

From Ritual to Moral Elevation: The Essence of Medieval English Morality Plays

Yao Yao

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University

Yuhangtang Rd. 668, Xihu District, Hangzhou, 310058, China

Email: yaoyao19920211@sina.com

Abstract Medieval English morality plays present a complex and multifaceted moralizing model that intertwines Christian morality with the path to salvation. These plays suggest that inner transformation, achieved through gaining truth, is essential for redemption. This transformation is highlighted through participation in the sacrament of penance and prayer rituals. While the morality of these plays emphasizes the pursuit of transcendental truth, the focus on public rituals reveals a morality that values visibility and ritual. This paper explores the intricate moral model presented in medieval English morality plays, examining how inner transformation and public ritual are combined to create a unique moralizing model. In this process, contradictions in Christian salvation theory and debate between Catholicism and Lollardy on prayer rituals showcased in the plays are analyzed.

Keywords medieval; morality; penance; prayer; salvation

Author Yao Yao is Ph.D. candidate in the school of International Studies at Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310030, China). Her main research areas are medieval English literature and literary cognition.

Introduction

In his work *The English Morality Play — Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition*, Robert Potter notes, “morality plays have frequently been mistaken for naive treatises on virtue. They are in fact the call to a specific religious act [...] It is the acknowledgement, confession, and forgiveness of sin, institutionalized in medieval Christianity as the sacrament of penance” (16). While Potter’s argument is correct, previous interpretations are not necessarily misunderstandings.

As Hardin Craig states, “in consequence of the fall of Adam man is destined to

die in sin unless he be saved by the intervention of divine grace and by repentance. It is the presentation of man in this situation in perfectly general terms that is the essence of the morality play” (67). In the five pre-Tudor medieval English morality plays¹, humans inevitably succumb to temptation by evil characters and demons. All five plays teach sinful people to resist the demon’s temptation, avoid the seven deadly sins, reject the body and world, follow virtues, believe in God’s miracles, repent and pray, and hope for eternal life through God’s grace. In the plays, seven abstract virtues are personified as characters, representing the qualities that people should possess to return to their original state of being like God. However, as Zhao Lin points out, these pure and simple moral qualities could only be achieved by early Christian saints. During the Middle Ages, a formalized confession mechanism and externalized good deeds replaced these difficult-to-achieve moral qualities.² Morality plays prominently depict this situation. These plays not only promote the Christian virtues, but also emphasize the necessity of penance and prayer to gain knowledge of human nature and God. Actually, the morality portrayed in these plays coincides with humanity’s path to salvation as a unity of good deeds, faith, and acceptance of religious rites. It involves both the exposition of virtues and the action of penance, as well as their relationship to transcendental knowledge, illustrating Christian salvation theory. In this process, religious rituals and sacraments are prominently featured.

The Moral Dimension of the Sacrament of Penance

The sacrament of penance is the retained part of each morality play. It plays a vital role, as it illustrates the interplay between grace, sacraments, and knowledge. Julie Paulson, in her analysis of the morality play *Wisdom*, observes that “*Wisdom* presents penance as a performance that is instrumental to the very formation of Christian subjects, for in the same moment that penance reforms the soul to God’s

1 The five pre-Tudor morality plays include: *The Pride of Life* (1300), *The Castle of Perseverance* (1400-25), *Wisdom* (1460-70), *Mankind* (1464), and *Everyman* (1510-19). The dates given for the first four plays are the dates of composition, while the date given for *Everyman* is its first printing date, as no manuscript exists. Some of these dates cannot be accurately determined due to a lack of specific records and firmly established facts. Scholars can only infer the dates based on relevant paleographical, linguistic, and internal textual evidence. See Richard Beadle, Alan J. Fletcher, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 2nd ed, Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2008: xix-xxi.

2 赵林:《中世纪基督教道德的蜕化》,《宗教学研究》,2000年第4期,第70-76页。[Zhao Lin, “The Degeneration of Christian Morality in the Middle Ages,” *Religious Studies*, 4 (2000): 70-76.]

image, the soul learns what a soul is” (“A Theatre” 275). In “Wisdom,” after confessing, the soul declares, “The lyght of grace I fele in me” (“Wisdom” 1073)¹. Penance also embodies the contradictions in Christian salvation theory. In response to the sin of greed, the church promotes the virtue of generosity and includes the specific strategies of restitution and donation as part of penance. While good deeds cannot save humanity, they serve as a guarantee of redemption. This encompasses personal virtues and good deeds as well as adherence to church rituals as parish members. However, the effectiveness of these aspects is a point of contention in Christian salvation theory. Morality plays emphasize the importance of rituals, with “The Summoning of Everyman” being a prime example. This section will focus on penance’s vital function in displaying Christian morality.

As Ryan suggests, the religious doctrine and effective dramatic structure in *Everyman* are consistent in their time sequence, with the former supporting the latter.² The path to salvation for *Everyman* is presented as a dramatic explanation of the contradictions in orthodox Catholic salvation theory, showing the moral requirements for *Everyman*. Like other morality plays, “The Summoning of *Everyman*” integrates the promotion of morality into the depiction of how humans can be saved. However, it sets itself apart by using the process of rendering account as a metaphor for the road to salvation, reflecting changes in the times. With the growth of commerce, the church increasingly emphasized that material wealth inevitably brings sin, and greed for accumulating wealth was foregrounded in literary works. The process of settling accounts is a recognition, defense and healing of greed. According to the rules of repentance, people’s accounts defending their

1 David N. Klausner, ed., *Two Moral Interludes: The Pride of Life and Wisdom*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications of Western Michigan University, 2009. All quotations from “Wisdom” in this article are from this slightly modernized and annotated version. Quotations from “Wisdom” in the following text will be marked with the play name and line number without further annotation.

2 Lawrence V. Ryan, “Doctrine and Dramatic Structure in *Everyman*,” *Speculum*, 32. 4 (1957): 730.

participation in economic activities¹ are integrated into penance sacraments, forming a repentance strategy. Therefore, the morality embodied in “The Summoning of Everyman” includes not only sacraments and grace but also Christian virtues such as generosity and charity, as well as business ethical standards such as justice and honesty. Even requirements for virtues and business ethics are incorporated into sacraments to ensure the acquisition of grace.

“The Summoning of Everyman” explores the sin of greed by revealing the true nature of goods. In the play, goods is personified as a tempter (an evil character), singing cunning and satirical tunes. Goods refuses Everyman’s request to accompany him on his journey, and tells Everyman,

I follow no man in such voyages,
For, if I went with thee,
Thou shouldest fare much the worse for me:
For because on me thou didst set thy mind,
Thy reckoning I have made blotted and blind,
That thine account thou cannot make truly;
And that hast thou for the love of me. (“The Summoning of Everyman” 224-225)²

1 The emergence of intentional theology in the twelfth century, the establishment of the sacraments of confession and penance, and the expansion of the commercial economy all contributed to the development of double-entry bookkeeping. The double-entry bookkeeping was a tool for merchants to defend their participation in economic activities, modeled after the Catholic system of confession and penance. While Aho and others have focused on the function of double-entry bookkeeping as a defense tool for merchants, the specific type of bookkeeping used is not important. In fact, whether the tool is single-entry bookkeeping, double-entry bookkeeping, or paragraph bookkeeping is not important. What matters is that bookkeeping and various records were determined by the dual identity of economic participants as Christians in the late Middle Ages, serving both as an inner confession and as a statement and defense to the outside world. Aho believes that “The advent of communal chronicling, manorial accounting, the family scrapbook, the personal diary, and so forth, were all elements in a vast accounting enterprise that arose near the end of the Middle Ages. Each in their own way is an exhibit in a larger European project of moral improvement, a project both stimulated by confession and reflected in it.” See James A. Aho, *Confession and Bookkeeping—The Religious, Moral and Rhetorical Roots of Modern Accounting*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2005: 29.

2 “The Summoning of Everyman,” Roger Sherman Loomis and Henry W. Wells, eds., *Representative Medieval and Tudor Plays Translated and Modernized*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942. Available at: <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005109569>> (accessed January 18, 2020). All quotations from *Everyman* in this article are from this slightly modernized version. In this version, the play keeps the name “The Summoning of Everyman.” Quotations from it in the following text will be marked with the play name and page number without further annotation.

Goods goes on to say,

That is to thy damnation, without lying,
 For my love is contrary to the love everlasting;
 But if thou had me loved moderately during,
 As to the poor given part of me,
 Then shouldest thou not in this dolour have been,
 Nor in this great sorrow and care. (“The Summoning of Everyman” 225)

These passages illustrate that love for goods is incompatible with love for God and that greed causes harm to others while bringing pain to Everyman himself. Goods also reveals its own cunning nature by saying,

What, thinkest thou that I am thine?
 [...]

 Nay, Everyman, I say no:
 As for a while I was lent thee;
 A season thou hast had me in prosperity;
 My condition is man’s soul to kill;
 If I save one, a thousand I do spill. (“The Summoning of Everyman” 225)

This passage suggests that the sin of greed, brought about by Goods, is inevitable. Overcoming this obstacle is crucial for Everyman to settle accounts with God and reflects the Catholic doctrine of cleansing sin and the morality it advocates.

As Everyman faces the crisis of accounting for his deeds, he is abandoned by Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods. His love for these three things increases in degree, as does his disappointment. He painfully realizes that his love for external things is misplaced. In desperation, Everyman turns to Good Deeds, whom he has neglected in his daily life. Good Deeds is willing to help, but is powerless in the face of sin, as a person’s good deeds have no value when they are in a state of sin¹. Good Deeds advises Everyman to seek the help of Knowledge. Under the guidance of Knowledge, Everyman confesses and repents. He performs penance under the guidance of a priest, enduring whipping to obtain God’s grace. From then on, Good Deeds can walk and promises to help declare Everyman’s good deeds. This demonstrates that only after a person has regained God’s grace through

¹ Lawrence V. Ryan, “Doctrine and Dramatic Structure in Everyman,” *Speculum*, 32. 4 (1957): 727.

the sacraments of the Church can good deeds help a person be saved as a devout Christian,¹ for “in every good thought and deed of man, there is the work of God” (Zhou xxxvi). Good Deeds then advises Everyman to summon Discretion, Strength, Five Wits, and Beauty. With these qualities by his side, Everyman makes the decision to donate and return what he has taken. Although these qualities eventually leave him, symbolizing that one’s own abilities are not enough to obtain salvation, he still has Good Deeds by his side as he walks towards the grave and eternity with a clear account book.

“The Summoning of Everyman” aligns with Augustine’s theory of grace when addressing contradictions in doctrine. Its emphasis on good deeds “reflects the cultural and intellectual trends of the time,” as grace “extends to every good intention, thought, and deed in the daily life of ordinary believers” (Zhou xxxv). In the Middle Ages, the growth of the commercial economy continually tested church doctrine. Despite the sins associated with commerce, there was no significant conflict between engaging in economic activities and being a Christian. This was due to theologians’ efforts to renovate doctrine and reconcile commercial activities with good deeds, as well as the adaptation of commercial activities to changes in doctrine.

In the play “The Summoning of Everyman,” good deeds play a crucial role in writing a clear account book, as can be seen from the implied blending of the account book. The account book has a religious reference meaning and includes the metaphor of “moral interaction is commodity transaction,” recording Everyman’s moral interactions as if they were financial transaction. In its source space, income and expenditure items record the acquisition and relinquishment of goods respectively. In the target space of moral accounts, sin is recorded as income, while good deeds are recorded as expenditure. Sin represents the acquisition of goods at the expense of morality, while Good deed signifies the relinquishment of goods in exchange for morality. Good deeds offset sins, resulting in a balanced account which indicates that Everyman is a moral person. Based on this moral account, Everyman is allowed by God to avoid punishment and attain eternal happiness after death. This blending of the account book is characteristic of the allegorical morality plays, where the metaphorical expenditure of good deeds matches the literal economic accounting entries of restitution and donation.

The character Good Deeds wraps up the correspondence between metaphorical meaning and literal meaning. Good Deeds can stand up and walk once Everyman

1 Lawrence V. Ryan, “Doctrine and Dramatic Structure in Everyman,” *Speculum*, 32. 4 (1957): 728, 733.

regains grace through confession and penance. At this moment, Everyman asks, “Good Deeds, have we cleared our reckoning?” (“The Summoning of Everyman” 233) Good Deeds says, “Yea, indeed, I have [a clear account] here” (“The Summoning of Everyman” 233). This signifies that Everyman’s moral account is balanced. Since metaphorical meaning corresponds to literal meaning in the allegorical morality play, the play also depicts a balanced and clear literal economic account, with entries for donation and restitution representing charity and justice. When Everyman makes the decision to donate and return, Good Deeds reaffirms everything, and the clear account is praised by angels who sing a hymn:

Come, excellent elect spouse to Jesu,
 Here above thou shalt go,
 Because of thy singular virtue:
 Now thy soul is taken thy body from,
 Thy reckoning is crystal clear. (“The Summoning of Everyman” 243)

A balanced metaphorical moral account with good deeds offsetting sins indicates that Everyman has overall morality. A balanced physical account book with entries for donations and restitutions proves Everyman’s fairness and integrity in commercial activities, and can be a reference for absolution of sin. The entries of donation and restitution demonstrate the defensive nature of the account book. Therefore, the physical account book also plays a role in salvation, washing away Everyman’s sins together with the Christian sacrament of penance.

From this, it can be seen that the accounting of Everyman’s deeds is a major feature of the plot. It reflects the penitential doctrine of the late Middle Ages, and relies on the defensive nature of accounting and its reference during the repentance process. Moral accounting, which represents God’s judgment, is a metaphor that reinforces the Church’s salvation doctrine. Good deeds are contrasted with restitution and donation, showing a clear correspondence between metaphorical and literal accounting. This reflects the adoption of specific commercial ethical standards by religious moral principles, demonstrating the morality of the time. This morality has worldly tendencies but is essentially an expanded doctrine of grace, based on eternal transcendental reality and concluding with sacraments. Its transcendental goal encompasses secular recognition.

In general, each of the five morality plays reveals sin and promotes virtue, but with different emphases. The commonality is that all five plays combine virtue with faith in God and acceptance of religious sacraments. Just as Thomas Aquinas

discusses the supreme good of God, human virtues, and Christ and sacraments in the three parts of *Summa Theologica*, the morality of medieval English morality plays encompasses God's grace, human virtues and good deeds, and religious sacraments, with religious sacraments becoming the culmination of all moral requirements.

The Ethical Purpose of Prayer Rituals

The protagonists in the five morality plays are all fallen sinners. However, under the guidance of the priestly figure, they see the ugliness of their own souls and the invincibility of death, realize that death may come at any time, or wake up when death truly arrives, thus understanding their sinful nature and inherent shortcomings. Thereafter, they abandon their pride and complacency, do good deeds as God requires, remain vigilant at all times, and pray to God in a submissive manner. They are portrayed as "figures who are praying to God" (Liu 84). Prayer becomes a demonstration of one's moral state and a necessary condition for receiving God's grace in medieval morality plays.

In his research on prayer in Renaissance drama, Joseph Sterrett mentions morality plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance* and the popular theology they convey. He notes, "if we go back to the popularised theology expressed in late-medieval morality plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance*, we find that all Mankind need do is call out or appeal to the grace of God for mercy to be granted. It is, in fact, the performance that triggers the mercy of God — at least in medieval drama" (504). Sterrett agrees with Marcel Mauss's definition of prayer as an action or performance, where prayer includes not only an inner emotional dimension but also an external or imagined ritual. People not only pray spontaneously but are also taught to pray. Using Mauss's definition, Sterrett seeks to go beyond the theological context and view prayer as a distinct socio-cultural phenomenon. He expands the interpretive scope of Renaissance drama but oversimplifies the prayer of medieval English morality plays.

According to Robert Potter, the plot of morality plays can be summarized as "man exists, therefore falls, yet is saved" (7). Potter also describes the pattern of morality plays as "a sequence of innocence/corruption/redemption" (8). In the essay "Morality Plays" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, Pamela M. King points out that the plays' action is "presented as the temptation, fall and restitution of the protagonist" (King 235). Man inevitably falls into temptation but is miraculously saved in the end. This structural pattern reveals the optimistic tone of morality plays, rather than the tragic color shown in Renaissance dramas such as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Therefore, while

as a prototype for later plays, the characteristics of medieval English morality play cannot be simply inferred from later plays. Its basic pattern deserves further study. The author holds that prayer is a clue to morality play's structural pattern and brings out sectarian disputes and moral connotations, showing its complexity.

John Cox mentions that in *Mankind* "a talented anonymous author in fifteenth-century East Anglia made prayer the focus of his generic story of Christian formation" (63). The prayer is a central theme in *Mankind* and drives its progress for (i) the main temptation by evil characters in this play is to persuade Mankind to abandon prayer and turn to pleasure, (ii) Mankind's abandonment of evening prayer signifies his fall, and (iii) he is forgiven through prayer for God's mercy. These elements show that prayer provides the complete structural elements of temptation-fall-redemption in the play. This essay argues that the structural function of prayer stems from the play's implication of the debate on prayer and its portrayal of prayers' effectiveness .

When Mankind is still innocent, he begins to perform evening prayers in the field, saying "Thys place I assyng as for kyrke [church]. / Here in my kerke I knell [kneel] on kneys [knees]" (*Mankind* 552-553)¹. However, the theological debate on prayer rituals implies the possibility of mankind's fall from innocence. When glossing line 552, Ashley and NeCastro quote Eccles's notes: "the Lollards believed, according to the trial of William and Richard Sparke for heresy in 1457, that 'a prayer made in a field or other unconsecrated place is just as efficacious as if it were made in a church'"(55). The Lollards were a heretical sect that emerged in England in the 14th century against the orthodox Catholic Church. The Lollards believed that going to church to pray was futile and that believers should pray on their own in their daily lives.

The effectiveness of prayer was pursued by both the orthodox Catholic Church and the Lollards. However, as Sterrett points out, "definitions of the interior vs public subject have been heated reference points throughout the history of Christian thought and the history of religious life itself" (497). In short, opinions differ on whether an inner spiritual life infused with emotion is superior to an external public performance. And some hold that public community's supervision of individual prayer curbs the capriciousness brought by individual freedom and ensures propriety and fairness. Although the Lollards who advocated individual prayer

1 Kathleen M. Ashley and Gerard NeCastro, eds., *Mankind*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications of Western Michigan University, 2010. All quotations from *Mankind* in this article are from this slightly modernized and annotated version. Quotations from *Mankind* in the following text will be marked with the play name and line number, without further annotation.

were suppressed by the Catholic Church from their emergence to their eventual extinction, theological debates have never been settled.

In terms of religious sacraments such as confession and penance, morality plays adopt some Lollard views while mainly representing orthodox Catholic views. The Lollards focus on repentance within the heart while ignoring forms such as confession and do not respect priests' authority. The five morality plays emphasize changes in inner states while also valuing external forms' role in promoting changes in inner states. In addition to this, despite that Knowledge in "The Summoning of Everyman" expresses skepticism towards clergy members, all five morality plays feature priest characters and portray them as intelligent. To be precise, it can be inferred that morality plays' overall attitude towards Lollard views is to learn from criticism but oppose their advocacy of arbitrary forms of rituals. Mankind's subsequent temptation by demons to fall can be seen as a result of his choice of prayer method. Prayer that does not emphasize ritualism and publicness is shown to be ineffective in the play.

When Mankind begins to pray, he recites in Latin, "Pater noster qui es in celis [Our Father who are in Heaven]" (*Mankind* 554). At this time, Titivillus whispers in Mankind's ear, "A schorte preyere thyrylth hewyn; of thi preyere blyn [A short prayer pierces the sky; stop your prayer]" (*Mankind* 558). Smart points out that this expression of Titivillus also appears in the poem "The Good Wife Wold a Pilgrimage" and the long poem "Piers Plowman," where such a short prayer is considered efficacious, and Titivillus's goal is to make Mankind abbreviate the prayer further — completely abandon prayer.¹

According to Robert Porter, the Lord's Prayer beginning with "Paternoster" "had been an instrument of repentance since the rise of the Celtic penitential system" (25); it was "an essential and magical prayer, familiar to all Christians, but to be spoken in good conscience only by those who had repented of their sins" (27). In *Mankind*, the efficacy of Lord's Prayer is not certain. On one hand, Mankind inherits Adam's original sin and must continually seek forgiveness through prayer. However, Titivillus's interference may prevent Mankind from effectively repenting. On the other hand, at this point in the play, Mankind has not committed any sins other than original sin. Mankind represents Adam in the Garden of Eden before he ate the forbidden fruit and was still innocent. He has not yet experienced the fall and not gained a deep understanding of his sinful nature and the concept of mercy. Therefore, his prayer may not meet the requirements for efficacy.

Furthermore, the content of Mankind's prayer is not revealed, and he does not

1 W. K. Smart, "Some Notes on 'Mankind'," *Modern Philology*, 14, 5 (1916): 107.

receive a response from God. As a result, the play does not confirm the efficacy of Mankind's prayer, leaving his fall as a possibility. After Titivillus tempts Mankind to abandon his evening prayers, the play shifts its focus to the sins committed by fallen Mankind. Abandoning evening prayers is a sign of falling, and Mankind's fall is no longer just a possibility but an inevitability that has already begun to manifest.

After committing the seven deadly sins, Mankind prays for forgiveness under the guidance of Mercy, who appears as a priest and encourages Mankind to pray by saying that "Dyspose yowrsylff mekly to aske mercy, and I wyll assent" (*Mankind* 816). Mercy explains the importance and effectiveness of prayer, and Mankind begins to pray for God's mercy through an "expedycius petycion [expedient petition]" (*Mankind* 860). Through his prayer, Mankind acknowledges his own misery, indulgence and weakness, and understands the significance of God's mercy. As a result of his repentance, Mankind receives God's mercy and is miraculously saved. This is not only the conclusion of *Mankind* but a common ending in all morality plays. The effectiveness of prayer in these plays is based on its public nature (praying in front of a priest) and the acknowledgment and confession of inner sinfulness during prayer.

Effective petitionary prayer, as Joseph Sterrett suggests, has become a dramatic device linked to redemption.¹ Robert Potter argues that morality plays are penitential dramas that evolved from the tradition of repentance.² One of the goals of morality plays is to encourage confession and repentance, with the promise of forgiveness and salvation, in keeping with theological concepts and repentance tradition. As a result, redemption is combined with petitionary prayer to form a prototype prayer model in morality plays. This prototype had a significant impact on English drama, as seen in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where the petitionary prayer model evolved to produce a different outcome. At the play's conclusion, King Lear acknowledges his powerlessness in prayer, saying, "Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so/ That heaven's vault should crack" (*King Lear* Act 5 Scene 3 231-2)³. Sterrett considers prayer as a ritual and comments, "[the tongues and eyes] are ineffective because 'a chance which does redeem all sorrows' has passed and lingers only in the 'Look', wish and perhaps the unspoken prayer of [Cordelia's] dying father"

1 Joseph Sterrett, "Rereading Prayer as Social Act: Examples from Shakespeare," *Literature Compass*, 10/6 (2013): 499.

2 Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play—Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition*, London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975: 25-29.

3 William Shakespeare, *King Lear: An Authoritative Text, Sources, Criticism, Adaptations, and Responses*, edited by Grace Ioppolo, New York: W. W. Norton Co., 2008: 231-32.

(499). The prayer model followed by five medieval English morality plays mirrors the primitive ritual rhythm of life triumphing over death and rebirth replacing decay. It expresses the emotional connection between external world and people's inner world — the connection between events and people's understanding of order and construction of meaning. Morality plays aim to reveal the human life process, showing that human predicaments are inevitable. They also depict human's efforts to strive for eternal happiness. They unfold as relentless tragedies but end joyously, promoting Christian moral values. In contrast, despite its protagonist's repeated repentance, the Renaissance drama *King Lear* ends tragically. A comparison of dramatic prayers reveals how dramatic models have evolved across time periods.

The Moral Implications of Performances of Contrition and Contemplation

In medieval English morality plays, sacrament of penance is the ultimate moral requirement, and prayer is essential for receiving forgiveness from God. These become the most important and evident criteria for moral judgment and salvation. The significance of penance and prayer lies in that religious rituals and sacraments shape an individual's inner senses, allows them to gain knowledge of their soul and God, and brings about changes to their inner state. This aligns with the morality plays' emphasis on using sensory images as a starting point and imagination as a means of understanding morality. Accordingly, the morality achieved through penance and prayer is characterized by its ritualistic and visible nature.

Firstly, the sacrament of penance is emphasized in morality plays, demonstrating that both God's grace and human repentance are essential for salvation and are attained through external rituals. Paulson notes that "inward self-understanding occurs through a visual, highly ritualized, and exteriorized demonstration" ("A Theatre" 275). This inward self-understanding is crucial for shaping morality and it depends on recognizing one's own shortcomings. Catholic theology stresses that "man is morally incapable" (Zhou xxxv), and to comprehend this, one must acknowledge their own deficiencies and sinfulness. Understanding one's deficient state and the significance of Christ's grace is attained through Christ's church and its sacraments. Thus, one must become a member of the church and partake in the sacraments.

The sacrament of penance is an external act intimately connected to an individual's inner subjective state. Confession in morality plays stresses the importance of contrition, as seen in "The Summoning of Everyman" and "Wisdom." In "Wisdom," Wisdom tells the soul: "Lo, how contrycyon avoydyth the devllys blake! / Dedly synne ys non you wythin!" ("Wisdom" 978-979). Wisdom also

explains the relationship between contrition and inner understanding:

By Undrystondyng have very contrycyon,
 With Mynde of your synne confessyon make,
 Wyth Wyll yeldyng du satysfaccyon. (“Wisdom” 972-974)

After being advised and guided by Wisdom, Anima [the soul] departs from the stage to receive the sacrament of confession, accompanied by Understanding, Heart, and Will. Anima says,

O Fadyr of mercy ande of comfort,
 Wyth wepyng ey and hert contryte
 [...]
 Wyth Mynde, Undyrstanding, and Wyll ryght,
 Wyche of my Soull the partyes be,
 To the domys of the Chyrche we shall us dyght,
 Wyth veray contrycyon thus compleynnyng we. (“Wisdom” 988-995)

Paulson argues that the use of “we” in the last two sentences expresses inner harmony between the soul and three powers, inseparable from external harmony in ritual action.¹ External rituals influence inner powers — particularly the contrition ritual affects inner understanding. External rituals place individuals in a state of inner devotion — precisely what Christianity demands and what morality plays advocate as a moral manifestation, reflecting medieval ethical thinking derived from imagination’s cognitive functions.

In “The Summoning of Everyman,” Everyman turns to Good Deeds in desperation when facing death and judgement. However, Good Deeds is weak and only stands after Everyman receives confession and contrition sacraments guided by Knowledge and a priest. From this, we can see an important point: an individual cannot truly understand their own sinfulness or know what true goodness is until they undergo religious sacraments. Only after the sacraments does one gain self-understanding through their own fragile image. They realize that they are the most abominable sinner, while also comprehending Christ’s mercy. This process triggers a change in inner state which is a prerequisite for regaining grace. Inner understanding relies on external visible images; inner change is achieved through

1 Julie C. Paulson, *Words Made Flesh: Sacramental Knowledge in the English Morality Play*, Durham: Duke University Doctoral Dissertation, 2001: 154.

external means — meaning that inner understanding is not directly conceptualized; this way of understanding emphasizes sensory experience's role in cognition and imagination.

Moreover, the specific redemption strategies of good deeds — restitution and donation — are recorded into account books and incorporated into confession sacraments to take effect. Therefore the morality which is embodied by good deeds depends on religious rituals and culminate with penitential sacraments. Good deed enters into the visualized, ritualistic external form as an external reference to initiate changes in inner state, helping the repentant achieve renewed self-understanding and approach God. The embodiment of Christian morality through good deeds and faith still needs to take effect through acceptance of church rites; therefore the morality advocated by morality plays is mainly manifested through ritualistic external forms. This morality's social concern remains low in degree while its primary concern is activating inner emotions through images and performances to facilitate the cognition from sensory experience to transcendence.

Secondly, prayer is a powerful ritual that can induce changes in one's inner state. In morality plays, the prayer model represents prayer theology. Eleonore Stump observes that there is a link between petitionary prayer and belief in an omniscient, omnipotent God. Despite being omniscient, omnipotent, and capable of miraculously saving humanity, God cannot respond to prayers if they are not offered. Prayer itself can bring about natural and spiritual changes in the one who prays.¹ Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas stated, "we pray not in order to change the divine disposition but for the sake of acquiring by petitionary prayer what God has disposed to be achieved by prayer" (qtd. in Stump 86). Stump's theological analysis and Moss's definition of prayer complement each other, allowing prayer to be understood beyond salvation structure, highlighting individual changes brought about by prayer, while without separating its ritual characteristics from its theological content. As a repeated ritual, prayer consolidates social groups and brings about changes in the cognitive state of the one who prays, allowing them to understand God and gain knowledge. Thus, prayers in morality plays prompt God's mercy by inducing changes in people's inner states, providing structural elements for salvation and fulfilling the educational purpose of morality plays.

It should be noted that in morality plays is a one-time event, but its constant performance turns it into a repetitive event. This is consistent with the Christian reality that someone faces judgment every day. Therefore, last-minute repentance

¹ Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16. 2 (1979): 81, 84.

and prayer in morality plays become requirements for people, and regular repentance and prayer are encouraged in the plays.

The morality play “Wisdom” advocates for a contemplative life as a moral life. In the play, Lucifer ironically implies that prayer is a key element of contemplation. Wisdom teaches people to distance themselves from fallen worldly life and reject the misleading mixed lives of crime and prayer, while appealing for a contemplative life of prayer, learning, and asceticism. The speech-act process of prayer is an important representative of contemplative life. It is a way of contemplation and carrier of contemplative meaning. The cognitive enhancement brought about by prayer is an important aspect of how contemplation embodies morality. When the protagonist finally utters a prayer to God, he confesses his sins and lack of grace, mentions Christ’s suffering and mercy, and sincerely begs for God’s grace, which are results of contemplation.

Contemplation does not completely exclude external forms of assistance. The acquisition of truth through contemplation lies in imagination facilitating religious cognition during contemplation. In Christian contemplative literature, “the soul comes to knowledge of God through meditating upon the soul’s ability to remember, behold, and desire God” (Paulson, “A Theatre” 264). Augustine called this understanding “the rational vision.” However, in her study of “Wisdom,” Paulson argues that drama offers a unique representation of the contemplative tradition. This form inherits the tradition of acquiring religious knowledge through self-knowledge, but does not rely solely on inner sensibility as a means of knowing or withdraw humanity from the world. Instead, it allows fallen humanity to gain true knowledge through the performance and practice of rituals. Paulson emphasizes visual and material images by focusing on the performance and practice of rituals. In morality plays, the state of the soul is consistent with external appearance, with a filthy physical image reflecting spiritual fragility. The ritualistic, public, and image-utilizing nature of prayer serves as an example of change from the outside in, cohering with the understanding of contemplation through performance and interaction in drama.

Conclusion

Compared to doing good deeds, the requirement for reverence and prayer for God emphasizes people’s inner heart and spirit, rather than external behavior. They are practiced through physical actions. But this practice is an action that concerns inner psychological states and spirit, which is an external form that reflects inner states. Sacraments and rituals emphasize human deficiency and imperfection by

utilizing man's filthy image and Christ's holy image. They strengthen separation from material world and connection with the transcendental world, proclaiming God's saving miracles. They enhance people's cognition by reasonably mobilizing imagination. In fact, they complete contemplation by joining external forms and performances. Their training of cognition demonstrates the morality advocated by medieval English morality plays, as well as their benefit for achieving the didactic purpose of the plays. They reflect the cultivation of imagination, highlighting the unity of morality and cognition.

Rising from the sacrament of confession to its moral dimension and from the prayer ritual to its moral purpose, the morality plays present a moral view that lies between this world and the other shore. The sacrament of confession and prayer rituals require a relationship between people and the secular world due to their public nature, but they also demand a close connection with God, ultimately transcending the secular world. The handling of relationships between people is for the ultimate arrival at the eternal happiness of the other shore. However, the morality play's portrayal of sacraments and rituals emphasizes their ritualistic and visible nature. The publicness of sacraments and rituals is a guarantee of their effectiveness, allowing people to achieve inner change through these effective external rituals. This approach reflects the effect that the dramatic medium adds to Christian literature. Although the morality plays point to transcendental goals, they also reflect the importance of people as church congregants and the control of the church over Christians, revealing to some extent the complex reality of "secular identity" and sectarian disputes.

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