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## The Originality Of *Everyman*

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Caractériser une pièce de théâtre ne consiste pas à analyser seulement les thèmes et les idées qui y sont incarnés, mais bien plutôt leur mise en œuvre dramatique, c'est-à-dire leur utilisation et combinaisons en termes de spectacle. Une comparaison, implicite d'abord, avec les pièces morales anglaises bien connues du lecteur, ensuite avec deux autres pièces analysées ici, l'une néerlandaise, *De Wellustige Mensch*, l'autre allemande, la pièce de *Moriens*, originaire de Munich, illustre l'originalité de *Everyman*. Cette originalité réside dans une grande concentration de l'action autour de l'homme-héros de la pièce et (par voie de conséquence) dans une tension émotionnelle particulière. *Everyman* illustre, bien plus que toute autre pièce, la parabole biblique des « vierges folles », emblème de l'incertitude et de la fragilité de la condition humaine. Bien qu'exploités depuis longtemps, ces deux thèmes de l'apologétique chrétienne (valeur de l'affect et incertitude de la vie terrestre) sont spécialement caractéristiques de la *devotio moderna*, particulièrement présente dans les Pays-Bas de la fin du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle.

To speak of originality in the case we are dealing with in this paper can be considered as a paradoxical undertaking. If originality is simply taken as a synonym for singularity, meaning that every work of art has a personality, or self, of its own, the phrase seems to be a mere *flatus vocis*, with an empty semantic content. If originality, on the other hand, implies radical otherness, standing as an exception in a given type of artistic production, and particularly in the field under consideration, this would seem to be a contradictory and unacceptable statement as regards the genre in which *Everyman* is usually classified, since the morality play is usually regarded as uniformly monotonous and repetitive.

In the otherwise very revealing introduction to his anthology of *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes*, Edgar Schell suggests that the standard pattern of the morality play describes the whole course of man's moral life, his youthful inclination towards worldly pleasures, his return to virtue, his lapse back into sin and finally his salvation; "Almost every morality play, Schell writes, follows this pattern, or a recognizable variation of it"<sup>1</sup>. With the experience of a forty years' familiarity with "English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes", the present speaker would be tempted to take advantage of the "almost" Schell has prudently introduced in his rather sweeping statement about the recognizable pattern of the morality play. Minor changes in the pattern-characteristic of the morality type do not constitute, in my eyes, significant differences from one play to another. If that was the case, if those minor variations in story

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<sup>1</sup> *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. viii.

or “fabula” were enough to tell such plays apart, then the quarrel could be easily solved by applying the adjective “monotonous” instead of “uniform” to the word “pattern”.

But differences between plays should be assessed in a different way. When Schell uses the word “pattern”, he is in fact talking about “plot”, “story” or “fabula”. He is referring to the fixed theological relationships behind the play: the nature of God, of man, man’s destiny in this world and in the next. He is also talking about the behaviour that is recommended by this dogmatic network: “Since God has created mankind out of love, so man must love and worship his creator; Man is made up of two heterogeneous parts, a body mortal and a soul immortal”. These tenets are surely at the basis of all morality plays, but here Schell takes up the old Owstian saw that moralities are no more than “sermones corporei” (taken up by Cawley in his introduction<sup>2</sup>). But those elements of content are not by a long way, the be all and end all of a dramatic piece, or any artistic work for that matter. The important characteristic which is indeed decisive in the appraisal of a work of art consists in the elaboration, figurativisation, or “mise en œuvre” of that matter. To take an obvious example, let us consider the three Macro Plays: they all deal with man’s salvation, but in different ways. It is a far cry from the solemnity and seriousness of *The Castle of Perseverance*, to the humour and goliardesque comedy of *Mankind* and the religious and artistic sophistication of *Wisdom*.

Since *Everyman* is a translation and close adaptation of the Dutch *Elckerlijc*, it could be thought that, if *Everyman* does not follow the English model, it is dependent on Dutch drama. There is indeed an *Elckerlijc* tradition in the Low Countries. The play was translated into Latin and German, and several times adapted in Dutch versions, between c. 1485 and 1550<sup>3</sup>. Some of these “remakes” were inspired by Catholicism, others by the ideas of the Reformation. This is a rather unique case, which seems to set that group of plays apart from the other Germanic moralities. In order to highlight the formal differences between the *Elckerlijc-Everyman* group and the other moralities, I would like to take two examples among the latter, one in Dutch, the other in German. The first is Ian Van Den Berghe’s *The Voluptuous Man* (*De Wellustige Mensch*, 1551), which seems to me (among the limited number of Dutch plays I have been able to read) to be

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<sup>2</sup> A. C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> See E. R. Tigg, “The Dutch *Elckerlijc* is Prior to the English *Everyman*”, *JEGP* 38 (1939), 568-96, pp. 369-70.

nearest to *Elckerlijc* in theme and dramatic effect<sup>4</sup>. *The Voluptuous Man* is the story of a sinner who comes to a bad end: urged by different vices, and in spite of the words of warning of Daily Preaching (a strict moralist), he goes to Worldly Pleasure's inn (she is the inn-keeper's wife), where he indulges in the pleasures of the flesh. After a contradictory debate between God's Wrath and God's Grace, which recalls the medieval Parliament of Heaven, and after Man's plea for mercy, the Almighty gives him absolution, and he is saved. The Catholic nature of the play is clear: as in a Spanish "Auto Sacramental", the host and chalice appear at the end of the play, as a symbol of God's presence and help for the sinner. The Voluptuous Man appears at the beginning of the play, but after fifteen lines of introduction, although present during the dialogue between different Vices: Carnal Lust, Bad Faith, Worldly Pleasure, Concupiscence of the eyes, Ambition, Lasciviousness, Excess and Passing Luxury, he keeps mute for the greatest part of the play. The Vices imagine temptations to make the poor man leave the path of virtue, but their efforts meet with no apparent success. The scene of sensuality does not take place on stage, but behind a curtain, as if preparing a typical Dutch "toog" (678) – which is not the case. The anguish of the Voluptuous Man is manifested only twice by the terrified Mankind figure:

But that dying, that dying that must be banished (308)  
Eternal damnation is my great fear (806)

This play is not a psychomachia, as the Vices have no opportunity of debating with Virtues. The sermon of Daily Preaching is addressed to the Voluptuous Man, but also to the audience, and only gives rise to passing remarks on the part of The Voluptuous Man, such as:

Woe is me, tears of blood I may well shed,  
If my easy life leads to such a death bed (476-7)

The second play, of German origin, is known as *The Munich Play of Moriens* (1510)<sup>5</sup>. It is a dramatic transcription of the *ars moriendi*. It develops as a play within a play: acting as a frame to the main action, a merchant watches an exemplum of three « morientes » tempted by opposed powers and possibilities. In the first episode, God and Satan also watch the three dying men, and comment on each man's chances of entering Paradise considering his past life. In the second episode, the merchant expounds the

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<sup>4</sup> References are to *The Voluptuous Man*, translated P. King, *Dutch Crossing* 28 (1986), 53-107.

<sup>5</sup> No English version of this play available. I am using an analysis of the play in E. E. DuBruk's "Staging an *Ars Moriendi* for a late Medieval Merchant", in *Contez me tout*, édité par Catherine Belsey et al. (Louvain: Peeters, 2006), 66-77. Line numbers in quotations not mentioned in DuBruk's article.

incompatibility between trading, making money and complying with God's commandments. Death appears, giving a paradoxical definition of himself: "We are something and yet nothing", and delivers his usual warning: "All living creatures will be bereft of life by us". Then, a reckless young man, of the Fellowship type, is killed by Death and sent to Hell. In the third episode, the three dying men engage in spiritual debates alternately with the Devil and men of religion. The three men are convinced by arguments drawn from the Fathers, and are received by God among the Elect. The Merchant inquires about the nature of the joys of heaven, and gets the following answer:

You ask a difficult question [...]

No mouth can utter the highest joys of heaven

And, characteristically enough, the next man, who is damned because he has refused the last sacrament, voices his terror at the thought of the torments of Hell: "Oh, grim death / [...] You cause me today painful fear and desperate straits". The last episode, showing a man dying in physical suffering, serves as an introduction to a debate about Purgatory. His soul, not quite ready yet to be received into Paradise, is taken to that sojourn of pains and purification. The episode terminates with the spectacle of souls suffering in Purgatory, who scream with pain, and beg their families to buy indulgences and contribute to charities in order to help them in their journey to Paradise (which is proof of the Catholic inspiration of the play).

I felt that these two plays, hardly ever mentioned in studies of *Everyman* or *Elckerlijc*, needed to be described at some length. Although inspired by the same theme, the *ars moriendi*, like the plays of the *Elckerlijc-Everyman* tradition, it is obvious that they are not constructed according to the same dramatic principles. *The Voluptuous Man* begins on a deceptively realistic tone, until we realize that the debate between the powers of evil, which constitute a self-contained spectacle, takes the forefront and steals the show from the *Humanum Genus* hero. The Munich play is totally unrealistic: the show within is made up of a succession of vignettes, like so many exempla, which are commented upon by the authorized voices (Doctor, Priest, Monk), for the benefit of the merchant, a dramatic representation of the audience.

What marks the difference with *Elckerlijc-Everyman* is that in the latter play(s) our attention is at once centered on the human hero whose spiritual future is the focus of the action. He is at once presented just as « a man », a fully-fledged man, and not, for instance, through the pseudo-realistic and rhetorical convention of the « ages of man », meant to give a stylised description of the gradual growth of the human creature, from childhood to old age, as is the case in the *Castle of Perseverance* (275-455) and the other

English « Youth » plays. In *Elckerlijc-Everyman*, man is neither young nor old, and the death which God sends him at the beginning is not to be equated with the natural death which necessarily comes with old age. Although the ageing of man remains relatively abstract in the English plays just quoted, the transformation undergone by man implies a semblance of represented time. In *Everyman*, in spite of other choices which we shall soon examine, the exclusive presence of performance time creates a sense of urgency, which intensifies the sense of tragedy. Since the character of *Everyman* has no particular idiosyncrasy he can be the representative of anyone and everyone of us in the audience. His sad predicament, his anguish are ours. The problem has indeed been raised: is *Everyman* “any person, anywhere, in any era?”, or is he “a man of his own place and time?”<sup>6</sup> Both, of course. For there is no way of perceiving a universal truth or feeling, etc. except through one’s own experience (either lived or just culturally shared); and we have enough evidence of the importance of trading and money in the late fifteenth century to convince ourselves of the truth of the description. As members of a modern audience, we must be aware of the contemporary context to appreciate fully the meaning of *Everyman*’s situation and reactions.

Another contextual datum is necessary for our understanding of *Everyman*’s moral problems: the nature of death. This concept lies behind the *artes moriendi*. It has been said that the *ars moriendi* is at the same time an *ars vivendi*. But this dual nature, clearly apparent in some French titles, is seldom explained in terms of the religious ideas inherited from the Middle Ages. Some light can be cast on this by a reference to the often quoted parable of the “foolish virgins” (Mat. 25,1-13). This parable ends with a remark proceeding from the most evident, shall we say the tritest, common sense: “for ye know neither the day nor the hour [...]” But it is not really death, as it is commonly understood, that is meant, but the coming of the symbolic “bridegroom”; as indeed the Evangelist explains at the beginning of the parable: “the kingdom of heaven is likened unto ten virgins [...]” (you know the rest of the story!). You also remember the ending of *Everyman*, “Come excellent elect spouse to Jesus” (894). Indeed the play is not about the death of *Everyman*, but about the “summoning” of *Everyman*. Here, the theme of the summoning is not connected with chronology. God’s summoning may come any day in the life of every man. The theme is a classic of Christian thought, during the Middle Ages, right through to the seventeenth century. The same sort of summons is heard by Piers Plowman (1362-79) on “The fair field full of folk”; and he starts on his pilgrimage towards the Holy Castle once he has “performed his

<sup>6</sup> Leo Carruthers, *Reading Everyman* (Neuilly: Atlante, 2008), p. 70.

penance” (Passus 5), which provides him with a pardon (Passus 7)<sup>7</sup>. Bunyan describes the same awareness to sin in more psychological terms, as the “burden” of sin, and he desires to be “converted” to good living, or have a “reformation” and a “new birth”. And death becomes “lovely and beautiful in (his) sight”; says Bunyan: “oh, methought, this life is but a slumber in comparison with that above”<sup>8</sup>. A quotation from an older text gives us the received Christian opinion on that score: *Dives and Pauper* (c. 1410):

*Dives* Of what country art thou?

*Pauper* By right of heritage, my country is Paradise, from whence I and thou and all mankind were banished for the treachery and forfeit of our father Adam, into this wretched world. And here we live like prisoners and exiles, waiting for the grace of our Lord [...] We have here, says Saint Paul, no abiding city but we seek a city of secure dwelling that is to come.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of the transitoriness of all earthly goods is characteristic of medieval religious thought. It is also emphatically expressed by Goods in *Everyman*:

*Goods* Why, wenest thou that I am thine?

*EM* I had went so

*Goods* Nay, Everyman, I say no,

As for a while I was lent thee,

A season thou hast me in prosperity.

Wenest thou that I will follow thee?

Nay, from this world not, verily. (436-45)

It should be clear that, if we want to understand *Elckerlijc-Everyman*, and most religious writings of the Middle Ages, we must convince ourselves of the idea that every living person was created once and for all, for the rest of eternity, the soul being immortal. This situation is often dramatized by a debate between the soul and the body, a favourite theme in popular preaching. It appears in the Early Middle English poem of the Worcester fragments<sup>10</sup>, in several debates such as *The Soul's Address to the Body*, and in *Vices and Virtues*. It is not present as such in *Everyman*, except in the scourging scene, in which the body is chastised to allow the soul to escape Purgatory and its torments (613-8). Death as a severing of the soul from the body is alluded to in the last lines of *Everyman*:

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<sup>7</sup> William Langland, *Piers the Plowman*, edited by W. W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1869] 1953).

<sup>8</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (London: Dent, [1928] 1953), n° 39 and 259.

<sup>9</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, vol. I, edited by P. H. Barnum, EETS, OS 275 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 52-3; cf. Heb. 13: 14.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hall ed., *Early Middle English, 1130-1250* (Oxford: Clarendon Press [1920] 1953), p. 2.

Come, excellent elect spouse [...]  
 Now thy soul is taken thy body fro [...] (894-7)

In the *Dying Creature* (1514) the body is included in a more comprehensive concept, the world, and after the “complaint of the sorrowful soul” to the dying creature, we find a fairly original “lamentation of the dying body to the soul”<sup>11</sup>. They both use phrases familiar in the Middle English debates: “Alas, alas, that ever thou and I were coupled together” (*DC*, 435), says the soul to the body, and the body offers apologies to the soul: “I am so sorry / [...] that (I) have brought you in such bondage, peril, danger, and adversity” (*ibid.*, 458-60).

In the same way as those older texts, *Everyman* describes the relationship of man with the world, from his birth to the end of the creation, known as “doomsday”. Everyman is suddenly hailed by God’s messenger – called “Death” in this play. The same messenger is Cruelty in the *Dying Creature*, and God’s Wrath in the *Voluptuous Man*.

The Christian point of view is that man has to give his reckoning, not because he is on the eve of his departing, but because this reckoning can be demanded by the Deity every day of our lives. The *Dying Creature* reports that God’s messenger has arrested him and said:

I warn you to make / you ready and that you fail not to be ready every hour; /  
 When you are called on – you shall not kow when (*DC*, 7-10)

Urged by God’s admonition, *Everyman* realizes that he should accept the warning from heaven, and do penance:

O, to whom shall I make my moan? (463)

From then on, *Everyman* is on his way to Salvation (confirmed at 581-607), through Contrition, Penance, Confession and Satisfaction. The second group of friends after confession, are “reliable” friends, because *Everyman* is in a state of grace:

V Wits: We will not depart for sweet or sour (687)  
 Discretion: Go with a good advice and deliberation,  
 We all give you virtuous monition  
 That all shall be well. (691-3)

Among *Everyman*’s friends, there are not “good” friends and “deceptive” ones. Their natures depend on *Everyman*’s point of view: those who come before his confession are impediments on the way to salvation; those who come after are regarded as what they are, companions of the flesh, the body, who will disappear when the body dies; and this is the change that *Everyman* brought to the traditional story of the “deceptive friends”. The friends met after confession are no obstacle to *Everyman*’s serene

<sup>11</sup> *The Dying Creature*, edited by J.-P. Debax, *Caliban* 11 (1974), 3-48.



acceptance of his earthly death, as he is confident that his soul will survive the departure of the body:

In manus tuas / [...] commendo spiritum meum (887-8)

This does not mean that the parting from the world is easy and painless. At the last hour, Everyman needs encouragement, which is provided by Good Deeds:

Good Deeds: Shorte our ende and diminish our pain.

Let us go and never come again (878-9)

With the evolution of culture, the rational mechanism describing the successive steps to be climbed to attain eternal bliss was probably thought to be insufficiently convincing, and sentimental considerations were introduced. The beginning of a personal and affective relationship between man and the deity can be dated to the introduction of the Marian cult in the twelfth century. And then came 1215, the 4th Lateran Council, which instituted the feast of Corpus Christi, and is generally seen, with its emphasis on regular (and private) confession, as the sign of a transfer of the responsibility of salvation from a collective body to an individual decision, based on the personal will and entailing personal efforts and suffering. The gradual influence of the decretals of the Council promoted personal prayer, even supplication, the intercession of the Saints, in particular the Virgin who is shown weeping at the foot of the cross (from where she utters forth her “planctus”, or moan; see the poem *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, fourteenth century), or sitting nursing her dead son in her lap, the *pietà*. The devotion to the sorrows of Mary can be traced to the same time, and in poems and plays she becomes the organizer of the Parliament of Heaven, a dramatisation of God’s mercy. The *devotio moderna* had by then truly become a devotion of the tears.

This affective approach is central to *Everyman*. Everyman’s conversion begins at the very moment he can utter his moan (463). If the recourse to the intercession of the Saints is not explicitly mentioned in *Everyman*, the hero is nevertheless shown as in need of help (the first friends are not exactly tempters, but prove unfit for giving assistance). He eventually finds the needed help with the two sisters: Good Deeds and Knowledge. When Everyman complains “I weep for very sweetness of love”, Knowledge replies, “Be no more sad, but ever rejoice”. (635-6). Although present in most devotional literature, sorrow and tears are curiously absent from the dramas, English or Dutch, that I have read (although some pathos is perceptible at the end of the *Castle of Perseverance*: sorrow, sigh, moan, weeping, woe, mercy, are words used 1403-1415, and a cry for Mercy triggers off the Parliament of Heaven scene, 3129). What is unique in *Everyman* is that sorrow and anguish give structure to the play. The

successive encounters with the “false” friends of the first part are used to build up a tension within the “person” of Everyman, who thus becomes the complex hero of what can be viewed as a tragedy. God’s messenger is called Death, which gives a great emotional impact to his coming, through the suggestion of a coincidence (not confusion) between spiritual death and physical death. I would also link this emotional atmosphere to the introduction of the romantic plot of the friends which gives a particular rhythm, and extra originality to the play.

In conclusion: to the question “Is *Everyman* atypical?”, as suggested by Roger Ladd in a recent article, my answer is “yes”, because *Everyman*, or rather the *Elckerlijc-Everyman* tradition, is a particularly faithful and thorough illustration of the *devotio moderna* approach to the problems of the Hereafter<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> R. Ladd, “‘My condicion is mannes soule to kill’, *Everyman’s Mercantile Salvation*”, *Comparative Drama* 41 (2007), 57-78.