from the parallel-text edition, *'Everyman' and its Dutch Original, 'Elckerlijc'*, edited by Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007). Hereafter cited as 'TEAMS'. Line numbering is the same as in A. C. Cawley, ed, *'Everyman' and Medieval Miracle Plays* Everyman's Library (London: Dent, [1974] 1981).

¹¹ The TEAMS edition is the only modern scholarly one that includes 'dedes' (= deeds) in this line; the editors used the Huth copy of Skot's second edition (B) which contains

‘his treasure’ in the same line reiterates the ‘wordly riches’ theme of God’s speech. In the ensuing exchange between Death and Everyman, the ‘reckoning’ motif is hammered home in no fewer than six repetitions of the word in sixty lines. Thus the play’s emphasis is not upon ‘fleshly lustes’ at all: there is no place for Lechery, whether male or female, in the play; Everyman is the only human character, and there are no cardinal virtues which might have invited feminine characterization.

But the two most important secondary characters in the second half of the play, and those who have the longest parts of all, after Death, and Everyman of course (he speaks some forty percent of the play’s lines), are the sisters Good Deeds and Knowledge. Good Deeds is explicitly identified as female in line 482; she refers to her sister Knowledge in lines 519-20. They speak 57 and 67 lines respectively, but their stage presences are much more important than that bare statistic would suggest. They are the only two characters besides Everyman to remain onstage for most of the second half of the play, for about 400 lines each from the moment Good Deeds first speaks (l. 486); though she may well have been onstage, silent, since the beginning. While Goods too may have been present but silent from the beginning, his scene with Everyman is very short, less than seventy lines of which he speaks forty. In comparison to those of Good Deeds and Knowledge, the longest span of onstage time for another character is Five Wits’ 180 lines (ll. 670-850). The group of four who enter together at line 669, leave at short intervals, beginning with Beauty at line 804. Noting furthermore that Beauty and Strength are referred to by the feminine pronoun (ll. 807, 828) and whether or not we acquiesce in Leo Carruthers’ plausible suggestion (p. 81) that they and Discretion are three sisters, we can see that the second half of the play is dominated by the feminine presence. If we take it also, as Douglas Morse clearly does in his recent film, that Confession is female because Everyman addresses her as ‘Shryfte, mother of Salvacyon’, that presence is all the stronger.¹² In performance, the extended presence of the supportive sisters Good Deeds and Knowledge throughout the second half is in marked contrast to the male-only first half. The play falls into two halves of exactly equal length, with Everyman’s lament over Goods’ desertion and his belated resolve to turn to his Good Deeds, beginning at line 463 of the 921-line play: only male characters, including God and Death and presumably the Messenger,

the word. Most others, including both Cawley editions, Cooper and Wortham, Lester, Bevington and Walker, are based on the Huntington copy of Skot’s first edition, and omit ‘dedes’. There is no equivalent to the line in the Dutch text (pp. 20-21). For details of the various modern editions, see the bibliography in *TEAMS*, p. 101.

¹² *The Summoning of Everyman*, directed by Douglas Morse (Grandfather Films, 2007).

appear in the first half. All have very short scenes. Everyman is seen to be left alone repeatedly following each of his successive encounters, with Death, then with Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods. Each departure or desertion is punctuated by a soliloquy: ll. 184-204, 303-17, 369-72, 378-91, 463-84.

In contrast, all of Everyman's speeches from lines 489 to 887 are uttered in the presence of, if not directly to, the female personifications Knowledge and / or Good Deeds, or to one or more of the human attributes Beauty, Strength, Discretion and Five Wits, of which at least the first two are explicitly represented as female by the *Everyman* translator (ll. 807, 828). Everyman's own single address to Confession is to 'Shryfte, mother of Salvacyon' (l. 552), however much the translator may have masculinized the sacrament in preceding lines (ll. 538, 541, 544).¹³

Performance options may either reinforce or dilute the marked feminizing and consequent softening of the play's second half. In the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1996-97 production at The Other Place, directed by Kathryn Hunter and Marcello Magni, a company of six played all the roles, plus various interpolated extras. The Messenger was rechristened Child (played by Myra McFadyen) and spoke only after several minutes of silent scene-setting. Death was played very effectively by Josette Bushell-Mingo, who then played Knowledge. Death accosted Everyman during a wedding feast; her initial address to him, 'Everyman, stonde styll', acquired a new piquancy, as he and the other guests were dancing, a dance of life become in an instant – for him – a dance of death.¹⁴ Actors played both Beauty and Strength, no attempt being made to observe strictly the text's gendering of those secondary roles; indeed Johnny Lodi's Beauty was outrageously androgynous. Myra McFadyen had in fact been present since the beginning: after Child, in the first part, the actress became a humble domestic servant in Everyman's service, bathing him in the bathtub that would double as his grave at the end, anticipating her later role as the Good Deeds who would accompany him to that grave. The effect of the directors' casting choices was to de-gender the play, which may well be in tune with

¹³ *Elckerlijc* uses feminine pronouns four times (ll. 486-94) with reference to Confession, while the English insists on the masculine: 'that holy man Confessyon' (l. 539), plus two masculine pronouns in the next five lines. Only in the phrase 'mother of Salvacyon' does *Everyman* follow the Dutch gendering.

¹⁴ The RSC directors may possibly have been influenced by a 1994-95 production by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, in which Death was a seductive woman who literally embraced Everyman. See a brief survey of this and other modern productions in *TEAMS*, pp. 11-14. For full reviews of the RSC production, see Greg Walker in *Cahiers Elisabethains* 51 (Avril 1997), 77-9; and Marion O'Connor in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 11 (1999), 19-26.

contemporary (if not with medieval) consciousness: if Death can be a woman – and why not? – and Beauty and Strength can be men, Everyman might just as well be Everywoman, or Everybody. Such updating can be and have been staged and defended. Nevertheless the RSC production respected the female-ness of the major roles of Good Deeds and Knowledge, and their emphatic feminine presence throughout the second half of the play was thus assured. As if to underline the point, Good Deeds, not a Doctor, spoke the epilogue.

Let us return in conclusion to Douglas Morse's 2007 film, *The Summoning of Everyman*. The director confirms in personal correspondence that he discerned and wished to accent the masculine and the feminine respectively in the two halves of the play. The settings were intended to support this distinction, with man-made, though not exclusively urban, structures featured in the first part – a Maypole, a fairground, jousting lists, much stonework: churches, cloisters, paved walks, streets and ramparts, with associated social activities – dancing, games, shows, mock combats; and a largely outdoor, natural setting – woods, fields, a large green-space cemetery with freshly-turned earth from Everyman's grave, and rain at the end – in the second. While speaking the crucial, central soliloquy following the desertion of Goods (ll. 463-85), Everyman moves from the concrete-and-stone man-made world to the wood where he finds Good Deeds. She is first seen, not collapsed in the corner of a room, but lying supine, half-covered by undergrowth. Happily, Morse did not overstress the point (was 'not entirely consistent', in his own words): virtually all of the film's action is set outdoors; brief moments in churches and a medieval museum as Everyman meditates punctuate the first part, while glimpses of a madonna during the meeting with Confession in the 'House of Salvacyon' (l. 540), a sort of gazebo in a woodland setting, recall the church.

The Messenger, God and Death are male. So are Fellowship and Goods. An interesting (and debatable) choice cast pre-adolescent children as Kindred and Cousin, a boy and a girl respectively. With an Everyman of advanced age (another questionable choice: should he not be in the prime of life?), they might be seen as part of a multi-generational extended family. A mute girl is introduced at Kindred's line 'Ye shall have my mayde, with all my herte' (l. 360). Earlier, Everyman's 'fleshly lustes' are rendered tangibly fleshly, in the person of an extra-textual, undulating belly dancer, with his arm around whom the protagonist is seen to head off to some more private place. She reappears briefly in a flashback during Everyman's penance, her image alternating rapidly with that of the reviving if still recumbent Good Deeds. Death's allusion to 'fleshly lustes' (l. 82)

re-echoes in Everyman's allusion to his 'synne of the flesshe' (l. 613); Luxuria is there after all, if only fleetingly.

Both Douglas Morse's emphasis on the feminine and his even-handedness in placing that emphasis are seen in the casting of the secondary roles in the second half of the play. Of the four gifts of Nature, the human attributes who fall away from Everyman successively prior to his descent into the grave, Beauty and Five Wits are played by actresses, while Strength and Discretion are men. Morse thus respects the balance between male and female specified in the text, but exchanges the genders of Strength and Five Wits. Strength is a large, mail-clad military type, one of the film's few overly literal readings: Strength as muscle-power rather than just any human being's natural physical force.¹⁵ But the switch is not simply one-for-one. As observed above, Five Wits remains onstage for a longer time than any other secondary character (always excluding Knowledge and Good Deeds, who should not really be considered secondary). He / She enters with Beauty, Strength and Discretion (l. 669), and is the last of the four to leave, exiting at line 850, ten lines after Discretion and barely thirty-five lines before Everyman descends into the grave. At forty-nine lines, her part is bigger than those of Beauty (10), Strength (21) and Discretion (13) combined. Though she too leaves him at the end, her departure, like those of her three companions is not so much a desertion like those of Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods, mere gifts of Fortune, but rather a natural extinction, a falling away, as Everyman loses his physical and intellectual attributes, and at last his five senses. Morse's casting of an actress in the part of Five Wits has the effect of showing Everyman, at the very end of his journey, surrounded, for a moment, by not two but three female figures: Five Wits, Knowledge, Good Deeds. The final image of Everyman sees him lying lifeless beside the open grave, with Good Deeds lying as if in sleep beside him, the book of account between them. The two children, Kindred and Cousin, a boy and a girl, return to look down into the grave during the Doctor's epilogue. The film maker's final affirmation of the feminine principle in the latter part of *Everyman* is the casting of women in both the Angel's and the Doctor's roles. Thus the play's last three speeches, by Knowledge, the Angel, the Doctor (ll. 888-921), the tripartite conclusion which completes the frame opened by the triple introduction spoken by the Messenger, God and Death (ll. 1-84), are delivered by feminine figures.

¹⁵ Despite the text's 'she' at line 828, the verso of the title-page of the Huth copy shows Strength as a man wearing a sword.

This paper, which began with a partial survey of female characters, and in particular the personifications of abstractions, in a number of medieval and early modern morality-type plays, concludes with comments on a film made in 2007, five hundred years after *Everyman* was translated and performed (if the English version ever was performed prior to William Poel's famous 1901 revival). That a twenty-first-century American film director identifies and intelligently enhances the feminine in the anonymous medieval play as he has done would seem to bear witness to its essential presence in that play. If those fifteenth- and sixteenth-century dramatists, the Dutch author of *Elckerlijc* and the English translator of *Everyman*, took pains to make a point of it, modern producers, critics, teachers and students of their play must surely take it seriously into account in their interpretations.