

Lecture 11: *Everyman*

Everyman is a Morality (rather than a Mystery) play.

What are some of the differences?

Like Mysteries, Moralities are about Salvation, but:

Personal/Individual rather than Historical

Personifications rather than persons

In other words, they are ALLEGORIES.

Everyman is obviously an allegory; all of the characters are really Named abstractions—Goods vs. Good Deeds, Mercy, Knowledge, and of course Everyone.

Do you remember what I said about *Piers Plowman*?

That its allegory was (in Dante's terms) "poetic" rather than "theological"?

What are the differences between the two kinds?

Allegorical fictions are generally of two kinds, according to Dante's distinction between (I) the allegory of theologians and (II) the allegory of poets.

I. is structured, hierarchical, implicitly conservative.

II. is more fluid, even anarchic, dynamic, unstable.

When we compare it with *Piers Plowman*, *Everyman* seems to be a much more straightforward, "realistic" example of what I called "the allegory of theologians," based on a fixed (and rather simplified) system of correspondences.

The morality play is relentlessly hierarchal; it responds to a conservative ideology that supports the established teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic church. Its meanings appear simple, easy to grasp. It has a clearly stated "message," or "moral"; despite its dramatic format, it often reads like a sermon—an *exemplum*, in fact.

Remember Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*.

We are told right up front that *Everyman* is "A TREATISE . . . IN MANNER OF A MORAL PLAY." And just so that we're sure to get the point, we are explicitly told what it means to teach us: "HOW THE HIGH FATHER OF HEAVEN SENDETH DEATH TO EVERY CREATURE TO COME AND *GIVE AN ACCOUNT* OF THEIR LIVES IN THIS WORLD" (A464).

Things are not quite as simple as they appear, however, because the *manner* of representation reshapes the message, transforming it from a prose “treatise” into a poetic *exemplum* or PARABLE, a figurative vehicle that opens up the tenor to a variety of meanings.

Do you remember the terms VEHICLE and TENOR?

What is a PARABLE?

What makes *Everyman* a parable? Consider this engraving by the 17th-century artist Matthaeus Merian the Elder (1625-30).



The engraving is from a (hand-made) Picture Bible. It illustrates one of Jesus’s parables. Which one?

What does this Parable have to do with the account that Everyone must give of her or his life? The primary metaphoric connection between parable and play seems clear enough: they are about reckoning, balancing the books. But there is also some interesting stuff working beneath the surface of the play.

Let me phrase what I'm trying to get at as a question:

Is the parable of the talents really about earning one's way into heaven by investing one's goods prudently?

Or something else?

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Now reframe the question: What happens to the *Goods* that Everyone amasses in pursuit of the good life?

Everyone. Lo, now was I deceived ere I was ware,
And all I may wite misspending of time.

Goods. What, weenest thou that I am thine?

Everyone. I had weened so.

Goods. Nay, *Everyone*, I say no;

As for a while I was lent thee,

A season thou hast had me in prosperity;

My condition is man's soul to kill;

If I save one, a thousand I do spill;

Weenest thou that I will follow thee?

Nay, from this world, not verily.

Everyone. I had weened otherwise.

(435-46)

So perhaps what we call “gifts”—or talents, are really not ours?

If *Everyman* is, among other things, a re-reading of the Parable of the Talents, it may be about what is sometimes called Stewardship, or about the right use of one’s *gifts*; it plays on the idea that ones “property” has only been *lent*, not given outright.

The play is not really about living well in order to earn one’s way into heaven, despite its emphasis on *Good Deeds* as the saving agency of Everyone’s salvation.

There is a tension in the play between *Goods*, which are not really ours at all, and *Good Deeds*, which are finally **all that we are**. This tension is supported by a kind of thematic word-play on the various ways in which we think of things as “good”—good for us, or good to have, or good to be; goodness is a function of both character, who we are, and actions, what we do. *Everyman* finally fuses these internal and external senses so that Good Deeds become the character of Everyone.

To see the process by which this fusion of outside action and internal well-being is achieved, let's look briefly at the conclusion of the play.

Having been abandoned by Fellowship, Cousin, Kindred, and Goods, Everyone is in desperate shape. In this extremity, Everyone decides to consult his Good Deeds:

Of whom shall I now counsel take?

I think that I shall never speed

Till that I go to my *Good-Deed*,

But alas, she is so weak,

That she can neither go nor speak;

Yet will I venture on her now.—

My *Good-Deeds*, where be you? (479-85)

Everyone finds her buried in the ground, enfeebled by sin, unable to move. She would go with Everyone if she could; since she can't, her sister *Knowledge* steps in:

Everyone, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,

In thy most need to go by thy side. (522-23)

Where did she come from? Why is she sister to *Good Deeds*?

Part of the answer is that *Knowledge* is Everyone's self-consciousness, which we both acquire and express by our actions.

With the help of *Knowledge*, Everyone unearths *Good Deeds*. (Everyone reminds me of the slave with the one pathetic talent in the parable.) The three proceed to *Confession*, and Everyone's penance (or shrift) restores *Good Deeds* to health and vitality by cleansing Everyone's sin; she says:

I thank God, now I can walk and go;
And am delivered of my sickness and woe.
Therefore with *Everyone* I will go, and not spare;
His good works I will help him to declare. (618-21)

When Everyone's Contrition is complete, the three companions are joined by *Discretion*, *Strength*, *Five-Wits* [i.e., senses], and *Beauty*.

Because these qualities seem intrinsic to Everyone, it may come as a shock to us when, after professions of undying loyalty, they behave just the way Fellowship, Kindred, and worldly Goods had done:

They all profess their steadfast allegiance:

I, *Strength*, will by you stand in distress,
Though thou would in battle fight on the ground.

. . . we will not from you go,
Till you have gone this voyage long.

(683-84, 780-81)

But once Everyone has received the sacraments of
Communion and Extreme Unction, [2
“The holy sacrament and ointment together” (708),
these “faithful” companions abandon Everyone:

Everyone. Alas, whereto may I trust?

Beauty goeth fast away hie;
She promised with me to live and die.

Strength. *Everyone*, I will thee also forsake and deny;

Thy game liketh me not at all. . . .
Thou art but a fool to complain;
You spend your speech and waste your brain.

Go thrust thee into the ground. (804-08, 822-24)

In the end, even Knowledge deserts Everyone;

only *Good Deeds* remains:

All earthly things is but vanity:

Beauty, Strength, and Discretion, do man forsake,

[They turn out to be as extrinsic as the more obviously worldly vanities that had earlier deserted Everyone.]

Foolish friends and kinsmen, that fair spake,

All fleeth save *Good-Deeds*, and that am I. (869-72)

And with these words, *that am I, Good-Deeds* becomes identical to Everyone; they are inseparably united on their final journey toward the God with whom they are to become inseparably united, as the Angel proclaims:

Come, excellent elect spouse to Jesu:

Hereabout thou shalt go

Because of thy singular virtue:

Now the soul is taken the body from;

Thy reckoning is crystal-clear. (893-97)

NOTES

1] This question hints at one of the great pseudo-controversies that divided the Reformers (Martin Luther, John Calvin, and their followers) from traditional, Roman Catholics in their understanding of salvation. According to the Reformed ideology, good works are of *absolutely no value* so far as the question of salvation is concerned; the only thing that matters is the faith one has according to God's mysterious grace. Reformers accused traditional Christians of preaching a false Gospel of 'Salvation by Works.' But that is a grotesque parody of the moral theology of Roman Catholicism, which understands good works to be the *fruit* of a "living and saving faith." And the Reformed position is equally easy to parody as religion of irresponsibility: since we are all inescapably sinful, saved only by washing ourselves in the blood of the lamb, there is no need to strive to become moral human beings: we are all already forgiven—or not. The potential confusion, for the faithful, goes all the way back to Saint Paul: "The Lawe entred, that the offence might abound: but where sinne abounded, grace did much more abound. . . . What shall we say then? shall we continue in sinne: that grace may abound? God forbid: how shall wee that are dead to sinne, liue any longer therein?" (Romans 5:20, 6:1-2).

2] The administration of Holy Communion (by which the communicant receives Christ's Body and Blood) immediately precedes the final sacrament of Anointing, which prepares the communicant for death. What *Five-Wits* and *Knowledge* say, respectively, about administering the sacraments reflects the doctrines and practices of the medieval church. According to *Five-Wits*,

Priesthood exceedeth all other thing:
To us Holy Scripture they do teach,
And converteth man from sin heaven to reach;
God hath to them more power given,
Than to any angel that is in heaven;
With five words* he may consecrate
God's body in flesh and blood to make,
And handleth his maker between his hands. (731-38)

* *dicens hoc est corpus meum*: 'saying this is my body.'

These lines might well have been written by a priest; they express the dignity and power of priesthood in strictly orthodox and honorific terms. But then something funny happens; Knowledge says "If priests be good" (749). That is a *huge* "If." The traditional position of the Catholic church was—and is—that a sacrament administered by a duly ordained priest is valid, even if the priest is vicious. Remember the Pardoner: if he was truly licensed (as he probably was not) his absolution from sin was efficacious, despite his own corruption—provided that the sinner had truly confessed and repented.

One of the many issues that were to divide Protestants and Catholics was precisely the validity of the sacraments, about which there were many opinions. Protestants generally denied that priesthood was sacramental, and some of the most radical sects believed that no minister was necessary for administering communion, whose validity and efficacy depended solely on the good faith of the recipient.

So, although *Everyman* apparently expresses orthodox ideas of salvation and favors the traditional church establishment—in its ideal form, it is at the same time quite critical of the actual church:

[W]hen Jesu hanged on the cross with great smart
There he gave out of his blessed heart
The same sacrament in great torment:
He sold them not to us, that Lord Omnipotent.
Therefore Saint Peter the apostle doth say
That Jesu's curse hath all they
Which God their Saviour do buy or sell,
Or they for any money do take or tell.
Sinful priests giveth the sinners example bad. (750-58)

This passage does not question the validity of the Priest's Office (the *sacramentum*), but it does decry the corruption of the office.