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The English Morality Play

Origins, History, and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition

Robert Potter





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The English Morality Play

First published in 1975, *The English Morality Play* is the extended history of the English morality play, its persistence and flourishing as a dramatic tradition. The book sheds light on the intellectual and social origins of the morality play, its relationship to the medieval Corpus Christi cycle plays, its subject, purpose, conditions of original staging, and the abstract characters of its *dramatis personae*. The changing tradition is revealed within Renaissance drama, in the works of Skelton and Medwall, and the Reformation plays of Lindsay, Bale and Udall, as the morality play altered under the pressure of political events, escaped from the general suppression of religious drama, and in complex ways came to influence the dramatic conceptions of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Contemporary parallels to the English morality tradition in European drama are investigated, as is the rediscovery of the texts of the plays by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics. In the final chapter, Dr. Potter examines the revival of the morality tradition on the twentieth-century stage and its influence on such dramatists as Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and Bertolt Brecht. This book will be of interest to students of literature and drama.



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Preface

A book begins as an unsatisfied idea. This one, once the idea for a paper which suggested a thesis (which detoured into an unexpected theatrical revival) and expanded into a dissertation on its way to becoming the present book-length study, poses a series of questions about a special kind of medieval and Renaissance play and attempts in some measure to answer these questions.

A book ends as an unsatisfied idea. I hope the book will help to indicate to its readers that the kind of play which we describe and usually dismiss as a 'morality play' had an art and a purpose and a history and an influence of its own, worthy of more attention and understanding. In several dimensions of the study, including the anthropological background, the morality's influence on mature Elizabethan drama, and the analogous drama of the Continent, I think this book offers as many suggestions for new departures as it does comprehensive or rigid conclusions. I hope it will encourage more thinking and writing about the early drama, and more productions of early plays. It has often been demonstrated that these plays deserve (and will please) a modern audience. To perceive them we need only suspend our disbelief, and they will show us what we least expect to find, which is ourselves.

I had wanted to dispense with the usual list of acknowledgments, in order to let the book speak for itself. Two personal considerations make me doubt the wisdom of doing so:

(1) There is a man that I know who once performed the miracle of convincing an eminent Hollywood non-actress that she could act. So thoroughly did he accomplish this miracle that even the lady's colleagues in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, who knew better, were convinced that she could act. They gave her an Oscar. And I watched her myself (it was in the early days of television) climb up on the stage, take the statuette in her claws, and make a short speech. Too short. She didn't mention the miracle-worker.

Preface

(2) On another occasion, the author of a book left me out of his prefatory acknowledgments list. It was a fine book, and I was proud of my work in the editing of it.

Therefore, with all due respect, I am naming the names of some of my many creditors – including the name of the man who left me out of his acknowledgments. It appears below, with the rest.

Sears Jayne, who introduced me to the study of the early drama, and the idea of scholarship;

Albert B. Friedman, who advised and directed me in writing the dissertation from which this book derives;

French Fogle, Martin L. Wine, George Wickes, J. Michael Miller, Marjorie Nicolson, Marshall Waingrow, and several others with whom I worked at Claremont Graduate School;

John Barton, whose masterful BBC series 'The First Stage' introduced me and so many others to the early drama in performance;

The staff of the Huntington Library, where I worked on early histories of the theater;

The staff of the Theater Collection of the New York Public Library, where I spent a hot summer (in the old quarters on Fifth Avenue) on modern productions of *Everyman* and other early plays. Also the staffs of the British Museum Newspaper Library in Colindale and the Enthoven Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum;

A number of people at Bristol University where I spent a Fulbright year: Bertram Joseph, Glynne Wickham, Oscar Brockett, and also Marion Jones, who made the fortuitous mistake of letting a novice director (me) stage the revival of Bale's *King John* for the 1964 Bristol Shakespeare Festival. Also the cast of that production, together with whom I learned much at first hand about morality plays in performance: David Male (*King John*), Martin Hoyle (*Sedition*), David Shawyer (*Clergy*), Richard Howard (*Civil Order*), John Harper (*Nobility*), Jack Jarzavek (*Cardinal Pandulphus*), John Rudlin (*Pope Innocent III*), and Jane Lapotaire (*England*);

The members of the Medieval Drama Seminar of the Modern Language Association, and the Institute for Renaissance and Medieval Studies, Ohio State University, where portions of this study were first presented;

Several colleagues at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and elsewhere who have dealt with the manuscript and otherwise encouraged me in this project at one stage or other, in particular John R. Elliott Jr, Homer Swander, David McPherson, Colin Franklin, R. A. Foakes, Martin Stevens, and Richard Helgerson;

Sally Alabaster Potter, who doubled in the role of Good Angel and Lady Lechery;

Thomas B. Markus, a collaborator in several theatrical ventures;

Preface

My four children, to whom the book is dedicated.

Any study of a medieval art form which begins with pre-history and ends with twentieth-century political theater obviously makes transit through many areas of highly specialized scholarship. I have tried to do justice to these multiple contexts; no doubt I have only partially succeeded. I have tried not to lose sight of the precise subject – a dramatic tradition which attempts to objectify theatrically the human predicament. That, in its full dimensions, is the subject of this book.

R.A.P.



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Prologue

London, 1901

The newspapers of London in the summer of 1901 – in that impregnable capital of world commerce and empire which was Yeats', Shaw's, Henry Irving's and Henry James' London – were concerned with casualty lists from the Boer War and announcements of charity drives in the name of the late Queen Victoria, who had died early in the year. Theatrical notices carried the names of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Ellen Terry, Sarah Bernhardt, Mrs Patrick Campbell. It was an unlikely moment for the rebirth of the medieval drama, as for theatrical experiment in general. Though still occasionally denounced from the pulpit as a place of wickedness and deceit, the London theater purveyed the most harmless trifles available; its audience was safely protected from politics and religious controversy by the censors of the Lord Chamberlain's office, and from experiment by the sagacity of commercial managements. The tiny but vociferous opposition to this state of affairs was mainly promoting the cause of Modern drama (that is, Ibsen), insisting that the real accents and problems of the modern world be somehow intruded into the dream world of the theater. There were, however, a very few radical antiquarians bent on redeeming the theater by means of the classics. And the foremost of these was William Poel, founder of the Elizabethan Stage Society.

Poel's idea, pursued with inadequate resources in a succession of impromptu halls and theaters, was to present the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries under an approximation of Elizabethan conditions. Poel had no fear of difficult plays or obscure period pieces, and his early productions included the first modern stage performance of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. For these courageous undertakings Poel earned a modest reputation and audience of devotees who kept the Elizabethan Stage Society functioning despite persistent financial difficulties. In 1901, after Poel's mother had died unexpectedly, the scholar A. W. Ward, Poel's friend and adviser, suggested that he might find consolation

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in reading a medieval play about death called *Everyman*. Poel read the play and determined at once to produce it.

Although a skeptic and a free thinker himself, Poel was always the stickler for authenticity; he decided that this religious play should be presented in religious circumstances. The authorities of the Church of England, as it happened, did not share his view. Poel's offer to stage *Everyman* in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey was summarily rejected by Dean and Chapter, and a similar initiative to utilize Canterbury Cathedral proved unsuccessful. At last Poel managed to find a disestablished location in London, and it was there, in the authentically medieval setting of the Master's Courtyard of the Charterhouse (a former monastery turned pensioners' home), that *Everyman* was presented on Saturday afternoon, 13 July 1901.

Poel's production was, to say the least, experimental. It was not merely the first production of *Everyman*, or any other morality play, in modern times; it was, so far as can be determined, the first modern performance of a medieval play.¹ There was little fanfare, however. Those in the audience who had never heard of moralities may even have approached the play with an open mind, unaware of what a morality play might be. But those who knew their dramatic history must have come with grim resolution, anticipating the worst. Moralities were tediously didactic medieval dramatic allegories in which the characters were not Real People, but Abstractions.

In Poel's performance the 'lifeless abstractions' of the medieval text turned out to be what they must always, invisibly, have been – not walking categories, but realized figures, parts in a play. It is clear that many were agreeably surprised. The critic of *The Times*, who found himself complaining that Fellowship had a North Country accent, pronounced the experiment a remarkable success: 'Brush away from a morality the dust, set it in the cool quadrangle of the Charterhouse on a hot July afternoon, quicken it with human speech and action, and the veriest Philistine will find it hard to cavil.'²

The reviews were enthusiastic, numerous, and unanimously glowing. Taken together they give evidence of a performance that challenged virtually every shibboleth of the Victorian stage. It was, to begin with, an *outdoor* performance, as the *Daily News* critic noted:³

many conditions which would have destroyed the illusion of the theatre . . . the stone courtyard, with the spectators crowding the windows as well as the ground area, the open sky, with the sparrows flitting around over the stage, the entrance of the characters on a level with and almost through the ranks of the audience – all these were things

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which would have been quite outside the frame of a dramatic picture, but gave added dignity to this moral abstraction in dramatic form.

The set was complex and decidedly unusual: 'one of the most impressive religious services that one has ever known . . . there were two "stages" – one must be pardoned the unwilling use of so soiled a word.'⁴ Against the great hall the main multi-leveled set had been erected. It had for its upper level 'a battlement representing heaven'⁵ and on its lower level an interior with simple medieval properties including a chair. There was, in addition, a separate stage some 40 ft away, 'a little chapel or loggia to which part of the action . . . was transferred.'⁶

Indeed Poel had staged the play with intuitive regard for medieval conventions of Mansion and Place staging, with a series of specific localities and a flexible neutral stage area, 'the platform was earth, as were also the courtyard and the little raised chapel or shrine that stood in the angle some 40 feet away.'⁷

A performance of this sort was a decided oddity in the age of the proscenium arch and the 'fourth wall' theory, with its unchallenged assumption that actors and audiences must be kept in their respective places, to create the magical illusion. To all this, *Everyman* offered a paradoxical simplicity, and many, including the critic of the *St James's Gazette*, were deeply impressed:⁸

the whole thing was so moving, so human, so real . . . Even then, in the open air in a courtyard and enclosed with antiquated buildings with no distinction of lighting to differentiate betwixt performers and auditors, and with such characters as Adonai (the Supreme Being), and Death bodily introduced upon the Stage, the essential human vitality of the whole thing was what most strongly appeared.

The presence onstage of a character representing God was in 1901 not merely a violation of theatrical conventions, but an actual violation of the law.⁹ That it was done in Poel's production without provoking an incident is probably a tribute to tasteful staging, a private theater audience, and simple good luck; later, in other circumstances, objections would be raised. But on this occasion God the Father did appear, both in *Everyman*, and in the Abraham and Isaac play from the Chester cycle which Poel's company performed as an afterpiece.

Behind this issue of Divinity on stage is a profound artistic point. In an illusionistic theater such as the Victorians', an actor is pretending to be someone, to an audience that pretends that he is

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that someone; in a presentational theater such as the medieval drama (or the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht), the actor makes no such pretense. He presents a character – God Almighty if necessary – to an audience whose attention is directed toward a higher, and invisible, hypothetical truth which the visible actors present.

Everyman is a play about the moment of death and thus, from the medieval perspective, a play about the shape and meaning of life. The structure is inevitable, and the final movement of the play brings *Everyman* to his grave. In Poel's production this was accomplished by a move out of the main acting area, onto the courtyard proper, thus invading the psychological territory of the audience in a way which would be effective today, and must have been quite shocking to a 1901 London audience.

The success of the production prompted a second performance the following week-end, and the *Athenaeum* printed a lengthy and perceptive review, recommending the experience:¹⁰

There are many points from which the entertainment may be regarded, and from all it is significant. The first thing that strikes one is that the primitive drama, which seems so dull and didactic, may well have passionned our forefathers – is, indeed, capable of passioning us; the second that this particular piece, played no better and no worse than it was on this occasion, is capable, when its merits are known, of attracting all London and becoming the 'sensation' of the season . . . those who care to witness an entertainment unique in its kind are counselled to take an opportunity that most probably will not recur.

The recurrence, however, came quickly enough. An additional performance was presented the following week 'for the benefit of the Queen Victoria Memorial Fund.' Two weeks later, and for the same charity, *Everyman* was performed in the Quadrangle of University College, Oxford. In the autumn a special performance was given at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. By the following season *Everyman* was being staged commercially in London, at St George's Hall and the Imperial Theatre.

The Poel production of *Everyman* went on to tour the provinces and America, and to become an international success. Modern audiences throughout the world were introduced to the morality play, previously known only to scholars, and the influence spread quickly to twentieth-century playwrights as diverse as von Hofmannsthal, Yeats, and Shaw – each of whom found something of immediate use in this ancient dramatic idea.¹¹

Since its revival in 1901, *Everyman* has emerged as a classic – a

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familiar stage play and an almost inevitable anthology piece. The Poel revival was decisive in a literary as well as a theatrical sense. In the years prior to 1901 *Everyman* had appeared in modern anthologies only twice.¹² By contrast, in the short period 1901-14 at least seventeen separate new editions of the play were published (of which four are acting editions) and there were five additional reprints in anthologies. In the years since World War I there have been more than twenty further editions (about two-thirds of them acting versions).¹³ *Everyman* has been performed in parish halls and theaters, by the Birmingham Repertory Company and the Old Vic, in King's College Chapel, Cambridge, at Canterbury Cathedral and at Westminster Abbey. It has been presented in innumerable university and school productions in Britain and America and elsewhere in the world, in ancient and modern dress, in a musical adaptation in 1904, as an opera in 1915, as a cantata in 1939, in pantomime on BBC television in 1938, and as a film in 1957.¹⁴ It is *the* morality play in so far as the twentieth century is concerned.

The success of *Everyman* has created a logical and problematical result – the conception of a large tradition in the terms of one specific play. Much has been written about *Everyman*, but very little about the nature of the dramatic form to which it belongs, and of which it is the most indelible, if not necessarily typical, example. This book begins as an attempt to provide an historical context for *Everyman* and the other moralities as a particularly characteristic kind of medieval play. The aim is to reconstruct the morality play as a dramatic tradition, beginning with conjectured origins in ritual and the medieval idea of the forgiveness of sins. We will not be dealing with a rigid, formal genre of literature, susceptible of easy definition, but rather with a popular and developing drama of ideas – which changed as visibly as the world did, intellectually and historically, under the pressure of the Renaissance and the Reformation. We will be examining the ways in which a variety of post-medieval playwrights, including Skelton, Bale, Sackville and Norton, Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega and Calderón, made use of this dramatic tradition. The focus will be on the drama of England, where the tradition proved most strong and significant, though one chapter will survey texts and performances elsewhere in Europe. Finally the study will consider how, at length, the morality play came to be misunderstood by scholars and critics in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and how it was rediscovered and transformed in twentieth-century theater.

Chapter I

The idea of a morality play

The great majority of surviving English medieval plays are dramatizations of historical events. The medieval drama took its beginning in a symbolic re-enactment of the Resurrection – the axial historical event of Christianity. An elaboration of this dramatic idea, working backward in history to the Creation and forward to Doomsday, produced the characteristic textual architecture of English medieval drama: cycles of scriptural plays, for popular performance at the feast of Corpus Christi, in which all human history could be comprehended. From a distance of centuries we are beginning to perceive these cycles as very considerable works of art.¹

Parallel to this historical corpus is a smaller and less clearly perceived body of plays, a form of drama known to us as the morality play. Like the cycles, these plays are Christian, anonymous, and 'popular,' written in English to be performed for the general population. But where the cycles take their form in fulfilling the totality of human history and defining its crucial rhythms, the morality play takes its shape from a different figure and pattern – the life of the individual human being.

I The unity of medieval drama

The medieval morality plays, which flourished in England at the same time as the Corpus Christi cycles, took many theatrical guises, from the cosmic pageantry and spectacle of *The Castle of Perseverance* (1405–25) and *Wisdom* (1450–1500) to the barnyard scurrilities of *Mankind* (1465–70), from the topical satire of *Hickscorner* (1513) to the universality of *Everyman* (1495). But they seem to have been a single and very specific kind of play about the human predicament.

A concept – what it means to be human – is represented on the stage by a central dramatic figure or series of figures. Subsidiary

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characters, defined by their function, stand at the service of the plot, which is ritualized, dialectical, and inevitable: man exists, therefore he falls, nevertheless he is saved. This pattern, repeated in every morality play, should enable us not only to understand the form, but also to fix its place in the unity of medieval religious drama.

Literary historians, generally passing through to other destinations, have made a habit of dividing the English medieval drama into three distinct and unconnected groups of vernacular plays: 'mystery' plays (based on Scripture), 'miracle' plays (based on the lives of the saints), and 'morality' plays (based on the struggle between vices and virtues). There are many things wrong with this tripartite division. The terminology, for one thing, is arbitrary and un-historical, since those who wrote, performed, and witnessed the plays observed no such distinctions, the term 'miracle' having been loosely used in the fifteenth century to describe scriptural and saints' plays alike, and the terms 'mystery' and 'morality' being late borrowings from French literary criticism.² Moreover, the division embodies a serious misunderstanding of the nature of the morality play.

Seeking literary sources for the quaint abstract names of morality-play characters, critics have traced the allegory of the plays to the *Psychomachia*, a fourth-century Roman epic poem in which personified virtues and vices battle over the soul of man. This identification rests on the somewhat tenuous connection between the epic and the battle of virtues and vices in the morality play *The Castle of Perseverance*. But the *Psychomachia* is a distant, and at best an indirect source. The immediate origins of the morality play, which we will be exploring in this chapter, are in the tradition of sermons and penitential literature advocating repentance and preaching the forgiveness of sins.³ The imprecise identification of the morality play with the *Psychomachia* has led some critics to describe the action of the dramas in terms of an epic battle between virtues and vices. But it is the figure of mankind who stands at the center of these plays, and the shape of his life which unfolds to determine the pattern of events.

The persistence of the morality play as a theatrical concept may be seen in the plots of two widely-separated plays in the tradition. In John Skelton's *Magnificence* (1515) a 'noble prince of might' lives in prosperity, counseled by virtuous advisers, until a group of unwholesome visitors arrive. They gain positions of influence under false pretenses, and inform the prince of his virginal inexperience. Soon the virtuous advisers have been discharged, and the prince is led through extravagance into adversity and poverty. Abandoned by his counselors, the prince is at the point of despair when the virtuous advisers reappear and lead him to a wise repentance, through which he is restored to 'joy and royalty.'⁴

The idea of a morality play

The Castle of Perseverance (1405–25), a play of about a hundred years earlier, stages very much the same series of actions. Its hero, *Humanum Genus*, begins in childish innocence, but is seduced into sin by his bad angel, and tempters such as World and Flesh. From this condition he is rescued by a good angel and agents of repentance (Confession and Penance), and brought to the safety of a castle called Perseverance. Later, in his old age, he is lured away from the castle and into sin once more, in which condition death comes upon him. He is saved from damnation by repentance, and the intervention of Mercy invoking the grace of God.⁵

The pattern in these dramas is not one of combat, but rather a sequence of innocence/fall/redemption. If we grasp this idea of the morality play, it is now possible to see the medieval religious drama as a totality, in which the morality play performs the same ceremony in the microcosm of the individual human life as that of the Corpus Christi cycle in the macrocosm of historical time.

What we *call* the medieval religious plays is relatively unimportant; what should be emphasized is their fundamental unity of purpose. Directed to an audience of believers, all the plays celebrate the permanent truth of Christianity as a theology, a theory of history, and an explanation of the human condition; all present theatrically the evidence to sustain such a world view, through the interaction of the familiar and the unknown, the material and the spiritual, the past, present, and future; all visualize theatrically the significance of human life *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The Corpus Christi play and the morality play may be seen as two manifestations of the same dramatic purpose. For both, life and history are a process. Both present man as a divine, fallen, redeemed creature, and do so in such a way as to suggest to the members of the audience that they are participants in the process, with significant choices to make. The Corpus Christi play allows the audience to participate vicariously in sacred events as spectators of the Fall, Flood, Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Last Judgment. The morality play epitomizes these truths, detects these rhythms, in the sequence of every individual life.

The technique in both kinds of medieval religious drama is *illumination*: to make visible the invisible truths of time and the universe – as in manuscript illuminations and in the work of glaziers, woodcarvers, and stonemasons of the cathedrals. To consider fifteenth-century playscripts as medieval art is to find that medieval playmakers used the special properties of their materials (spoken language and dramatic action) with a comparable skill and directness, and to the same communal end.

Without rendering exaggerated judgments on its ultimate literary or theatrical value, it is now possible to see that the morality play,

The idea of a morality play

like its counterpart, the Corpus Christi cycle, was ambitious in theme, experimental in its dramaturgy, and, as drama, deserving of the popularity which it seems to have enjoyed with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century audiences. Moreover, unlike the Corpus Christi play, the morality play would prove adaptable to new circumstances and social conditions. It had at its basis, to begin with, an archetypal human perception: the fall out of innocence into experience. The centrality of this idea in the morality play is, perhaps, its defining characteristic. The human predicament, both in a theatrical and a theological sense, creates the morality play's plot and distinctive structure.

A morality play sees life as a sequential process through which every human being passes, by virtue of being human. The idea of such a sequence is behind Jacques' mordant chronicle of humanity in *As You Like It*.⁶

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances,
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloone
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

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It may be noted that the pattern of Jacques' human 'history' is tragic. Beginning humbly, man rises through exercise of free will and appetite (as schoolboy, lover, soldier) until he reaches a plateau of illusory achievement. From this security, however, he is inexorably tumbled by physical decay into senility and finally non-existence.

The human drama of a morality play is an analogous, but crucially different, presentation of the life cycle. Beginning in innocence man falls by exercise of free will and appetite into a dilemma of his own making. From these depths, however, he is inexorably delivered by divine grace to achieve salvation and eternal life. The end of human life is not 'mere oblivion' but regeneration: never death, always a rebirth.

The Castle of Perseverance and *Magnificence* are in many ways stern exemplary discourses on human mortality and the wages of sin. But if they were merely that, such plays would end with 'mere oblivion' or its spiritual equivalent – damnation. This indeed is what will occur in the late sixteenth century, when the morality is reconstructed into the scheme of tragedy, and the result will be a play of tragic individuality, like Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. In its original form, however, the morality play embodies a generalized and remarkably optimistic theatrical conception of the human condition. It moves to a rhythm even older and more fundamental than tragedy. It has the rhythm of the victory of life over death, the shape of enacted ritual.

2 Ritual and regeneration

'Ritual' in this context means a public observance of accepted truth; more specifically, a collective activity in which past action is imitated and repeated for a present purpose. I use the term 'ritual' in the sense of a series of significant collective *actions* (where myth, by contrast, is essentially verbal and narrative). These actions in primitive societies are public attempts to account for, and deal with, natural forces and phenomena. By means of ritual, primitive man seeks to establish a direct relationship between his society and the mysteries of nature so as to understand and control them. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ernst Cassirer, and others who have studied the implications of these rituals see them to be among primitive man's strongest expressions of self-confidence, affirmations of his important position in the order of nature.⁷

In the action of the ritual, a collective articulation is being celebrated; from past experiences and individual responses, a collective attitude is formulated. The ritual action of the rain dancer

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re-enacts the coming of rain; by simulating rain he calls sympathetically for its fertility to come again. Continued drought may only mean that the ritual has been improperly performed, but the falling of rain will be taken to validate the ritual, its grasp of the truth. And the repetition of a ritual is a communal acknowledgment of the permanence and actuality of the concept. It serves, in Suzanne Langer's phrase, as 'a disciplined rehearsal of "right attitudes."' ⁸ By rehearsing in an articulated and formal sequence the correct attitudes, ritual causes the truth to 'come true.'

The celebration allows the believers to participate in its recurrence. In this way ritual seeks to control nature by imitating it. Thus the rituals of primitive man at the change of seasons are conceptual explanations of the decay of autumn or the rebirth of spring. They enact a logic for the events, in the image of a death or a revival. The forces of nature, represented in the form of dying or reviving gods, for example, come under human control. ⁹

In the social rituals of primitive man, the life of the individual is brought into significant relationship with the totality of the society. The so-called *rites de passage* enact common attitudes adopted towards the sequence of life, celebrations of a pattern in which all participate. The power of such rituals is to convey to the individual life a general significance. As Joseph Campbell emphasizes: ¹⁰

the tribal ceremonies of birth, marriage, burial, installation and so forth, serve to translate the individual's life-crises and life-deeds into classic, impersonal forms. They disclose him to himself, not as this personality or that, but as the warrior, the bride, the widow, the priest, the chieftain. . . . The whole society becomes visible to itself as an imperishable living unit. Generations of individuals pass, like anonymous cells from a living body; but the sustaining, timeless form remains. . . . Rites of initiation and installation, then, teach the lesson of the essential oneness of the individual and the group.

Ritual, as it emerges from contemporary investigation, is a conceptual process. It functions by synthesizing general truths out of the particulars of human experience. It discerns an order, imitates the rhythm of the order, conceives its meaning. Above all it welds a connection – in terms of action – between this outer world of events and the inner world of feelings.

One theory is that all drama begins in the elaboration of such primitive ritual. Independent evidence from major civilizations, including India, Greece, and China, lends a basic plausibility to this theory. On the other hand, drama seems so much a part of

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human nature (e.g., disguise, mimesis, child's play, pageantry, game theory, dance, the whole idea of personality) that it may antedate any particular collective activity, such as ritual. In any event, primitive ritual is inherently dramatic and has in certain cultural instances produced a drama in which older, sympathetic-magical actions become clothed in the rationale of new myths, stories, or other narrative substitutions. Such a development, according to many accounts, brought about the evolution of Dionysian ritual into Greek tragedy.¹¹ In the present context, another less frequently noted example should be mentioned – the popular drama of ancient Egypt (based on the fertility rituals of Osiris) which staged in comic terms the birth and growth of Osiris' son Horus.¹²

There are indications that at least the structure of the morality play (as distinct from its intellectual substance, which is medieval and Christian) can be traced to similar origins in fertility ritual. The link which connects morality play and ritual is a folk ritual drama known as the mummers' play. Exactly what the mummers' play was like in the Middle Ages we cannot be certain, since it is an orally transmitted form (like the ballad) which went officially unnoticed until folklorists began to record it in the eighteenth century. However, three facts are abundantly clear: the mummers' play is an ancient outgrowth of fertility ritual; it existed in some form in medieval times; and it influenced the developing medieval drama.¹³ Its central act, a battle of champions to the death, with a miraculous revival, reproduces the ritual battle of winter and summer, the rhythm of death and regeneration, the ritual burial of winter and the resurrection of life.¹⁴

The typical mummers' play, as E. K. Chambers reconstructs it, begins with a prologue introducing two champions (St George, 'Bold Slasher,' etc.). After considerable boasting and argument they fight; one is felled, but a widely-traveled doctor appears and cures the fallen warrior, often by a mock beheading. This action ends the drama proper, but a number of dancers enter (including one with a big head and one named Beelzebub) and the performance concludes with a collection of money (*quête*). The existence of this strange and widely dispersed folk ceremony (now known to have been performed at one time or another in over a thousand different localities in the British Isles)¹⁵ can only be explained in terms of a widely observed folk ritual, a pre-Christian survival. Few scholars would today deny that a drama of this kind was indeed in existence and being performed throughout the Christian Middle Ages. The question is how, and to what extent, this folk tradition influenced the development of medieval religious drama.

W. K. Smart, writing in 1917, was first to point out the significant

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traces of the mummers' play to be found in the fifteenth-century morality play *Mankind*. These elements center in lines 426–68 which comprise, 'in a sense, a mummers' play.'¹⁶ Three agents of temptation (Nought, New Guise, and Now-a-days) have been beaten up by Mankind; Mischief, their commander, offers to cure them of their ills by temporary decapitation. This episode recalls the mock cure of the mummers' play and refers to the folk tradition of magical beheading, best remembered from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹⁷ Later in *Mankind* the vices, summoning the demon Tityvillus to aid them, stop the play to make a collection from the audience, 'elles þer xall no man hym se.'¹⁸ This event, which is often cited as the first incursion of commercialism onto the English stage, in fact suggests the inevitable collection (*quête*) of the mummers' play; it is likely that begging actors were no great novelty in the fifteenth century.¹⁹ Tityvillus is described as 'a man wyth a hede þat is of grett omnipotens.'²⁰ He is very similar to the masked 'big head' character of the mummers' play.

The explanation of these similarities given by Smart – that the mummers' plays might be descended from moralities – is belied by what we now know of the pre-Christian origins of the mummers' play. Aside from sheer coincidence, the only other explanation for the folk elements in *Mankind* is that they were borrowed from the mummers' play in its fifteenth-century ritual form.

This relation of the moralities to a conjectural ritual drama has been explored in some detail. Baskervill found evidence of the magical beheading as a pagan 'Christmas game' of the Middle Ages, and pointed out that the castle in *Perseverance* could well have been a descendant of the tents, pavilions, and castles formerly erected on playing-fields for summer festivals.²¹ In Redford's sixteenth-century play *Wit and Science*, the hero Wit fights with the giant Tedioussness and is apparently slain until Lady Recreation and her followers appear and revive him miraculously with a song; in a later episode Wit triumphs over Tedioussness by beheading him.²² A few general resemblances have been noted by other critics, and echoes of the mummers' play prologue, with its invocation of the champions, have been found in the fifteenth-century morality play *Wisdom*.²³

A caveat should here be entered against attempts to overstress the similarities of the morality play and the mummers' play. Medieval scholars are justifiably cautious about 'pagan' myth and ritual, and its supposed dominance in Christian works of literature. They recall the concerted attempt of a generation of folklorists (whose rise conveniently coincided with that of German National Socialism) to trace everything in literature to Germanic 'volk' origin. Nevertheless, it is important in studying the early drama

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never to forget the advice of Pope Gregory the Great, who cautioned his missionaries that they must not destroy sacred places, but build upon them.²⁴

An example may be seen in the earliest known morality, *The King of Life* (usually known as *Pride of Life*). This fragmentary play begins with a prologue of 112 lines summarizing the action to come. At the conclusion of the prologue the King of Life enters, boasting of his power and majesty. He is accompanied by Strength and Health, two guards sworn to defend him against all enemies. His Queen, however, warns him that he is a mortal creature; he ignores her warnings, and those of a Bishop and instructs his messenger to proclaim Life's domination of all the world and to challenge anyone, even Death, to fight if he would deny it. The messenger goes forth and is issuing the challenge to all (including the King of Death), as the manuscript breaks off.

The King of Life would seem to bear several previously unnoticed relations to the folk-play tradition. In the person of the King we possess a bragging champion to outstrip the St Georges and Bold Slashers, and yet to typify all that they might once have been. The King is a haughty and impressive figure, a worthy adversary for the King of Death. Their projected combat, like that of the mummers' play champions, is evidently to be the climax of the play.

Fortunately, the prologue gives a detailed summary of the action of the play and allows us to reconstruct the lost and concluding portion of *The King of Life*. The events can be outlined as follows:

1 The King of Life dreams that he will be killed by Death. (ll. 81-4)

2 Life and Death meet in battle; Death overcomes Life's guards and then Life himself. (ll. 85-92)

3 As Life dies his soul arises but is caught by fiends; the body and soul dispute over the blame, and soul bewails its fate. (ll. 93-106)

4 Through the intercession of the Virgin the soul of Life is freed from the fiends and allowed to ascend to heaven.²⁵

The action of the play, then, follows the sequence of life, death, and rebirth. In this respect *The King of Life* is a typical morality play. We are accustomed to personified death in such a play, but the personification of a life force, once we examine it, suggests a distant and distinguished ancestry. For the King of Life belongs to the genre of dying and reviving kings who, as Frazer voluminously testifies, are found in the folklore and religion of so many cultures.²⁶ Like these representatives of the life principle, the King of Life is struck down in his prime and raised up by a higher power. In essence and in action he invites comparison with these archetypal ritual figures.

The similarities do not end with characterization; the dramatic

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structure of the play itself is ritualistic. In a series of actions the play presents an explanation – and a demonstration – of the fact of death.²⁷ Against the vaunting fact of Life this demonstration comes gradually nearer – first in the warning of the Queen, then in the Bishop's sermon, next in the King's dream, and finally in the actual combat. The moment of death finds the body racked with pain and the soul on the point of damnation. But the ultimate fact of death is the solution to it, explained and demonstrated in the revival of the King of Life. And the fact of death is expressed in a pattern which closely parallels that of the folk play: a combat between elemental forces, with challenges, direct battle, the apparent death of one participant, and a miraculous revival.

It seems highly likely that *The King of Life* is related to some primitive ritual drama (of which the mummers' play in turn preserves a dim memory). If we can ever in fact reconstruct this drama, perhaps it will be possible to prove the intriguing hypothesis that the morality play is the Christianized descendant of primitive fertility ritual. At the present time, however, evidence is insufficient to prove anything beyond a compelling parallelism.

Modern studies of primitive myth and ritual have opened new modes of understanding for the study of literature and drama. Although caution must be exercised in claiming anthropological ancestries and sources for all literary inventions, there is an equal danger in ignoring the available insights and pretending that modern man has rationally fabricated everything in literature. In a balanced judgment on this question, Frazer's latest editor emphasizes the general connections which can helpfully be established between ritual and literature:²⁸

It may, for instance, be quite wrong to assume that a particular . . . myth, play, or epic actually goes back, in point of literary genealogy, to an earlier ritual libretto; but it may nevertheless be quite right to assume that this particular type of composition was inspired or conditioned in the first place by the standard pattern of seasonal rituals and that its structure and conventions were determined originally by those of the primitive performances. In other words, what is really at stake is . . . the parallelism between a pattern of narrative and a pattern of ritual, or – to put it in broad terms – the ultimate relation of a genre of literature to a genre of ceremony.

A search for the origins of the morality play should begin with the perception that it is related in a variety of complex ways, to ritual and ritual drama. This relationship is *direct*, in the sense that

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faint textual links can be established between the morality drama and the action of ritual; it is also *analogical*, in the sense that the morality play appears to serve a ritual social purpose. Its primary function is to demonstrate and therefore to verify Christian doctrine.

The morality play, like a ritual drama (or a contemporary ideological play) is an extreme manifestation of one perennial impulse of theater, which is to embody, to verify, to create the acknowledged Truth. Every society creates verifications of its ideas, particularly any society with a systematic conception of truth, based on invisible but acknowledged higher principles (whether those of a fertility cult or Christianity or Marxist-Leninism is substantially unimportant for the moment). The ideological drama, the morality play, and the ritual play are demonstrative theatrical ceremonies of this kind. In each case we have a validating performance, a tangible substantiation of the higher principles. In each case the Truth comes true. In each case we have a drama of ideas, with a positive and reinforcing conclusion.

The morality play, an archetypal example of the theater of demonstration, is both didactic (in the sense of teaching Christian doctrine) and ritualistic (in the sense of 'proving' it). These interwoven strands of didacticism and ritual together provide the origins of the morality play.

3 The forgiveness of sins

To understand the origins of a dramatic form is not simply to establish its line of descent, but to reconstruct its original purposes. In some cases (e.g., Restoration heroic drama and *Commedia dell'Arte*) the idea may be highly uncertain; in others (e.g., Ibsen's social drama, Brecht's epic theater, and the morality play) the purpose is scarcely in doubt. The morality plays have a common theme and a practical (if theologically complex) moral: sin is inevitable; repentance is always possible. *Everyman*, and the other extant medieval morality plays (*King of Life*, *Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, *Mankind*, *Hickscorner*, *Youth*, *Mundus et Infans*) are about repentance – why it is necessary, how it may be carried out and what it will accomplish.

The morality plays have frequently been mistaken for naïve treatises on virtue. They are in fact the call to a specific religious act. If we are to understand the plays, we must clearly understand the action which they promulgate and ultimately represent. It is the acknowledgment, confession, and forgiveness of sin, institutionalized in medieval Christianity as the sacrament of penance.