

# Medieval drama

Religion



Consistent with the categorical definition of a medieval morality play, *Mankind* focuses on the externalized dramatization of a psychological and spiritual conflict faced by a universal main character. The main character, *Mankind*, has his inherent human weaknesses targeted and exploited by allegorical evil forces to convey a few defining themes. Although the play includes an abundance of humorous actions and lines, many of which are performed by the immensely humorous personified evils, *Mankind* was not written merely for entertainment value or farce.

On the contrary, *Mankind* relies heavily on allegorical characters to illustrate serious themes concerning the temptation of sensual living, God's salvation of man, and humanity's free will to choose. The beginning of the play introduces Mercy, who immediately discusses God's sacrifice of his own son in order to attain redemption for all of mankind (ll. 7-16). His soliloquy regarding the redemption of man successfully highlights the sinfulness of *Mankind*'s transgressions later in the play, a fact which further emphasizes a reoccurring and important lesson in regards to making pious choices.

Encompassed within the motif of making pious choices, one of the reoccurring themes in *Mankind* is a admonition against the temptations of sensual living. Sensual living is generally seen as a newer or more modern trend, and as such is considered a dissention from the traditional values upon which medieval society is based. One method in *Mankind* of portraying modern evils as bad is the character "New Guise," one of a trio of antagonists who represent the personification of evil traits.

The attachment of the term "New Guise" to such a blatantly negative character connotatively implies that anything not based on "tried and true" proverbs and practices is consequently bad and should be avoided. The importance of proverbial reliance in medieval life is prominent in most morality plays, and *Mankind* is no exception. When the evil character Mischeff translates a Latin proverb (ll. 57-63), for example, his mocking perversion of Biblical exegesis stands in stark contrast to Mercy's respectful and pedantic use of proverbs (ll. 228, 292, 754-55) in several of his sermons.

The dichotomy between the way in which good and evil characters in *Mankind* perceive traditional values is critical in establishing a more direct theme regarding sensual living. The first noteworthy action in the play which supports this theme and conveys it to the audience comes in the form of an extended metaphor. *Mankind's* jacket (ll. 671-676) is not considered fashionable to his diabolic companions, who decide to tailor it into a shorter, more modern piece of attire. His jacket is quickly reduced to an unreasonably short reflection of its original state, much too small to protect him from the elements.

*Mankind's* "new guise" is portrayed as being unnecessary and ridiculous in many respects (ll. 718-721). It is implied that a jacket should be a piece of outerwear worn in comfort and used for protection, not merely adorned for appearances. In this way, the choice to live a sensual life preoccupied with popular modern trends is analogous to the dissension of the human will from good to evil, and as such is portrayed in an overtly negative manner.

Abhorrence for hedonistic lifestyles resonates continually within the play.

When Mercy learns of Mankind's sinfulness, his response (ll. 760-61) is that sensual living should be blamed for the impious human choices being made at the time. Likewise, he declares that such a manner of living is a detestable pleasure (l. 766) and quotes Ecclesiastes in Latin (l. 767) to further emphasize his point. Further thematic analysis of Mankind reveals another prominent lesson involving redemption. Avoiding sinful behavior is a critical aspect of a Christian life, but equally important is God's ability to forgive human errors.

Although situations earlier in the play lead up to Mankind's redemption, the importance of salvation is most strongly emphasized after the protagonist is in despair believing he cannot be saved for his actions. Mankind's choices throughout the play establish a trend of disregard for God and a number of impious acts that emphasize human weakness. Early in the play, Mercy instructs Mankind (ll. 280-92) to be a servant of the Lord and to avoid anything which may be considered unkind to God.

He reiterates several times how critical it is for Mankind to be a servant to God if he wants to overcome Mischeff and his evil companion, and encourages Mankind (l. 308) to never be idle. All of the principles Mercy encourages are contrasted by Mankind's decisions later in the play, a characteristic of Mankind that greatly emphasizes God's mercy and the importance of repentance to gain salvation. For example, Mankind believes he is beyond mercy of any kind (ll. 820-23) after his impious and sinful actions.

In an attempt to pacify Mankind's despair, Mercy once again relies on a proverb (I. 34) that essentially proclaims that God will save as many as he can. Mankind then distinguishes himself as worthy of God's mercy (II. 837-38) when he overcomes his despair and begs for forgiveness. Mankind's repentance is so blatant it may be considered hyperbole, but effectively conveys the idea that God's forgiveness and mercy will be extended to even the most immoral individuals as long as they repent. Furthermore, the dialogue between Mankind and Mercy has a very serious tone that sharply contrasts the constant humor evident throughout the rest of the play.

The shift from an emphasis on comedy to drama increases the thematic impact of God's mercy towards Mankind considerably, making it more apparent and more emotional from the audience's perspective. Likewise, the fact that Mercy forewarned Mankind before his unsuccessful attempts to resist temptation creates a greater feeling of dissent when Mankind engages in those actions. Highlighting the error in Mankind's choices further accentuates the vast extent to which God is willing to extend his mercy for man's benefit.

The reversal from hopeless despair to unlimited joy develops and enhances the ideology that salvation is attainable for all of humanity, no matter how wretched and sinful their life has been. Temptation and salvation may be the most prominent themes in the play, but a few other reoccurring elements in Mankind are still very pertinent in understanding its purpose. One such element, the concept of man's inherent free will, stands at the forefront. In the play, Mercy warns Mankind about the evil forces and their tempting

offers (ll. 162-185), yet he does not directly attempt to impede the diabolical characters' efforts.

His lack of action may seem somewhat cowardly considering the disrespectful and insolent manner in which Mischeff and his companions confronted Mercy (ll. 45-161) in the beginning of the play. Yet, by foregoing any aid other than a verbal warning to Mankind, Mercy establishes a critical implication for all human individuals. In the initial attempts by New-Guise to lead Mankind into a life of sin, Mankind responds (l. 329) that it is his responsibility to avoid idleness.

Following an episode of mocking by the trio of antagonists, Mankind reiterates his incentive to work (l. 50) by stating that labor is how he makes his living. Although labor is emphasized as one important aspect of a virtuous life, the underlying concept is that only Mankind has the ability to choose what he thinks is right or wrong, and must face the consequences of his actions. Mercy declares his regret for how weak, or flexible, Mankind seems to be (l. 741), essentially underscoring the importance of resisting temptation.

Then, following Mankind's repentance, Mercy clearly states to Mankind that it was his responsibility to freely confront Titivillus (ll. 82-884) and the others. The idea of the human free will to choose is reiterated throughout Mercy's parting words with Mankind, but eventually he states it explicitly by declaring that only Mankind can save or destroy his soul (l. 893-94) and that God will not deny any man the freedom to choose. Free will plays a consistent role in the choices that Mankind faces throughout the play, and

the fact that God will never revoke the human right to choice is a critical element of the thematic intent of Mankind.

Through the use of allegorical characters and their dialogue, Mankind successfully conveys its thematic intent to a medieval audience. By personifying humanity through Mankind, the choices he must confront represent the modern temptations that the average individual would face in a medieval setting. Furthermore, by examining the play in its entirety a pattern develops with a reoccurring emphasis on the avoidance of a hedonistic lifestyle, the importance of God's salvation and man's free will to choose his own fate.