

Women and the English Morality Play

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MORALITY PLAYS like *Mankind* and *Everyman* seem to have an awkward relation to issues of gender. Their titles alone are quaint if not regrettable, setting out as they do old-fashioned, universalizing designations for humanity that have begun their exits from the language. In fact, when the submission guidelines of journals like this one advise scholars to employ inclusive language, the term flagged as most obviously wrong is “mankind.” Add to this these works’ male protagonists and their sermonic motives, and the two dramatic moralities—plays at the heart of the genre as it unfolded in England—can strike readers as virtually defining a male-centered aesthetic and worldview.

Co-editing these two plays for an edition in the new Arden Early Modern Drama series, however, I have been struck by some things that complicate this picture and suggest that feminist attention to *Mankind* and *Everyman* is far from misguided. First, despite their titles, and however masculine the environments that produced them, *Mankind* (most likely a monastic work) and *Everyman* (a translation of the Dutch chambers-of-rhetoric play, *Elckerlijc*) acknowledge the importance of female labor in society. Second, the performance history of these plays reveals an unexpected reliance on actresses in their lead roles. Third, the critical histories of *Mankind* and *Everyman* are also surprisingly gendered, with a majority of the more important statements on these moralities coming from female scholars. I will suggest in the conclusion to this essay that one of these scholars, Sister Mary Philippa Coogan, needs to be credited with staking out an important position in the study of early English drama. Her 1947 dissertation on *Mankind* offered an anti-evolutionary reading of medieval theater history even as it engaged in a pioneering, cultural-studies treatment of the morality play.

What role do female figures take in *Mankind* and *Everyman*? Of *Mankind*'s seven roles—Mercy, Mankind, Mischief, Titivillus, New-Guise, Nowadays, and Nought—all are male. Conventionally a female abstraction, the sermonizing “Mercy” is male in this play, perhaps because Mercy must (like a priest) hear Mankind’s confession and give him absolution (ll. 815–52).¹ That this change has continued to work against the grain of gendered expectations is suggested by both E. K. Chambers’s and B. J. Whiting’s mistaking of Mercy’s sex: perhaps only skimming the play, both of these scholars thought Mercy was female.² Most likely a product of the Benedictine monastery of St. Edmund at Bury, *Mankind* features a plot that seems to bounce among the world-views and practices of monastery, farmyard, and tavern. When women other than the Virgin Mary and other religious figures are referred to in the text, it is usually in terms of sex. As the “vice squad” begins taunting Mercy for his clerk-like ways, for instance, Nowadays conjures up a marital relationship in a riddle for Mercy: “Also I have a wife, her name is Rachel; / Betwixt her and me was a great battle; / And fain of you I would hear tell / Who was the most master” (ll. 135–38). Nought also invokes Nowadays’s wife in offering Mercy a deal: “Lo, master, lo, here is a pardon belly-met. / It is granted of Pope Pocket. / If ye will put your nose in his wife’s socket, / Ye shall have forty days of pardon” (ll. 143–46).³ If the otherwise odd specification of the name “Rachel” in *Mankind* lends a touch of realism to the sequence, so does Nought’s subsequent mention of spending time with “the common tapster of Bury” (l. 274) help anchor the play in relation to what a variety of evidence suggests is its most likely place of origin—Bury St. Edmunds. In this way, the attractions as well as the realities of heterosexual life outside the monastery walls—including marriage and the tavern—work to define a fantasy of “universal” life produced inside it.

Everyman, an English translation of the Dutch play *Elckerlijc*, is on the whole less “social” a play than *Mankind*: its allegory often floats above and out of contact with the material world. Like *Mankind*, and its Dutch source, however, *Everyman* acknowledges the gendered world of labor outside the main plot when Cousin, declining to accompany Everyman to the grave, offers instead his maid: “She loveth to go to

feasts, there to be nice, / And to dance and abroad to start” (ll. 361–62). This essentially translates the Dutch original. Yet in lines not present in *Elckerlijc*, the English text adds: “I will give her leave to help you in that journey, / If that you and she may agree” (ll. 363–64). It is perhaps significant that this condition (the explicit obtaining of an unmarried woman’s consent) appears as well, later in the century, in Shakespearean dramas like *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*, where fathers make similar declarations about the need to obtain their daughter’s consent. Called “the paradise of women” in proverbs from the sixteenth century forward, England had a reputation—however deserved—for recognizing women’s agency. The *Everyman* translator generated these lines where none had existed in the Dutch; the maid is not just to be sent (as in *Elckerlijc*), but must be asked to come.

Unlike *Mankind*, *Everyman* has female figures in central roles, including Good Deeds and her sister, Knowledge, each of whom is necessary to Everyman’s salvation. Beauty is identified as female, and perhaps Strength is as well. It is necessary to say “perhaps” because Strength is given a feminine pronoun, “she,” at lines 828–29 in one of the texts (Q1) and “he” in another (Q2). The sound of *Elckerlijc*’s pronoun, “Si” (rendered “It” in the TEAMS translation), may have influenced the *Everyman* translator here: the woodcut illustration of “Strength” inside the title-page of Q4 depicts Strength as male.⁴ In addition to Good Deeds, Knowledge, and Beauty, the Angel who appears near the play’s end might be understood to be female as well. On the other hand, *Everyman* made one important change in the gender of its source text’s figures: whereas *Elckerlijc* represents its figure of confession (“Biechte”) as female, and has its everyman figure kneel before her in confession, *Everyman*—a doctrinally conservative text—seems too nervous about the priestly role of Confession, and changes the Dutch play’s “she” to a “he.” In this, *Everyman* repeats what *Mankind* did when it made Mercy a male figure.

This transposition—replacing a female figure with a male one—was reversed when *Mankind* and *Everyman* were staged in the twentieth century. Beginning in 1901, *Everyman*’s first performances came with an actress in the lead role, a casting choice that solidified into custom

for the first several decades of the play's revival. May Douglas Reynolds took the part first, in 1901, with Edith Wynne Matthison stepping into the role a year later and reviving her performance three separate times from 1908 to 1918. Sybil Thorndike played *Everyman* in 1905, and later in the century Margaret Halstan would perform the role in a 1952 production honoring William Poel, the theatrical entrepreneur who had first staged the play. Productions of various early dramas (including *Hamlet*) had enjoyed success with such cross casting, of course, so the fact that *Everyman* was played initially by a woman should not seem surprising. What is remarkable, however, is the consistency this casting choice assumed over time. *Hamlet* had witnessed various actresses taking its lead role in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of course, but such had not solidified into tradition with Shakespeare's tragedy as it had with *Everyman*.

What was it, then, that made a female performer especially attractive for and effective in *Everyman*'s lead role? Perhaps the fear connected with *Everyman*'s hazard had something to do with it. Blithely going about his life, he is suddenly and surprisingly called to go to his grave. Playgoers of the time may have found themselves especially able to empathize with a female *Everyman*, given the gendered nature of the era's melodrama. We could think of *Everyman* as "The Perils of Humanum Genus," and note that it appeared only a decade or so before *The Perils of Pauline*, the early film serial that crystallized such gendered melodrama for the U.S. Reflecting on these early productions from a later vantage point, Matthison recalled that Poel had been struck by the "musical effect" of a woman's voice against the heavier tones of the Messenger, Death, and God (then billed as "Adonai").⁵ It may also be the case that some of the motivation behind this casting choice involved the opportunity of displaying a woman's legs in tights, as photographs of Matthison in costume from 1903 suggest.⁶

Though produced far less frequently than *Everyman*, *Mankind* has also been cast with a woman in the lead role. In the landmark production of 1985 by the Medieval Players, for instance, Bridget Thornborrow played *Mankind* to wide critical approval. Unlike *Everyman*, *Mankind* is initially given power over the world of vice, and in a sequence notable for its raucous fun uses his shovel to punish the Three Ns (cf. ll. 380–90).

Eventually, however, he becomes just as helpless as Everyman. A particularly gripping episode unfolds when he falls under the sway of the play's predatory devil, Titivillus. In this sequence, Titivillus engages the audience's leering complicity as he whispers into the ear of a sleeping Mankind, effectively seducing him—in a quasi-erotic situation—into a fallen life of sin (ll. 555–60). The dilemma posed by the erotic in the contemporary world would prompt Julie Crosby to adapt *Mankind* as a “postmodern medieval musical” in 2004. Crosby rewrote the title figure as a young woman struggling to make her way through a fallen world of celebrity worship and pop culture.⁷

If actresses have been crucial to productions of the English morality play, so too have female critics played an important part in shaping its modern reception. One of the first things that an outsider to medieval drama notices when consulting its critical bibliography is the number of female scholars at the very top of the field. Such figures include, among others, Sarah Beckwith, Theresa Coletti, Jody Enders, Pamela King, Gail McMurray Gibson, and Claire Sponsler—and this list could obviously be extended. A sociological study of the field interested in this concentration of achievement might turn its attention to the morality play in particular, for, to a surprising degree, female scholars have been responsible for the foundational statements on the English morality play. While limitations of space prohibit an adequate discussion of their contributions, crucial statements on the English morality have been made by (in addition to the preceding critics) Kathleen Ashley, LynnDiane Beene, Anne Brannen, Sarah Carpenter, Dorothy Castle, Kathy Cawsey, Janette Dillon, Sylvia D. Feldman, Merle J. Fifield, Cheryl Frost, Elizabeth Harper, Margaret Jennings, Megan Mateer, Paula Neuss, Ann Eljenholm Nichols, Amanda Price, Milia Riggio, Phoebe Spinrad, Lorraine Stock, Meg Twycross, Jacqueline Vanhoutte, and Suzanne Westfall, to name only these. From the transcription of *Mankind* made during the nineteenth century by Eleanor Marx (daughter of Karl) up to the present day, women have played such a central role in the interpretation of the English morality play that it would be possible to assemble a fairly exhaustive critical library on the genre using only the work of female scholars.

One scholar that deserves special mention in this regard is Sister

Mary Philippa Coogan, whose doctoral dissertation on *Mankind* was published by the Catholic University of America Press in 1947.⁸ Coogan's thesis is an impressive piece of work, one whose originality and insights have not received the credit they deserve. Her contributions to critical history, in fact, have been largely ignored. For instance, the current account of how an "evolutionary" model of dramatic history from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (i.e. the narrative established by E. K. Chambers and others) has given way to an "anti-evolutionary" one is almost invariably told with male protagonists doing the heavy lifting. Yet Coogan departed from Chambers early on. Sensitive to the way in which conventional histories of drama had flattened the morality play into a homogenous whole—such critics as Chambers and Whiting, as we noted, weren't even aware of Mercy's gender in the play—Coogan responded with an anti-evolutionary emphasis on the particularity of *Mankind*. As she put it: "Critics and historians of early English drama have approached the study of the moral plays too exclusively from the point of view of the evolutionary theorist. This attitude of mind has fostered a tendency to explain each play in terms of those that precede and follow it, with the result that the individual pieces have received only cursory notice."⁹ As we will see, what remains important here is not only the early date of Coogan's insight (1947), but the fact that she supported her theoretical conjecture with a detailed contextualization of a particular play.

Indeed Coogan's intent was to approach *Mankind* through what we would call its cultural context, treating the play as the product of a particular place (the Benedictine monastery of St. Edmund at Bury, in East Anglia) and time (Shrovetide). To Coogan, the generalizing procedures of conventional histories of the drama had led critics to miss crucial details in the text:

Mankind is rich in clues to its own interpretation; clues that have, on the whole, been overlooked by critics too much interested in fitting the play into its proper niche in the "pre-Shakespearean" series. Failure to observe that Mercy is a priest, to see the implications of this identification, and to notice its connection with the identification of *Mankind* as a Shrovetide piece, has caused them to overlook

the Lenten theme that is the dominant feature of the play. Lacking this approach to interpretation, they did not see the links between *Mankind* and the tracts, manuals, sermons, and other writings that deal with Lent, with penitential observance in general, and with the sacrament of penance in particular. They missed, therefore, the richly allusive qualities in the speeches of Mercy and Mankind, and the underlying unity through metaphor of passages that might seem on casual reading to be scrappy and disconnected; they failed, in fine, to see how well the homiletic portions of the play fit into the general tradition. This has led them to condemn the preachings of Mercy too hastily, and with a view that is too contemporary, and to misinterpret wholly the scene in which Mankind attempts to plant his corn.¹⁰

If Coogan at times succumbed to an “old historicist” impulse to pin down the particulars of *Mankind*, her thesis was remarkable for its interest in what one could call the institutional setting, as well as the cultural contexts, of *Mankind*’s early performances. Coogan’s personal familiarity with the church seems to have given her special insight into the possible connections between *Mankind* and a setting in the Benedictine monastery at St. Edmunds. Throughout, she was sensitive to the rhythms of the church calendar and the ways in which specific institutions came to generate concrete practices and traditions in response to this calendar. Indeed, her thesis on *Mankind* anticipated the “texts and contexts” approach that is now all but standard in many classrooms and textbook series.

So what is painful to notice is the way in which male scholars, and only male scholars, are routinely cited for calling Chambers’s narrative into question. O. B. Hardison, Jr., for instance, has become the figure to credit for dethroning Chambers. The passages quoted here, from various parts of a 2001 study by Lawrence Clopper, suggest an almost partisan assertion of a magisterial scholar’s legacy:

Hardison exposed the evolutionist thinking of earlier scholars in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*.

In 1965, O. B. Hardison, Jr. was the first to show that E. K. Chambers’s

monumental work *The Medieval Stage* (1903) and the works of other early scholars were culturally conditioned by Darwinian theories of evolution; as a consequence, scholars now deliberately avoid speaking of the evolution of dramatic forms.

Hardison and others have shown us how our desire for origins and our thinking in evolutionary terms have in some respects distorted our understanding of the phenomena we seek to study.

O. B. Hardison, Jr. has provided the classic rebuttal to the evolutionary theory of the drama...¹¹

Clopper is far from alone in seeking to augment the critical lineage this way. It has become common, in and out of medieval studies, to tell the story of the critical past with reference to a small group of men. Raphael Falco, for instance, in 2002, related the same story as did Clopper, adjusting it only to include V. A. Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (1968) in his narrative of extraordinary scholars who made it possible for us to finally leave Chambers behind.¹²

Yet this narrative is far from accurate. As we have seen, Coogan's thesis articulated as early as 1947 a stance opposed to E. K. Chambers's evolutionary model. To repeat a passage we have already read: "Critics and historians of early English drama have approached the study of the moral plays too exclusively from the point of view of the evolutionary theorist." Or consider these words from the first page of her Preface:

General surveys have been made of early English drama which include brief treatments of the moral plays, and a few studies have been devoted to the moral plays alone. However, there is a dearth of close investigations of individual plays. The orientation has been, it would seem, too exclusively toward an evolutionary theory of the drama.¹³

It is difficult to imagine a clearer statement than this. Coogan declares her intent to focus upon a single play by suggesting (here, and more particularly in the passages quoted above) the drawbacks of a traditional model of dramatic history. She calls this model the same thing

that Hardison, Jr. and others have, that is, “evolutionary.” And she therefore has a good claim to being among the first, if not indeed the first, to publish an extensive account (both theoretical and practical) of why medieval drama should be read against the grain of Chambers’s evolutionary narrative.

We might ask ourselves what it means that scholars who have spent much of their lives trying to flesh out the contexts of medieval documents—and who often take no small delight in displaying the labor they’ve committed to the elucidation of these documents—seem far less careful when it comes to documents from the recent past. Why do such scholars continue to assert O. B. Hardison, Jr.’s priority when such is clearly a fiction? Another way of asking this: Why is it more desirable to tell a story of one outstanding man (Hardison) following another (Chambers) than to pay attention to the actual landscape of scholarly work—landscape that is often far less monumental in nature? Perhaps in asking the question this way, we have come upon an answer. For, in the promise of its repetition, the oedipal story of the son upending the father is a comfortable one for men precisely because it excludes female rivals.¹⁴ As we have seen, however, there is a price for the fantasy, and that price is misunderstanding our own story.

As this brief survey has sought to demonstrate, women have figured much more centrally in and in relation to the English morality play than the titles of *Mankind* and *Everyman* might indicate. It may be worth asking, therefore, whether these titles’ assertion of the universality of men has not been misread. That is, if we take these plays’ universalizing gesture as indicative of what English theater was like before, during, and after the age of the morality play, we are very likely to miss an important part of what they tell us about what theater is, and has been: an intensively social form which, no matter what its auspices and assumptions, inevitably includes others. Thus *Mankind* and *Everyman* work, if not always against the direction of their own titles, certainly in ways that include—and have included—the efforts, ambition, and talents of women. The female labor that appears on the margins of *Mankind* and more centrally in *Everyman* was instrumental in the setting up of these plays during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Looked at not as evidence of a masculine theater of the past but as proof that no

theater can ever be so exclusive, these plays—and their theatrical and critical heritage—give us reason to consider the English morality play in a new light.

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∞ END NOTES

1. All references to *Mankind* and *Everyman* in this essay are to the Arden Early Modern Drama edition, *Everyman and Mankind*, ed. Douglas Bruster and Eric Rasmussen (London: Arden, 2009).

2. E. K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1945), p. 61; B. J. Whiting, *Proverbs in the Earlier English Drama* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1938), pp. 73–75.

3. See also Mischief recounting what may be read as a sexual assault upon his jailer's wife at ll. 644–45.

4. For the valuable TEAMS translation, see *Everyman and Its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh, and Ton J. Broos (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007); also available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/davidson.htm>.

5. Robert Speaight, *William Poel and the Elizabethan Revival* (London: Heinemann, 1954), p. 163.

6. See the illustration at p. 9 in Bruster and Rasmussen, ed. *Everyman and Mankind*.

7. Titled *Manykynde: The Musical*, with book by Julie Crosby, music by Nancy Magarill, and lyrics by Nancy Magarill and Julie Crosby, it was directed by Louis Scheeder and ran at the Soho Playhouse from August 15th to August 26th in 2004.

8. Sister Mary Philippa Coogan, *An Interpretation of the Moral Play, Mankind* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP of America, 1947). Coogan was born in 1908, during the period which witnessed the theatrical revival of the morality play. She also wrote her M.A. thesis at the Catholic University of America; it was published in 1938 under the title *The Religious Toleration of Sir Thomas Browne*.

9. Coogan, *Interpretation*, p. III.

10. Coogan, *Interpretation*, p. III.

11. Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago: U Chicago

P, 2001), pp. 1 n. 1; 19; 33; 142 n. 5, with reference to O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965). Hardison does not mention Coogan's work.

12. Raphael Falco, "Medieval and Reformation Roots," in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 239–56; pp. 240–41.

13. Coogan, *Interpretation*, p. vii.

14. On the Oedipal structures of critical representation in medieval studies, see Elizabeth Scala, "The Gender of Historicism," in *The Post-Historical Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 191–214; Elizabeth Scala, "Historicists and Their Discontents: Reading Psychoanalytically in Medieval Studies," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44 (Spring, 2002): 108–31.