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All That Lyueth Appayreth Faste: Time in Everyman

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Dans cet article, je souhaite démontrer les principales raisons de la popularité d'*Everyman*, une moralité anglaise de la fin du Moyen Age. Cette étude traite du concept du temps dans *Everyman* et donne un aperçu des idées essentielles ayant trait au temps sacré par rapport au temps profane, ainsi que par rapport au temps de l'existence humaine individuelle. En première lecture, *Everyman* apparaît comme une pièce représentative des valeurs essentielles du christianisme de la fin du Moyen Age. Cependant, l'ensemble de la culture médiévale européenne était fortement influencé aussi bien par les traditions païennes que chrétiennes, et ne pas tenir compte de ce fait dans l'interprétation de la littérature médiévale est source d'erreurs. Il me semble que le meilleur moyen de comprendre la littérature médiévale anglaise, et peut-être également la littérature de la période suivante, consiste à reconnaître et accepter l'importance de toutes les influences de la tradition païenne dans le contexte de la culture chrétienne.

There is a generally accepted idea about medieval English literature that the concept of time is determined predominantly by Christian tradition. On the other hand, I consider the influence of pagan tradition more important and more influential, even in *Everyman*. In a great number of books on the history of English culture, the end of medieval literature is marked with the arrival of the Renaissance. In my opinion there is not such a distinct border; we should rather accept the idea of literary continuity, which means that late medieval English literature merges with the Renaissance, and the distinction between the two even blurs. I do not strive to be absolutely exhaustive, which is of course impossible, but I try to show the place of this early period in the canon of English literature. The paper suggests that the symbiosis of these two streams, i.e. pagan and Christian, makes *Everyman* and other medieval English works of literature bizarre, unique and fascinating since there is no equivalent in any other historical era of English literature.

Let me start with a remark that 'any genuine interest in the Moralities must be based on their intrinsic qualities and not merely on their value as antiquarian documents or as forerunners of the Elizabethan achievement.'¹ *Everyman*, considered to be one of the best English morality plays, came down to us in four early printed versions from about 1510-1519, which shows the great importance of both the text and its performance that was based on the written text. What is, then, the intrinsic value of the moralities which causes that great popularity? This is the main question to be asked

¹ L. A. Cormican, "Morality Tradition and the Interludes", in *The Age of Chaucer*, edited by Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 188.

because these plays, including *Everyman*, may seem a bit distant to our postmodern sensibility and mentality; yet, there must be something absolutely inevitable which accounts for the fact that these literary bits and pieces still claim our close attention. The huge popularity is not only due to simplicity and direct language as Abrams puts it.² The contemporary effectiveness of moralities was undoubtedly enormous, but what is the pragmatic reason for reading or performing these plays at that time or even today? The answer is quite simple: these plays transcend contemporary interests and their presentation of human nature is of permanent literary and dramatic value.³ In the context of Middle English lyrics, which I consider a significant influence on the play, *Everyman* is valuable poetry on stage as well. Moreover, what is highly appreciated is that *Everyman* presents the everlasting desire of human beings and this is 'concretely the ancient problem of the final outcome of man's conduct, of man's attempt to discover and do the right.'⁴ These everlasting questions are always associated with human life and its finality; thus, understanding the concept of time in *Everyman* may be helpful when finding the intrinsic values and qualities of the play.

The lines 'your tyme draweth fast'⁵ and 'all that lyueth appayreth faste' (l. 44) may be considered to be the distilled essence of the play which was written one hundred years after *The Canterbury Tales* and one hundred years before Shakespeare. Still, it represents not only an interim period of English literature but gives us a clear picture of human needs and fears at the end of the Middle Ages; however, *Everyman* is not a mere morality play warning us that we have to change our behaviour immediately. The most important idea that draws from Chaucer and the previous phase of the rich literary tradition is a notion that human life is similar to a pilgrimage, since it is an allegorical quest for something more precious and valuable. The allusions to earlier literature show that the author of *Everyman* is not only a great writer but also a proficient and eager reader of the whole tradition of English medieval literature. The human life course, from birth to death, complies with the conventional metaphor of life as a journey; we have to set off on a journey and arrive to the end of our life. The only problem is that this quest is too short and quick, and moreover, we do not have time to wait; on the contrary, we have to hasten because 'the day

² M. H. Abrams and S. Greenblatt, eds, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. I (New York and London: W. W. Norton Company, 2000), p. 445.

³ L. A. Cormican, p. 188.

⁴ L. A. Cormican, p. 189.

⁵ *Everyman*. <<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/everyman.html>> (12th December 2008), line 566.

passeth and it is almoost ago' (l. 194) which causes the existential fear upon which the whole play is based as we can hear when *Everyman* says:

O wretched caytyfe wheder shall I flee
That I myght scape this endles sorowe.
Now gentyll deth spare me tyll to morowe. (ll. 171-173)

This clear contrast between cruelty and pity, typical of the late Middle Ages, often recurs in *Everyman* and hence contributes to the thesis that 'the Middle Ages knew but the two extremes: the fullness of cruel punishment, and mercy.'⁶

Death is sent to *Everyman* and cannot be put off by either promises or tears; moreover, nobody wants to accompany *Everyman*, not even Kindred, Goods and Fellowship. Beauty, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits and Knowledge all abandon him when dying, which clearly complies with the medieval poetry, such as a famous poem from the thirteenth century 'Wanne mine eyhen misten'.⁷ The hero/non-hero, *Everyman*, towards the end of his life is abandoned by everyone but Good Deeds, forgotten until late in the play. Only Good Deeds is able to guide him in the other world, but eventually he will need the help of God's grace through the rituals of the church as well. By now, the story conforms to the genuine Roman Catholic teaching when the play expresses St Augustine's famous doctrine of salvation, which we cannot reach but through God's grace – the deeds alone are not sufficient. Strength, Beauty, Discretion and Five Wits stay with *Everyman* according to the well established tradition of late medieval English lyrics, only accompany him to the edge of the grave,⁸ but cannot go further because 'Al to late! Al to late! Wanne the bere is ate gate'⁹ to quote the above-mentioned poem again.

At the end of the Middle Ages there is a strong feeling of extreme, but unspecified, fear among people, and this existential terror was successfully nourished by both literature and official church ideology. One of the dominating motifs of the fifteenth century, the period of waning of the Middle Ages, was the thirst for revenge and unshakable sentiment of right.¹⁰ The huge fear expressed by *Everyman* is much more pronounced than in earlier phases of English literature also due to the fact that 'man at that time is convinced that right is absolutely fixed and certain. Justice

⁶ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 25.

⁷ R. T. Davies, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics. A Critical Anthology* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 74.

⁸ Jay Ruud, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*. (New York: Facts on File, 2006), p. 217.

⁹ R. T. Davies, p. 75.

¹⁰ Johan Huizinga, pp. 20, 23.

should prosecute the unjust everywhere and to the end. Reparation and retribution have to be extreme, and assume the character of revenge.¹¹ This attitude leads us to pre-Christian period of human mentality when gods were to be feared; however, this position, practically pagan, blurs with Christianity and creates a unique vision of human salvation. That is why *Everyman* exhorts people when God says:

They be so combred with worldly ryches
That nedes on them I must do Iustyce
O euery man lyuynge without fere
Where arte thou deth thou myghty messenger. (ll. 60-63)

Fear of God, rather than love of Him, is a very important idea of late medieval Christianity, anticipating only that there must be something absolutely different to come – in this situation, it was the newly introduced religious movements such as *devotio moderna* or the first proponents of the Reformation showing that there is no need to be afraid of our future, but it is vital to trust in God. The late Middle Ages was a period of emotions, spirituality and fears, and it must be borne in mind ‘in order to conceive fully how violent and high-strung was life at that period.’¹² Future insecurity of the reckoning at the time of our death is highlighted by *Everyman* throughout the play many times, such as when Good Deeds says: ‘There is a blynde rekenynge in tyme of dystres’ (l. 505) because there are no letters in the book of deeds: ‘For one letter here I can not se’ (l. 504). In the context of reckoning, there is one original concept of the play because the author of *Everyman* is the first in English literature, to the best of my knowledge, to use the accounting metaphor, such as ‘to gyue a straye counte generall’ (l. 404), later highly popular in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. The ‘double-entry bookkeeping’ metaphor is used several times and creates a highly powerful motif as it suggests the inevitability of our deeds and hence fills human mentality with horror of our future destiny.

The story of *Everyman* seems a little simple at first sight and the motifs clearly follow the well-established and standard procedures of late medieval literature; however, *Everyman* is successfully trying to express existential fears when the play is launched by a well-known and powerful medieval *memento mori*: ‘That of our lyuves and endynge shewes, How transitory we be all daye’ (ll. 5-6). Moreover, the biggest problem of the whole human life, studied by the play, is that sin which had seemed to be ‘full swete’ (l. 13) appears to ‘causeth the soule to wepe’ (l. 14) in the end. Everything ‘wyll fade from the as floure in maye,’ (l. 18) which is not a standard metaphor since the month of May is traditionally considered by

¹¹ Johan Huizinga, p. 23.

¹² Johan Huizinga, p. 14.

medieval English literature, such as in the poem ‘Sumer is icumen in,’ the period of regeneration, not a time of fading; that is why the contrasting motif of joyful May with the fading of sinful reality is extraordinarily powerful in the context of the initial lines. Similar binary oppositions are also evident when *Everyman* aptly expresses the Platonic duality of body and soul, ‘all erthly thynges is but vanyte’ (l. 867), as an Old Testament allusion to *vanitas vanitatum* (*Ecclesiastes* 1, 2), because everyone will have to face the inevitable death – this fear of the unavoidable end means that the medieval soul was extremely excitable and the passionate element was present everywhere.¹³

What is the reason why *Everyman* has proved to be the most enduring of the vernacular morality plays? The cause for such great popularity is first and foremost the fact that it is a real drama – pointing out the dramatic moments of everyone’s existential fears at the end of our lives or just before death. That is why, *Everyman* fits into the classic definition of a morality play which is an allegorical representation of human life.¹⁴ The importance of *Everyman* in English literary canon is undisputed due to the following reason: even though the characters of the play are mere abstractions, their strength lies in their relationships which are human. However, there must be something beyond this simple fact. I contend that the most important reason for the great popularity of the play is its expression of the elementary ideas which were valid throughout the Middle Ages and also created the Renaissance paradigm. Human life as such is based on its orientation in time, i.e. we are mortal beings, and our life starts with our birth and ends with death. This temporality significantly determines our lives and its representation in literature always creates an impressive impact on the readers or listeners. Moreover, the question of the sense of our existence leads us necessarily to the question of our temporality. Regarding the sacred time of human salvation, the basic concept is the transience of human life, already described by masterpieces such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, later by Shakespeare, but perfectly elaborated by *Everyman* because the destructiveness of time and the insecure future of human beings is moderated by the Christian concept of salvation daringly mixed with the feelings of existential fear in the core of the play. Eternal glory is expected with uncertainty and the future brings only insecurity – that is the reason for many lines filled with melancholy mixed with despair. On the other hand, the play also contains certain comic elements which balance the dogmatic and harsh scholasticism of the *ars*

¹³ Johan Huizinga, p. 20.

¹⁴ Ronald Carter and John McRae, *Routledge History of Literature in English* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 43.

moriendi, popular in the devotional literature of the later Middle Ages, and make the play smoother and more relaxing despite the depressing tenor. However, *Everyman* lacks the broad humour of, for instance, Chaucer, but contains rather mocking and grim elements.¹⁵ The funniest characters are Cosyn and Kyndrede; when Cosyn announces ‘the cramp in my to’ (l. 355) and the other one refuses to go with Everyman but offers his maiden since she likes travelling, ‘she loueth to go to festes there to be nyse, and to daunce and a brode to sterte’ (ll. 360-361), the play starts to proceed more quickly and lightly than before. The commonplace error in interpretation is that these features seem to make the play more Renaissance rather than medieval; however, the Middle Ages is not the era of rigidity and sterility, and the Renaissance the era of exuberance and voluptuousness; it is rather the contrary. Having said that, there is not such a discrepancy between the two periods of European culture – it is merely an artificial romantic construct, unfortunately, still widely accepted.

Everyman strictly follows commonplace medieval ideas, not only religious but also general cultural notions of the era and thus this work of art remains for us ‘a powerful play driving home its stark warning about the inevitable end of life and about the human need for preparedness.’¹⁶ The failure to find a companion who would be able to offer us a real life guide is the dilemma of our lives as well; therefore, at least in this point, the play proves to be powerfully up-to-date. The key word of the late Middle Ages, ‘insecurity,’ signifies even for us, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that we also face many fears and terrors and thus naturally, creates a common denominator and connects us with late medieval period paradigms.

¹⁵ M. H. Abrams, p. 445.

¹⁶ Jay Ruud, p. 218.