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Everyman's Unspoken Confession

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Dans *Everyman*, la représentation des sacrements et, en particulier, du sacrement de pénitence, invite à une réflexion sur les problèmes et les spécificités de l'allégorie dramatique et sur la façon dont la pièce les traite. L'étude de la représentation de Confession dans la critique en tant que personnage et sacrement sous-estime son caractère problématique en imposant des schèmes médiévaux conventionnels sur les scènes concernées ou en proposant de résoudre ces problèmes en suggérant des artifices de mise en scène. Bien que les sacrements occupent une position centrale dans la pièce, ils apparaissent de façon décousue et floue. La communion et l'extrême-onction n'apparaissent pas sur la scène. Bien que *Everyman* rencontre un personnage dénommé Confession, les étapes de sa pénitence n'apparaissent pas dans l'ordre prescrit par les traités religieux. De plus, *Everyman* ne fait pas une complète confession publique de ses péchés sur scène. La représentation pour le moins étrange des sacrements dans la pièce trouve en partie une explication dans le contexte culturel. Alors que les sacrements de pénitence et de communion étaient soumis à la critique des Lollards et autres mouvements dissidents, il est plausible que le dramaturge ait rechigné à les désacraliser en les représentant sur la scène. Au lieu de cela, il évoque les sacrements en présentant leurs effets sur le protagoniste. Il est probable que ce choix reflète l'accent mis par la *devotio moderna* sur les pratiques spirituelles intérieures plutôt qu'extérieures.

At mid-point in the morality play, *Everyman*, the characters representing the protagonist's social and material world have all abandoned him, and he has apparently exhausted all possibility of external comfort. *Everyman* expresses his solitude in two rhetorical questions that sound very much like laments: "O, to whom shall I make my moan [...]?" (463); "Of whom shall I now counsel take?" (479).¹ The soliloquy in which he poses these questions represents the beginning of *Everyman's* movement inward. From this point on, until the Angel appears in the closing moments of the play, all of the actors onstage represent some aspect of the central persona. There is one possible exception, however. While Good Deeds, Knowledge, Strength, Beauty, Discretion and Five Wits are all qualities pertaining to *Everyman*, the status of Confession is less clear. In this play that posits the sacraments, and specifically confession, communion and extreme unction, as essential aids in *Everyman's* expiatory pilgrimage, the character of Confession has generally been seen as an external helper, even a priest. Nevertheless, this allegorical figure and the scene in which he or she appears raise a number of questions about the play's representation of the sacraments, and more generally about allegory. Why, for example, does an

¹ All quotations from the play are from the edition selected for the Agrégation in 2009: *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. A. C. Cawley (1956; London: J.M. Dent, 1993). Line references to the play will be given between parentheses in the text.

actor play the part of Confession and not communion or extreme unction? Why does Everyman apparently move offstage for communion and extreme unction? Why, in contrast to other medieval sinners represented in theatre and in narrative, does Everyman not openly disclose his past transgressions? The representation of the sacraments in the play, and in particular of confession, invites a consideration of some of the problems and peculiarities of allegorical drama and of the ways in which the play addresses them.

Critical considerations of *Everyman's* treatment of the sacraments have tended to downplay its peculiarity by imposing conventional medieval schemata on the relevant scenes or by resolving problems through suggestions for performance. In this way, interpretations tend to narrow down the multiple possibilities that the allegorical mode opens up, as we can see by examining commentaries on the staging for the house of salvation and on the casting of the character Confession. In Cawley's edition of *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, a note to the line in which Knowledge says that "that holy man, Confession" (539) can be found "In the house of salvation" (540) states quite bluntly, "i.e. in the church."² In their 1980 edition of the play, Geoffrey Cooper and Christopher Wortham follow Cawley's lead in their note to line 540: "This phrase suggests the Church both as the institution empowered to dispense the sacraments and as an actual building representing the institution."³

David Bevington elaborates: "Staging appears to require some high place from which God and an angel speak and a *sedes* representing the "house of salvation" or the Church. The figure called Confession who dwells here is probably also the figure called Priesthood from whom Everyman receives extreme unction (l. 749)."⁴ These are, of course, quite reasonable and convincing interpretations, but they bring to bear a degree of precision that is absent from the text.

The substantive "confession," like the verb "to confess," is polysemic and even reversible. It could designate the sinner's statement, the penitential process he undergoes, or the sacrament he obtains. It suggests both the act of confessing and that of hearing confession. Cooper and Wortham rightly object that "the allegorical mode, which always keeps a little distance from everyday reality, does not encourage a highly specific reading in this instance: the allegory keeps the idea of confession a little

² Cawley, p. 214.

³ *The Summoning of Everyman*, eds. Geoffrey Cooper and Christopher Wortham (Nedlands, W.A.: University of Western Australia Press, 1980), p. 34.

⁴ David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 939.

aloof from human administration.”⁵ Jean-Marie Maguin also stresses the allegorical nature of Confession, linking the playwright’s choice to the controversy about the efficacy of the sacraments when they are administered by corrupt priests: “*Everyman* a contourné cet obstacle [...] en confiant le sacrement de pénitence non à un prêtre mais à un personnage au-dessus de tout soupçon puisqu’il s’agit de l’allégorie de la confession.”⁶ Indeed, the play’s dialogue includes expressions that should discourage a too easy conflation of Confession with priesthood. *Everyman* addresses Confession as a “glorious fountain” (545) and as “Shrift, mother of salvation” (552).⁷ Though this discrepancy may be the result of contamination by the Dutch *Elckerlijc*, where Biechte (Confession) is consistently addressed as feminine, it suggests that the English playwright did not necessarily identify the character as a priest. Thus Douglas Morse’s casting of Confession as a woman in his 2007 film version of *Everyman* is justifiable, and his choice of a gazebo to represent the house of salvation is not shocking. On the contrary, through these choices Morse respects the openness of the allegory, as well as the play’s refusal of realism.

Another way in which interpretations have tried to eliminate the ambiguity of *Everyman*’s confession is in viewing it in the light of the very precise schemata derived from medieval catechisms and didactic treatises. In these manuals the stages that sinners have to undergo to complete the sacrament of penance usually follow the tripartite schema established in the *Lay Folks’ Catechism*. This seminal text spells out the three conditions of penance very succinctly: first comes contrition, “sorrow of our heart that we have synned,” then confession, “open shrift of our mouth how we haf synned,” and finally satisfaction, “rightwise amendes making for that we haf synned.”⁸ More lengthy treatises like the one Chaucer translated and adapted for the *Parson’s Tale* generally analyze these three categories in the same order but in much more specific detail. In the play, by contrast, the process *Everyman* goes through is strangely out of focus, dispersed, and

⁵ Cooper and Wortham, p. xxvi.

⁶ Jean-Marie Maguin, *Everyman, ou la question de l’au-delà au moyen âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), p. 99.

⁷ In his Middle English edition of the play, Cawley reasons that this change of sex “is more apparent than real if the masculine is taken as a reference to the man who acted the part of the priest-confessor, and if the phrase *moder of saluacyon* is regarded as figurative description of sacramental confession, just as are *clensynge ryuere* 536 and *glorious fountayne* 545”; *Everyman*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961).

⁸ *The lay folks’ catechism, or The English and Latin versions of Archbishop Thoresby’s instruction for the people*, eds. Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth, E.E.T.S. o.s. 118 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1901), p. 66.

non-systematic. Still, some of the scholarly interpretations of Everyman's words and actions in the confession scene try to fit them into pre-established forms. Surprisingly, these discussions tend to confuse the issue rather than clarify it. Jean-Marie Maguin speaks of three aspects of penance, but the list is not the same as that found in the *Lay Folks' Catechism*. He identifies two stages that concern the penitent, contrition and satisfaction, and a third, absolution, dispensed by the priest.⁹ Christine Richardson and Jackie Johnston claim that the play dwells on "the four stages of penance prescribed by the Church [...]: Confession, Contrition, Absolution, and Satisfaction."¹⁰ Leo Carruthers gives one of the more detailed accounts of what he describes as the "unfolding of the sacrament in the play."¹¹ He adds a fourth category, restitution, to the conventional medieval list of three,¹² matching specific lines from the play to each stage the protagonist goes through. Though it is true that certain lines from the play do correspond to moments in the penitential process, a few observations are in order.

First, Carruthers's line references show that the stages of penance do not progress in sequential fashion. For example, although in the manuals, Contrition is always the first stage of penance, Everyman does not put on "the garment of contrition" until line 643,¹³ in other words, quite late in the process. Moreover, he does not make restitution until much later in the play, when he announces his testament in preparation for the last rites.¹⁴ Thus, different aspects of penance are mixed and diffused rather than being sequential and grouped. Secondly, in the speech made by the character Confession, the accomplishment of the sacrament seems to be deferred to an indefinable future moment:

For your time draweth fast; and ye will saved be,
Ask God mercy, and He will grant truly.
When with the scourge of penance man doth him bind,
The oil of forgiveness then shall he find. (569- 572)

Confession's use of modals rather than simple verb forms projects Everyman's absolution into an uncertain future. Moreover, the phrase, "and ye will saved be," can be taken as a promise or as a conditional, depending

⁹ Maguin, p. 99.

¹⁰ Christine Richardson and Jackie Johnston, *Medieval Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 104.

¹¹ Leo Carruthers, *Reading Everyman* (Paris: Atlante, 2008), p. 121.

¹² These three – contrition, confession, and satisfaction – found in the *Lay Folks' Catechism*, are described above.

¹³ See Carruthers, p. 122. Knowledge calls it "a garment of sorrow" (643) as well as "Contrition" (645).

¹⁴ Carruthers, p. 122.

on the way in which it is spoken or punctuated. The choice is arbitrary, since the printed text on which our edition is based has no punctuation for these lines. If a long pause or a full stop follows the phrase, it offers Everyman a personal reassurance: “and ye WILL saved be.” This is how Carruthers apparently interprets the line, when he admits: “Although the text does not provide the precise words of absolution, they are implied in Shrift’s entire speech, especially in ... [lines] 569-70.”¹⁵ However, if a comma ends line 569, as in Cawley’s edition, the phrase simply gives the general conditions for salvation: “And ye will SAVED be, / Ask God mercy” Cawley’s choice is clear, since he glosses the word “and” as “if,”¹⁶ a choice which seems perfectly consonant with Catholic doctrine, since man cannot ever presume to be saved. In the subsequent lines, “When with the scourge of penance man doth him bind, / The oil of forgiveness then shall he find” (571-572), the shift from the ambiguous “ye” to the generic “man” further depersonalizes Confession’s interaction with Everyman.

Finally, the confessional manuals can be used not to demonstrate the completeness of Everyman’s act of penance, but on the contrary to question its validity. All the penitential manuals elaborate on the imperative of making a full and open verbal confession, and they warn sinners not to try to mask their faults with euphemism or indirection.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Everyman has very little to say about the many sins he has committed. During his prayer he acknowledges being “a sinner most abominable” (595), and while he is making satisfaction by scourging himself, he declares, “Take this body for the sin of the flesh” (613), but these two rather general admissions do not by any means meet the requirements for confession. Morse’s film of *Everyman* tries to make up for this lack of specificity through the technique of flashback. As Everyman scourges himself, his earlier transgressions with an oriental dancer appear on the screen, adding a narrative dimension that is notably absent from the play. Although they make entertaining film, the flashbacks during this scene could be taken as a hindrance to Everyman’s spiritual progress, implying a rather modern psychosexual fixation that contradicts the purgative ritual of confession.

In choosing not to represent a verbal confession on stage, the playwright omits what could be a highly dramatic moment in the play. This omission could be explained by the necessity for this “moral play” to maintain a

¹⁵ Carruthers, p. 122.

¹⁶ Cawley, p. 215.

¹⁷ For example Chaucer’s “Parson’s Tale” insists that: “Al moot be seyde, and no thing excused ne hyd ne forwrapped [...]” (*Canterbury Tales*, X, 319).

balance between generality and specificity. The allegory has to be particular enough to sustain a narrative thread but abstract enough to convey general theological concepts and to include all spectators by mirroring the experience of every member of the audience. By contrast, the confessional mode is potentially a highly individualizing discourse, as we can see in Chaucer's use of the confessional genre to create two of his most memorable characters, the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner.¹⁸ These characters become so engaging that readers tend to ignore their kinship with vice figures and begin to sympathize with them as individuals. At the other extreme, the English morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, chooses to stage a much more generic confession that is little more than a list of the seven deadly sins.¹⁹ The discourse of *Humanum Genus* in that scene is so standardized that it becomes lifeless. While the scene fulfils didactic aims, it falls short as theatre.

Perhaps the problem of the missing confession disappears if we interpret *Everyman's* meeting with Confession as an allegorical representation of a full verbal declaration of wrongdoings. In other words, perhaps rather than embodying the dispenser of the sacrament of penance, Confession represents *Everyman's* act of partaking in the sacrament, just as Discretion, Beauty, and the others represent his qualities and attributes. If we view the allegory in this way, the dramatic development is consistent with *Everyman's* turning inward for help, rather than having recourse to others. Moreover, this inward movement is consistent with changes in devotional practices, especially the *devotio moderna* that has been linked to the play. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, spiritual reformers questioned the validity of the sacrament of penance along with the need for priestly intercession in confession. The Dutch *Elckerlijc* omits penance from the list of sacraments, though the English *Everyman* restores it.²⁰ The peculiarities of *Everyman's* representation of penance could be explained by the controversial status of the sacrament, by the debate over whether the Church needed to dispense it. Though the English play moves a step closer to orthodoxy in making Confession a "holy man," and by adding penance to the list of sacraments, it retains the allegorical openness of its Dutch source.

¹⁸ My consideration of confession in *Everyman* has benefited from exchanges with Indira Mathur concerning her work on the "Pardoner"'s and "Wife of Bath"'s Prologues in her doctoral thesis under my direction.

¹⁹ The confession is made in lines 1468-1493 of the play; see Bevington, p. 840.

²⁰ *The mirror of Everyman's salvation : a prose translation of the original Everyman* ed. and trans. John Conley et al (Amsterdam : Rodopi, 1985), pp. 48-49. Compare with *Everyman*, lines 722-725. See Cooper and Wortham's discussion, p. xxv.

Both the Dutch and the English plays avoid one of the major risks inherent in staging the sacraments. After all, they are performative rituals like those evoked in Austin's discussion of performative language.²¹ Like the words of the marriage ceremony, the priest's "Ego te absolvo" changes the believer's status. Nevertheless, the priest who enacts sacramental rituals employs the same tools as the actor. He uses words, gestures, and sacramental objects that could be compared to theatrical props. If *Everyman* staged the sacraments, how could the audience be expected to distinguish the actor's performance from the priest's? The risk inherent in representing confession, communion and extreme unction onstage would be of demystifying them, of trivializing them, of suggesting that they are only symbolic gestures and not sacramental rites.

This process of demystification probably began with the changes in the education of the laity that resulted from the Fourth Lateran Council's decision to make penance a yearly obligation. This opened the way to the development of instruction in the vernacular. On the one hand, this new development increased the Church's control over the faithful. On the other hand, it exposed the mysteries of the faith to debate and ultimately helped pave the road toward the Reformation. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries many of the followers of the Lollard movement in England had already rejected auricular confession and denied the necessity of the priest's mediation in obtaining absolution.²² They also refused the idea that the bread and wine of communion actually became God's body and blood.²³ Perhaps *Everyman* respects the sacredness of the sacraments by refusing to represent them.

As I hope I have shown, the challenge of representing the sacraments is fraught with potential pitfalls. *Everyman* moves them offstage, out of sight. Jean-Marie Maguin proposes that they could be represented through mime. He suggests *Everyman* could appear to receive the last sacraments in the background during the digression on priesthood.²⁴ If we follow the same argument, *Everyman*'s confession could also be mimed. After all, at the time the play was written, before the adoption of the confessional box, confessions were supposed to take place in view of other parishioners but out of range of their hearing. Nevertheless, nothing in the text suggests this

²¹ See J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

²² See Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), p. 57.

²³ For a discussion of Wyclif's rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation, see Stephen Lahey, "Wyclif and Lollardy," in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 334-354.

²⁴ Maguin, p. 45.

particular solution. I would argue instead that rather than staging the rituals of penance, communion and extreme unction in any realistic manner, *Everyman* represents their effects on the protagonist.²⁵

As *Everyman* recoils from the material world, the play moves from a focus on the physical to an emphasis on the spiritual. Recognizable entities like Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods, who can be matched with their counterparts in the real world, yield the stage to characters that represent the individual's inner qualities. The dramatic action thus moves from a somewhat realistic mode to a more ideal or spiritual one. In a development that strains the audience's tendency to relate allegory to real situations, Beauty, Strength, Discretion and Five Wits join Knowledge and Good Deeds as *Everyman's* companions on the way to the grave. As *Everyman's* soul recovers from its fallen condition, the protagonist's healthier, more whole and integrated state is signaled, surprisingly, by the multiplication of his being into its various parts. In this way, the audience can visualize the qualities *Everyman* needs to achieve salvation.

In examining the representation of the sacraments I have tried to show how *Everyman* negotiates the problems and pitfalls of staging sacred rituals. The play begins with the *coup de théâtre* of God's message to *Everyman* through the agency of death. The first desertions dramatize the ineffectiveness of worldly comforts in the face of death's finality. *Everyman* then presents the sacraments as the remedy for the protagonist's predicament. These crucial rituals occupy a central position, but they are incomplete and only vaguely defined. Contrary to what we might imagine, this lack of definition probably made the play more effective as theatre. After all, theatre demands audience participation and identification. In the Middle Ages, its role was to promote the values of the Christian community. At the time *Everyman* was written, the tenets of faith concerning the sacraments were contested or in a process of mutation. Hence *Everyman* balances didacticism with more subtle suggestiveness, allowing spectators to fill the abstract forms of allegorical theatre with the substance of their own experience.

²⁵ I look at these effects from another angle in my article "The Redemption of Language in *Everyman*," published in this volume.