“Medieval drama teaches the spectators what they already know; it therefore lacks excitement, surprise and alienation.”
Discuss, with reference to the morality plays.

There appears to be some critical debate concerning the number of extant morality plays available to the modern reader. Pamela M. King asserts authoritatively: “only five medieval English morality plays survive”\(^1\), whereas Robert Potter suggests a number close to twenty\(^2\). However, this essay deals with the three examples published in the *New Mermaid*\(^3\) edition edited by G.A. Lester, namely *Mankind*, *Everyman* and *Mundus et Infans*. As such my reading is admittedly confined to a selection of texts canonically recognised and consciously labelled as examples of morality play.

If such a dull opening paragraph has a purpose it is to suggest that the very definition of a text as a morality play is problematic. It suggests that the plays operate as a coherent group and, more significantly, encourages a reading of the texts within the received limitations of their genre. The OED defines morality play as follows:

> “*morality play* now chiefly *hist.*, a kind of drama popular in the 15\(^{th}\) and early 16\(^{th}\) centuries, intended to inculcate a moral or spiritual lesson, in which the chief character are personifications of abstract qualities.”

So, according to the OED, morality play as a genre is tied to a notion of teaching and moralizing through stock allegorical technique. By definition, therefore, its dramatic potential might be understood to be limited. Indeed, the terms of the question and the OED’s definition might appear to be corroborated by the closing speeches, essentially the epilogues, of *Mankind* and *Everyman*:

> “Thynke and remembyr the world ys but a wanite
> As yt ys prowyd daly by diverse transmutacyon.”
> *(Mankind, 908-09)*

> “Ye hearers take it of worth olde and yonge.
> And forsake pryde for he deceyeth you in the ende.”
> *(Everyman, 903-04)*

The tone here is didactic and the speeches’ parting imperatives recall the rhetorical nature of the dismissal of a medieval sermon. The audience leaves the play, much as if they had just left church, with a string of moral instructions ringing in their ears. However, morality plays are not sermons and they, most probably, do not take place inside churches. They appear to have been staged by small touring troops in pretty much any location that could accommodate an audience and a performance space. There seems to be a discrepancy between such a spontaneous, even anarchic, performance dynamic and the stern, predictable dramatic output. Perhaps it is useful to view morality play to be simultaneously inviting and resisting generic pigeon-holing.

---

\(^1\) *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre, Morality Plays*, Pamela M. King, p.240

\(^2\) *The English Morality Play*, Potter, p.9

\(^3\) *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, ed. G.A. Lester, New Mermaid, 2002
The morality play stages a conflict between the forces of good (of salvation) and those of evil (whose aim is the damnation of the human soul). This is a conflict that is at the very core of medieval existence and is therefore relevant to almost any potential medieval audience member. This defining conflict for the human soul is undoubtedly familiar, to the point of being inescapably, to its audience. However, in the performance nature of these texts a dynamic is introduced that means morality plays do far more than merely teaching what is already known. Through the action of the play the audience themselves are implicated in the tension between good and evil whilst, furthermore, language and speaking become key symbols of the plays’ defining conflicts.

The general trajectories of Mankind, Everyman and Mundus et Infans are similar, as King explains: “the action concerns alienation from God and return to God, presented as the temptation, fall and restitution of the protagonist.” Furthermore, the plays demonstrate a shared interest in the sanctity of the human soul and what the individual can do to ensure their salvation. They deal with themes and concerns that were exceedingly relevant to their medieval audiences. Essentially, the plays are about what they are about because dealing with concerns of judgment and the fate of the soul is the most direct route into the medieval consciousness. In taking mankind’s salvation as their subject matter the drama is democratized as every member of their audience, regardless of social station, lived daily with similar preoccupations. For the medieval individual living was inseparable from death; the individual was constantly kept aware of the divine judgment that would await them after death and corporeal life on earth was seen as a mere interlude in the eternal existence of the soul.

The question acknowledges that morality plays do deal with the familiar and suggests that because of this the form lacks the potential to excite or surprise. Contrarily, the morality plays can be seen to construct an opposition between the familiar and the unknown or the surprising and exploit the tension inherent within this for dramatic effect. For example, the sermon-like endings above in their very familiarity can be seen to ironically represent an unsatisfactory conclusion to their plays. In dramas where vice has been represented with such convincingly vitality the impact of the preaching epilogues is somewhat hollowed out as, perhaps, their moral force has already been undermined by the action of the play. The familiar and the known fails to be conclusively persuasive because the audience has been engaged by the excitement of the play. In my reading of the plays Mundus et Infans is less successful than either Mankind or Everyman for the very reason that it does not jar its audience by juxtaposition of the familiar and the alien. At one point, Conscience admits that her speech has merely been a paraphrasing of the Ten Commandments;

“These ben the commandments ten;
Mankind, and ye these commandments keep
Heaven bliss I you behete;
For Christ’s commandments are full sweet
And full necessary to all men.”
(Mundus et Infans, 436-40)

The repetition within these lines of ‘commandments’ and ‘full’ is a symptom of the emphasis this play appears to place on teaching and affirmation of Church doctrine. In addition to the Ten Commandments, the play also recaps the seven deadly sins and includes a brief summary of the life of Jesus Christ. Everyman and Mankind, on the other hand, offer something far more dynamic in their treatment of a similar theme.

---

4 Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre, Morality Plays, Pamela M. King, p.246
One of the key features that appears to distinguish morality play from a more static and obviously didactic medium such as sermon is their level of audience participation. As Robert Potter explains; “members of the audience are not so much asked to suspend their disbelief, as invited by the actors to participate in theatrical analogy.” Morality play is a dynamic genre that, in the case of Mankind, demands active participation from the audience in the action of the play and also in Everyman and Mundus et Infans implicates the audience member in the movement of the central protagonist, the mankind figure.

This process of audience implication, forcing the spectator to take a stake in the action that they are watching, is achieved most obviously and deliberately in Mankind where the three rogues encourage the audience to join them in singing a ‘Christmas Song’.

“NOWADAYS: Make rom, sers, for we haue be longe!
We wyll cum gyf yow a Crystemes songe.

NOUGHT. Now I prey all thee yemandry that ys here
To syng wyth ws wyth a mery chere.”

(Mankind, 332-35)

Within thirty lines of an extended speech by Mercy warning Mankind (and, of course, the audience) of the danger of being corrupting by these very rogues, they burst onto the scene and begin to steal the show. Almost unwittingly the audience finds themselves accompanying the rogues in singing vulgar lyrics, and enjoying it too. The play itself stages a wholesale corruption of the audience just moments after a warning to the contrary, thus the audience are forced to reflect on the limited efficacy of sermonizing and moral instruction. By implicating the audience in sinfulness Mankind craftily negates any charge that it is blasphemous or degenerate because the spectator himself is implicated in the sinful action and, moreover, the play makes the point more forcefully than any sermon could do of the ease of being corrupted into sin through collective activity. The audience become more than spectators, by implication they participate in the action of the play. If morality play does teach a medieval audience what they already know it goes about it in a manner that engages, excites, and, possibly, alienates the audience.

Furthermore, aside from active participation in the drama, morality plays also implicate their audiences in the action through association with the protagonist. In Mankind, Everyman and the Manhood figure in Mundus et Infans the plays all have an allegorical representation of humankind. When Potter states that these figures are not simply “medieval incarnations of Willy Loman” I assume he is suggesting that the protagonists of morality plays are not just symbolic representations of people they actually are the people. Medieval life was dominated by the Church and as such the medieval individual’s primary preoccupation was the same as that of the mankind figures in the plays; the salvation of their souls. When in Mundus et Infans Age asks:

“How should I heaven win?”

(Mundus et Infans, 880)

He voices the preoccupation of surely nearly every audience member. Both Everyman and Mundus et Infans hurtle towards death and judgment at an alarming speed. The audience cannot help but be reminded of the inevitability of their own deaths and the fear that comes with divine judgment. The fears and superstitious of

5 The English Morality Play, Potter, p.32
6 ibid. p.40
the medieval spectator are bound up in the allegorical construct at the centre of the play. It is not only Knowledge, but also the audience who must travel with Everyman through the movement of his play and eventually to his grave. As King points out: “as Everyman himself is both a personification of the entire human race and an individual actor, he represents the fusion of one man and all men, so in him is conflated the judgment each individual will meet at death with the Last Judgment.” Each audience member is invited to associate his own struggle to live a virtuous life with that of Everyman. Everyman in name and action comes to stand for every spectator who watches his play.

In inviting audience participation in action morality plays appear to have more in common with confession rather than sermons. During confession the individual was expected to enter into a dialogue with their priest and in confessing their sins and carry out a suitable penance to be absolved. Morality plays demand a certain dialogue between the play itself and the spectator. Furthermore, both confession and morality plays foreground the significance of language and expression to the well-being of the individual’s soul.

Like a number of other different and diverse medieval texts, the morality play too stresses the pre-eminence of language and of the word. An important opposition is established between ‘good language’ and ‘bad language’. The way a character speaks in addition to their actions becomes a signifier of their moral worth. In Mankind Mercy warns the protagonist of those who aim to tempt his soul away from a virtuous life:

“Be wareof New Gyse, Nowadays, and Nought!
Nyse in ther array, in language thei be large
To perverte yowr condycyons all the menys xall be sowte.”
(Mankind, 294-96)

It is their appearance and their language that are highlighted as the most potent dangers to Mankind’s salvation. Indeed, the seductive power of language and its potential to corrupt is foregrounded in the form of the protagonist’s speeches. When in dialogue with Mercy, Mankind imitates his formulaic verse and his speeches are rendered in quatrains. However, after Mankind has been tempted by the combined efforts of Newguise, Nowadays, Nought, Mischief and Titivillus his language is seen to disintegrate to the vulgar and slangy patterns used by these rogues:

“We xall goo forth together to kepe my faders 3er-day.
A tapster, a tapster! Stow, statt, stow!”
(Mankind, 728-29)

Language is thus prioritized in the plays as a key indicator of one’s moral standing. Critic Bernard Spivack suggests that, “Mankind is an early example of dramatic verse on the part of evil.” The morality plays thus grapple with the problem of staging seductive evil that recurs as an important issue in texts such as Dr Faustus and Paradise Lost. There is the concern that if the language of temptation is enough to win-over the mankind figure to evil then why should it not also be enough to convince the audience. If morality play is to stage the suppression and undermining of the subversive voices of evil then it must first allow them space for expression. So in plays conscious of the corrupting force of language, the staging of compelling, but sinful, voices is necessitated and a fraught, tense dramatic moment is constructed.

---

7 Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre, Morality Plays, Pamela M. King, p.240
8 15th Century English Drama, Davenport, p.37
In *Everyman* this concern with language is manifested in the play’s focus on confession as a crucial action of purgation in ensuring the salvation of the soul. *Everyman* moves towards the act of confession as the play’s pivotal moment and when it occurs it is a viscerally physical act of purgation. *Everyman* is framed by death and the action of the play is pressurized by the knowledge of impending judgment. The pre-eminence of confession is highlighted in Everyman’s conversation with Knowledge:

> “EVERYMAN: Where dwelleth that holy man, Confessyon?
>
> KNOWLEDGE: In the house of saluacyon.”

(*Everyman*, 539-40)

Here the act of confession through its location is linked to salvation. Thus the play posits that salvation is to be achieved, at least in part, by an act of self-expression; the acknowledgment of sin and a construction of a biography of the self’s sinfulness. However, in a potentially alarming, potentially alienating, progression the practice of confession is seen to transcend the word and become an intensely physical experience:

> “In the name of the Holy Trynyte,
> My body sore punysshed shall be:
> Take this, body, for the synne of the flesshe!
> …
> Therefore suffre now strokes of punysshynge
> Now of penaunce I wyll wade the water clere,
> To save me from Purgatory, that sharpe fyre.”

(*Everyman*, 611-180)

Everyman appears to undergo an extreme process of confession and penance, ‘extreme unction’ as it is referred to in the text, and in his final speech mimics the words of Jesus as recorded by Luke: “*in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum* [into your hands I commed my spirit]”. It strikes me that there can be no certainty of interpretation of this speech. It could be a very holy assertion that in the moment of death the virtuous become one with their saviour, however, there also appears to be room for a more subversive blasphemous reading where the audience is aware of Everyman, and the actor playing him, somewhat grotesquely parodying the ultimate Christian symbol, Christ on the cross.

To conclude, morality play harnesses medieval preoccupations and fears to construct a drama that is at once familiar but also startling. The courtyard, great hall, or steeet corner that might stage a morality play is clearly not a church and the content of the plays are far from sermons. The plays are steeped in the doctrine and dogma of the medieval church and although they might purport to teach and to instruct, the medium itself in both performance and language elements becomes part of the conflict between good and evil. In implicating the audience so deeply in the action of the play and the life of the protagonist the plays resist an interpretation that suggests they are unable to surprise or excite.
Bibliography

(Line numberings refer to the text of this edition)

