

Spirituality and the trappings of the material world in medieval morality plays

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



' Some religious texts seem to find it relatively easy to disengage from the material world. Many more, however, derive their dynamism from the difficulty of doing so.'

' Behold not the earth, but lift your eye up', [30] Mercy sermonizes in the opening of *Mankind*, one play amongst a corpus of Medieval morality plays dealing with spiritual crises in figures representative of mankind. Mercy's line expresses succinctly the morality play's didactic purpose; encouraging an audience to see and think beyond the distractions of the material world and, in Richard Proudfoot's words, ' persist in virtue till death', that is, be loyal to that which is immaterial such as God and heaven. If we consider the ' material world' to be all that is immediately tangible, including the body, it becomes easy to see how difficult any religious text could entirely escape engaging with this and focus solely on the immaterial concepts of virtue, hell, heaven and God. However, the Morality plays acknowledge this impossibility and, I would argue, dramatize the way in which the material world can act as a barrier to mankind's salvation. The problem of disengagement thus becomes one not of the text's but of the protagonist's. The dynamism of these plays derives exactly from this struggle of the protagonist, as the texts demonstrate how easy and pleasing total absorption in the material world can be, blinding mankind to the more important spiritual world. In addition to this, if we are to take ' dynamism' in the sense of movement, it is generally the allegorical enemies of mankind (such as ' mischief' in *Mankind* or ' goods' in *Everyman*) who are directed to be the most physically dynamic, and thus most exciting, on stage, serving the morality play's purpose in their demonstration of how attractive sin can

be. Indeed, if these texts were to simply mediate on heaven, hell, God, and spirituality, the play would be closer to a sermon, and indeed the moral figures in these plays are often described as sermonising in their speech. What makes the morality play both more dynamic and didactically effective than this is its active engagement with the various trappings of the material world in order to realise through this the superior importance of God and Christian faith.

'Material world' is a broad and expansive term with the plasticity to be applied to literally anything of matter on the planet. However, placed in a semi-antithesis to the immaterial realm of heaven and its surrounding concepts, Everyman and Mankind are interested in depicting the aspects of the material world that are negative and hindering. One of the most obvious material concerns in Everyman in particular, though present in both, is wealth and worldly possessions as diversions from, or even replacements for, God. Everyman brings this to the forefront of the play where the actor playing God expresses: "In worldly riches is all their mind;/They fear not my righteousness, the sharp rod'. [27-8] Here, the syntactical arrangement here of 'worldly riches' on one line and God's 'righteousness' separated onto another causes pause in speech, expressing both the incompatibility of worldliness and holiness as well as the distance material wealth creates between God and mankind. G. A Lester suggests in his introduction to the play that 'Everyman's dissolute lie is reflected in the people and the possessions he has held dear and to whom he first turns in necessity', pointing out the need, established from the very outset, for Everyman to

abandon his love of material wealth and possession in order to be absolved before death. There follows an interesting structure in the play, where the more Everyman loses, the more tightly he clings to his possessions. Faced with the prospect of death, wealth is both Everyman's first and last port of call. He attempts initially to bribe death, then being also refused by Fellowship, Kindred and Cousin, turns to Goods for accompaniment to the grave, who in reply retorts: ' what, weenest thou that I am thine?'[437] It is clear instantly that Everyman has made a mistake. Instead of accepting his solitary journey, he clings to figures of progressively closer bond to him, from Fellowship to Goods; the latter of which he believes he is the owner of. Goods, however, points out what death earlier has - that all Everyman's prosperity and wealth is merely lent to him by God. The nature of theatre then allows Goods to physically disappear in his following exit, dramatizing through this movement the transitory nature of material wealth where Everyman believed it to be stable. This direction shows a forced disengagement with the material world as the audience sees it gradually disappear around Everyman before he finally comes to understand through his losses that he must face death with only his good deeds beside him.

Mankind engages with material wealth as an exciting commodity which has the power to make things happen, but as in Mankind, turns out to be an insubstantial distraction from God. When Mischief, Newguise and Nowadays fail to bring about the fall of Mankind, they decide to call in Titivillus, who they believe will have more luck. The three figures ask for money from the audience, ' We intend to gather money, if it please your negligence,/For a

man with a head that is of great omnipotence', [460-1] remaining vague about whom they are calling on stage. Whether the audience actually parted with their money or not, the direction ' They take a collection' [466] implies that the actors would pretend as though they did nonetheless. Such a collection, I would argue, has two ramifications. Firstly, it is not totally clear who the audience are funding to appear, and when it is Titivillus who enters, the play draws a clear parallel between money and evil, showing how trusting too much in it is foolish. Secondly, in a much more roundabout way, it is this collection which drives the plot forward to Mankind's abandonment of work and rejection of Mercy, as it is their money that enables Titivillus to succeed in leading Mankind astray. Making the audience engage with their own material wealth and complicit in the direction of the plot demonstrates here how easily deceived one can be by trusting too much in money rather than in God.

Both plays also conceive of corporeality as a cumbersome fact of the material world which acts as another barrier to the end goal of unity with God. Indeed, it is this conflict between the body and spirituality that drives much of the action and dynamism in Mankind in particular as Mankind grapples with the difficulty of living a holy life trapped in an inherently sinful body, whilst Nowadays, Naught, and Newguise exploit the foul aspects of corporeality for comic excitement as a distraction from Mercy's sermonizing on the spiritual and immaterial. Indeed, G. A. Lester affirms the location of dynamism in Mankind in his introduction to the play, suggesting that ' Mankind [...] instructs by example. Mercy preaches, and the wild debauchery

of the comic scenes provides the living text'. The three evil figures are far more immediately accessible to an audience than Mercy; they invoke corporeal processes for humour and in the process appear more human than Mercy who's ' body is full of English Latin!'[124] The play is crafted deliberately so, in another theatrical demonstration of how easy it is to stray from good and allow the material to cloud one's sight of spirituality and god: ' I have eaten a dishful of curds,/And I have shitten your mouth full of turds.'[131-2] In a particularly crude line, Nowadays imagines defecating in Mercy's mouth, an image significant when one considers that the play's discussion of God and the soul has been coming out of Mercy's mouth. This image expresses in a somewhat jarring fashion how easily God and holiness can be forgotten as they are not immediately tangible. This impression is furthered later in the play when Nought invites the audience to join in with a song about defecating: ' He that shitteth with his hole, he that shitteth with his hole',[338] as the audience become swept away in the bawdy comedy of corporeality, which while superficially may seem harmless, inverts the language of Christian ritual: ' Holyke, Holyke'.[343] In the context of the song about defecation, ' holyk' is likely supposed to sound like ' hole lick', yet depending on the way the actor voiced it, is also a distortion of ' holy'. We see then that the play engages with this corporeal humour but condemns it through such language distortions, presenting the audience's engagement with it as a disengagement from God and holiness.

Because Newguise, Nowadays and Nought all draw attention to the more vulgar aspects of corporeality, it becomes difficult to separate these from the

corporeality of Mankind, so his body is not just coded as a barrier to spirituality, but also as something inherently bad in itself. Whilst material goods can, with concerted effort, be removed from the morality play, the body is the last material barrier to spirituality. Mankind engages with this difficulty through its protagonist who by falling into the sinful trappings of the body comes to understand that whilst on earth he cannot achieve spirituality because of his sinful body, but must wage war against it and perpetually ask for God's mercy: ' Beware of Titivillus with his net, and of all his envious will,/Of your sinful delectation that grieveth your ghostly substance./Your body is your enemy; let him not have his will'. The playwright here affirms that Mankind's ' delight' earlier in the play has been sinful because it has been disengaged from God, and the impossibility of escaping the sinful body whilst on earth is made clear is acknowledged. Instead, the solution is that the body must continuously be renewed through confession.

The material world is a distraction that cannot be ignored in *Everyman* and *Mankind*, as the tangible is often more easy to place faith in, or be distracted by, whilst the intangible can be forgotten or submerged. In a morality play, as opposed to a written religious text, the material world is necessarily produced on stage as the play is presenting a protagonist representative of mankind. This set up, rather than just being a mediation on earthly sin, is a mode through which the material can be shown physically (through entrances and exits) to give way to the power of God and faith. The dynamism of the two plays does not stem from its difficulty to disengage

with the material world but in the acknowledged conflict between the lure of the material world and the holiness of the spiritual world outside of it.