INTRODUCTION

Only five medieval English morality plays survive: The Pride of Life (85, pp. 90–105), The Castle of Perseverance, Wisdom, Mankind (83) and Everyman (86, 87), to give them their common titles, together constitute the entire corpus of an apparently influential native dramatic genre. The identification of the genre has been retrospective and depends largely on the perceived influence of these plays on the more abundantly surviving Tudor interlude. It is possible on the basis of the few surviving texts to construct a working definition of a characteristic dramaturgy for the morality play, yet their absolute cohesion as a group is bound to be questioned in any attempt to define that form in its individual manifestations and theatrical contexts, particularly as The Pride of Life is a corrupt Anglo-Irish text and Everyman a translation from a Dutch original.

What these plays have in common most obviously is that they offer their audiences moral instruction through dramatic action that is broadly allegorical. Hence they are set in no time, or outside historical time, though their lack of historical specificity is generally exploited by strategically collapsing the eternal with the contemporary. The protagonist is generally a figure of all men, reflected in his name, Everyman or Mankind, and the other characters are polarised as figures of good and evil. The action concerns alienation from God and return to God, presented as the temptation, fall and restitution of the protagonist. The story of man’s fall and redemption presented in a cycle of mystery plays as an epic historical narrative is thus encapsulated in the morality play.

The dramatic variety this material offered was a direct product of the details of contemporary belief, particularly regarding the degree of control that the individual had in this world over his fate in the next. Orthodox Augustinian thought held that a person’s endeavours towards the attainment of heaven were ineffectual without the direct intervention of God’s grace...
Morality plays

through the Redemption. This was tempered by other currents of thought which held that man had absolute free will to choose in this world between vice and virtue and that those choices affected his fate in the next. The late fourth-century writer Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, an imaginative portrayal of the battle between vice and virtue for the soul of man, was most evocative of the latter line of thought.

The element of free will allowed to man in deciding his eternal fate led to an increasing refinement of people's imaginative perception of the forces of good and, particularly, evil, varying according to degree and kind. Popular schemes of vices and virtues abounded, the most prevalent being the designation of seven cardinal or deadly sins, corroborated by a body of visionary literature in which various witnesses, such as Lazarus of Bethany and St Patrick, offered first-hand accounts of how individual sins were punished in hell. Further categories of venial sins were identified for which self-help was possible in this world or, with the development of the concept of purgatory, in the next. Dante's *Commedia*, written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, is perhaps the best known and most widely influential developed imaginative vision of the entire other world in terms of crime, punishment and reward.

The believer faced both individual judgement when he died and final judgement on Doomsday when he would be relegated body and soul either to heaven or to hell for all eternity. He also knew that his encounter with a differentiated sin did not take the form of being snatched in an instant by some grisly mishapen 'bug', but was the matter of protracted struggle, demanding constant personal vigilance as well as the invocation of grace through the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of penance. In other words, against the variegated temptations to sin, he could invoke the fortification of Christ and the compensatory effects of his own good deeds. This struggle is the matter of the plot of an individual morality play, the whole dynamic of its action.

Although the action of a morality play is frequently described as allegorical, the term is used loosely to describe how action, character, space and time are related to the real world through a tissue of metaphor. The use of *prosopopoeia*, or personification, in creating dramatic characters involves a fundamental rhetorical separation between the play world and the real world, as players take on the roles of qualities, e.g. Mercy; supernatural beings (Good Angel); whole human categories (Fellowship) and human attributes (Lechery). The original audience's perception of reality was in any case different to that of a modern one (391), and it is not always clear what is an outside agent sent by God or the Devil and what an internal motive. Each role, as actualised in a theatrical context, is presented as a distinct
consciousness and is, therefore, a dramatic character. The action can be
seen securely only in terms of its own mimesis, as an instance imitating an
eternal reality. What may seem abstract was, for the period when the plays
were written, representative of true reality, transcending the ephemeral and
imperfect world of everyday existence.

Later allegorical fiction, such as *A Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gulliver's Travels*,
and *Animal Farm*, presents its audience with a sustained, developed literal
story, structurally separable from the message for which it is the vehicle.
The only literal storyline in the medieval morality plays is, however, the
actualisation on stage of their moral 'sentence'. Hence the imaginative
development of the situation or instance, constituting the plot of a play, is
essentially thematic, rather than narrative, because it deals directly in eternal
truths. To anchor their action in the world, the plots of these plays depend
heavily on extended metaphor instead of a causal pattern of domestic
events. In some instances this may be a battle, as at the climax of *The Castle
of Perseverance*, where the forces of evil besiege the eponymous castle and
are repulsed with a deluge of roses, a scene borrowed directly from the
*Psychomachia* (316). Elsewhere in this play, however, the plot corresponds
more nearly to a journey, or pilgrimage, from birth to death — another
commonplace in contemporary literature for man's life, notably in Deguile-
ville's *Pélerinage de la vie humaine* (321). *Everyman* also is a pilgrimage, but
one which focuses on the end of the journey, as the protagonist confronts
his death, whereas the unfinished *Pride of Life* appears to present the same
journey interrupted by the untimely early arrival of death. *Mankind*
employs yet another metaphor for fallen existence, the life of hard agricul-
tural labour being equated with virtuous penitential living for the pro-
tagontist. The more socially refined tone of *Wisdom* unites its highly
complex theological argument by presenting the movement towards a
hard-won final harmonious relationship between the soul and Christ in
terms of marriage metaphors. What all have in common is an argument
directed against a specific sin, based on a package of doctrine and illustrated
through these systems of sustained metaphors, drawing on the received
commonplaces of virtuous living.

As aspects of an argument intended for edification, time, place, plot and
character are all morally directed. The same strategies extend to the spoken
text. All the plays under consideration are in verse and employ clear rhe-
torical markers. The speaker is instantly placed at any given moment on a
scale between absolute good and absolute evil by the controlled choice of
lexis, syntax and register, as well as by manipulation of stanza structure.
The transformational nature of fall and redemption are both indicated in
this manner: fall into sin is characterised by fragmented lines, blasphemy
and nonsense. Virtue, on the other hand, is characterised by high-style, latinate structures, characters more usually talking in complete stanzas.

The rhetoric of theatrical communication must be unambiguous in a play that offers its audience prescribed doctrine. Although these plays are often described as didactic, that term also requires qualification. As is the case with the cycle plays, their orthodoxy serves to confirm and to celebrate rather than to argue. In fifteenth-century religious drama, the desired effect was concordance, achieved by a conspiracy of the verbal and the visual: diction, costume, placing and gesture all function as clear supportive signs of moral status. The dynamic nature of these plays lies not in internally contrived conflicts, but in the manner in which they generate pressure upon their audiences emotionally and physically, as well as intellectually. The precise manner in which these various effects are achieved is best explored by reference to individual plays. In what follows, the five plays are treated in an order that allows for a developed analysis of their form, rather than one determined by their strict chronology, which cannot be positively established in any case.

**THE CASTLE OF PERSEVERANCE**

The survival of the three fifteenth-century English morality plays may be attributed to the action of one East Anglian antiquarian. Manuscript V. a. 354 in the Folger Library, Washington D.C., which contains the only texts of *Mankind* and *The Castle of Perseverance* and the only complete text of *Wisdom*, is named for its first known modern owner, Cox Macro (1683–1767) of Bury St Edmunds. Hence the plays are edited and commonly referred to as ‘The Macro plays’ (83, 115). The three Macro play texts bound together are in fact bibliographically discrete units of different dates. None is in the hand of the author, though *Wisdom* and most of *Mankind* were copied and owned by an East Anglian monk, Thomas Hyngham of Bury St Edmunds (see above, p. 196 and 239). All are written on paper and have been dated by their watermarks and handwriting style. The manuscript of *The Castle of Perseverance* is thought to date from around 1440, *Wisdom* from 1460–65 and *Mankind* from 1465–70. *Wisdom*, otherwise called *Wisdom Who is Christ*, or *Mind, Will and Understanding*, is the only one to appear elsewhere, in an imperfect text in another collection of plays, the Digby MS 133 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (84).

All three plays are of proven East Anglian provenance. But the three plays are also very different in the theatrical auspices that they display and could, of course, exemplify peculiarly East Anglian tastes. The eastern counties of England were hardly typical of the country as a whole in the late Middle
Ages: the wool trade meant that the population was very prosperous but also persistently rural, no significant proportion gravitating to town life. Consequently, and because of direct links with the continent, the corpus of late medieval arts of all kinds is both rich and distinctive in character (253). On examination it becomes apparent not only that each of the three plays belongs to a radically different theatrical context and, consequently, audience, but also that all are related to other contemporary dramatic traditions.

*The Castle of Perseverance* is an extremely elaborate and expansive play. Briefly, it offers a package of orthodox biblical doctrine as armament against the sin of covetousness (318). Mankind (*Humanum Genus*), accompanied by his Good and Bad Angels, is subjected to various temptations by the forces of the World (*Mundus*), the Flesh (*Caro*) and the Devil (*Belial*). Backbiter eventually persuades him to join Covetousness, but he is retrieved by Penitence and Confession and enters the Castle of Perseverance. The forces of evil lay siege to the Castle, where Mankind is defended by an array of seven Virtues. Although the Virtues win, Covetousness tempts Mankind to leave the Castle, offering him material success in the form of possession of the now vacant Castle. Death comes and Mankind's riches are seized by the enigmatic I-wot-nevere-Whoo, while his Soul is carried to Hell. The Four Daughters of God – Mercy, Peace, Righteousness and Truth – hold a debate, which Mercy wins, freeing the Soul to ascend to Heaven.

The play draws on many commonplaces: the objectification of man's moral armament as a castle is familiar in sermons and also in the influential Anglo-Norman *Chasteau d'Amours* by Robert Grosseteste, which also contains a debate of the Four Daughters of God. Both elements disclose the medieval tendency to illustrate man's relationship with God through feudal and familial analogues (320). The battle between vices and virtues draws directly on Prudentius's *Psychomachia*. But the major thematic movement of the play depends on the presentation of man's life as a journey. Good Angel in the beginning sets up Christ as an example of poverty and a remedy against coveting the world's goods, citing biblical texts in Latin to support his argument. Despite these warnings, Mankind falls in trying to protect and retain his 'cupboard', which contains the goods he amasses through his temporal existence. The course of that existence is the play's whole action – a pilgrimage, from birth to death, synonymous with the progress from flawed innocence to experience, and represented theatrically as a physical journey through a landscape (317). The protagonist describes his own journey at the outset:

Aftyr oure forme-faderys kende  
*maner*  
Pis nyth I was of my modyr born.  
Fro my modyr I walke, I wende,
Morality plays

Ful feynt and febyl I fare sou beforne.
I am nakyd of lym and lende
As Mankynde is schapyn and schorn.
I not wedyr to gon ne to lende
To helpe myself mydday nyn morn.

(lines 275–82)

Shortly afterwards he reaches his first crossroads, the choice between earthly and heavenly reward:

Whom to folwe wetyn I ne may.
I stonde and stodye and gynne to raue.
I wolde be ryche in gret aray
And fayn I wolde my sowle saue.
As wynde in watyr I wave.

(lines 375–9)

The moment of Mankind’s fall to Covetousness is presented as a choice that centres on the journey motif:

3a, up and don jou take pe wey
Porwe pis werld to walkyn and wende
And jou shalt fynde, soth to sey,
Pi purs schal be pi best frende.

(lines 2518–21)

Put that way, the choice between staying still in the Castle of Perseverance or moving on is as inevitable as it is fatal. Fixed points on the play’s set, including the Castle, operate as ports of call on the journey, objectifying the moral state of the protagonist.

We know more about the set of this elaborate action than can simply be surmised from the spoken text because the manuscript of The Castle of Perseverance contains a diagram (see illustration 8). It shows centrally the castle itself, a structure on legs, with a bed below it from which Mankind will be born and from where, at his death some 3,000 lines later, his soul rises up to be judged. These are the only features that are actually drawn. They are enclosed by a double circle, outside of which, at the appropriate points of the compass, scaffolds are labelled, one for God in the east, the Devil in the north, the World in the west, and the Flesh in the south. Destroying the familiar symbolic symmetry of the rest, Covetousness has a scaffold of his own, in the northeast. As Covetousness alone among the comprehensive scheme of sins that assail the protagonist in the play is the one that he will find irresistible, the diagram is effectively a map of the play’s action.

Attempts to reconstruct this playing space have, however, raised funda-
mental questions about the status of the diagram. Around the drawing of
the castle is a containing double circle which has proved irresistibly suggest-
ive of an amphitheatre. Between the circles is written,

pis is pe watyr a bowte pe place if any dyche may be mad pe it schal be plyed
or ellis pat it be strongely barryd al abowt & lete nowth ouer many stytelerys
(marshals) be with inne pe plase.

Evidence of Cornish plays performed in round outdoor amphitheatres was
pressed into service to demonstrate that the double circle was a containing
barrier for the entire theatrical space which the play demands. This was the
premise of Richard Southern’s *The Medieval Theatre in the Round* (421),
which interpreted this diagram in a way that neatly supplied a precedent for
the Elizabethan circular playhouse. The problems to which Southern had to
address himself were chiefly related to the scale of the earth-moving
required should a ditch large enough to contain a large play and its audience
be dug. Such questions disappear if the diagram is read as an illustration not
of theatrical space, but of scenic space, of set design (420, 406). The scaf-
folds, strategically placed because their placing is vital to the symbolic
action, but not drawn probably because they conform to some contempo-
rary theatrical norm, do lie outside the circle. The circle then becomes an
outer defence of the castle. The audience is precluded from being in the
moated area, ‘for lettynge of syt’, but could, presumably, dispose themselves
anywhere else they liked. This makes sound figural sense. The disposition of
the scaffolds creates a symbolic universe, within which the audience would
stand to watch the action. The spatial meaning of the created place is akin
to that of the church as traditionally used in, for instance, processions at
Epiphany. As this space contains both play and audience, has fixed co-
ordinates which relate it to the entire universe and, at the same time, is not
cut off from the ‘real’ world by any architectural barrier, it suggests that the
play world and the real world are one and the same. Consonant with this,
the play contains no verbal references to any place not contained within this
mimetic space.

The castle and the space within the moat, however, are preserved for
stage action only, perhaps because they are temporally associated with the
particular action of this play, the personal armament of the protagonist.
Mankind’s course of action also directly implicates the audience, but where
they can relate to the static universe suggested by the circle of scaffolds
directly, their relationship to all that is symbolised by the castle is indirect,
arising only through their delegation of the dynamic action of the course of
the play to the protagonist. That dynamic action is the course of a whole
lifetime, and space and time are closely linked in the play through the
process of ageing. Precise references to water in the text seem to substantiate the reading of the diagram as a set design in which the moat surrounds the castle, for example when Sloth attempts at line 2347 to dig a channel to give the other Deadly Sins access during the siege.

If the set diagram may be read as integral to the play, a means of expressing its meaning in map form, complementing the linear dramatic development of the text itself, the same may be said of the cast list that follows, for it arranges characters not purely by precedence but also by allegiance, giving the reader further assistance with the play’s essentially schematic meaning, where spatial relationships, one of the standard systems of theatrical communication, are given clear moral value. The original audience would have absorbed the play’s spatial messages possibly semi-consciously while watching the action. For them, the foretaste of that action was embodied in the play’s ‘banns’, which were written to be delivered as a trailer, seven days before the actual performance, probably in some central location in the town or villages adjacent to the chosen playing place, operating precisely in the manner of an opera programme for the illiterate. The banns also illustrate conclusively that the play was intended as a travelling production, suggesting further the implausibility of the massive earthworks necessitated by Southern’s hypothesis. East Anglia has its own game places, at least one of which, at Walsham-le-Willows (248) appears to demonstrate the possibility that the playing space was divided between an outer area containing both audience and action, and an inner space from which the audience was excluded.

The complex surviving evidence in the manuscript of The Castle of Perseverance suggests a most elaborate play, carefully structured, first to contain its audience within the sphere of its action, then to convert them to its doctrine by means of an argument which is both intellectually and physically arresting, and all within a play world which conforms to symbolic rules that exist in complex relationship to the audience’s existential realities.

**MANKIND**

In direct contrast with The Castle of Perseverance, Mankind is a play of such evidently simple scenography that it can be played almost anywhere. In the absence of records or diagrams, a growing body of twentieth-century critical commentary has hypothesised about several eminently possible settings for the most portable English morality play, both indoors (422, pp. 21–45) and out (42, pp. 31–52). The text includes references to a door, a yard, standing and seated audience members and a hostler. The
economy of the production has led to its attribution to a troupe of touring professionals, and the traditional dispute hinges upon whether it was designed for outdoor performance, possibly on a booth-stage in an inn-yard, or for indoor performance, in the hall of a large private house or institution.

Acceptance of the play’s worthiness for serious study came late in view of its undoubtedly broad language. *Mankind*’s reversal in fortune, be it the result of a ‘better’ understanding of the text or of frank liberalism, has led to its supplanting *Everyman* as the prototype of the English moral play, yet any sense of the text as any kind of generic paradigm must give way to the pressure of the play’s assailing distinctiveness.

In place of the elaborate visual spectacle of *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mankind* depends on a dense verbal texture and lively action in a relatively small space. The characters of the play, nominally personifications, seem in performance more like complete psychological entities. The action opens with a sermon from Mercy, the ‘virtue’ of the play. Cast unusually as a man, Mercy preaches on the subject of the quality he represents, but in terms of relationships within the action he is more saliently Mankind’s father confessor. His tone is admonitory in the opening of the play, but towards the end, when he believes Mankind to be lost, there is an almost tangible emotionalism written into the role:

Mercy xall neuer be convicte of hys oncurtes condycyon.

*found guilty; unkind*

Wyth wepynge terys be nyȝte and be day I wyll goo and neuer sesse.

Xall I not fynde hym? Yes, I hope. Now God be my proteccyon!

My predylECTe son, where be ye? Mankynde, vbi es?

(lines 767–70)

Mercy the character begs God for the quality he represents, which is, strictly speaking, allegorical nonsense; he stands more for the human aegis by which mercy may be obtained, than for the quality itself.

Mercy’s pupil, Mankind, is presented as an earnest dullard, interested in tilling his plot of ground and keeping his nose clean. The range of vices sent to tempt him is perhaps most distinctive, being both complex and particular to this action. Temptation is orchestrated by Mischief, who does not, however, directly enter the temptation until Mankind has been thoroughly worked over by other vice figures. He then tries to persuade him to succumb to despair and kill himself. Two lines of attack are used to bring Mankind to this point. First there is an attempt to convince him of the superior attractions of bad behaviour. This does not work, and he repels his opponents with his spade:
Morality plays

Go and do yowr labur! God lett you neuer the!  
Or wyth my spade I xall yow dynge, by pe Holy Trinyte!  
Haue 3e non other man to moke, but euer me?  

(lines 376–8)

He has then to be persuaded of the extreme difficulties of continuing good behaviour. The first approach is undertaken by three unsavoury vice figures called Newgyse, Nowadays and Nought, often referred to as ‘distraction vices’. They are dedicated to pure displacement activity. There are dramatic complexities to the interrelationships of vice from the moment these three enter: Nought is clearly the stooge, barely capable of looking after himself, and, sharp as the other two may seem, for them to organise the temptation would be strictly beyond the logic of their characterisation. Mischief, therefore, retains the initiative.

When the temptation to give up his work and join in the fun has been so emphatically resisted by Mankind, Mischief has recourse to another ruse, one which moves the play right away from the personification allegory, which it has nominally observed up to this point. In order to make Mankind’s work so hard that he gives up trying, Mischief, with the assistance of the other vices and members of the audience, calls up a real devil. Titivillus, although remaining invisible to Mankind, agrees to appear in corporeal form to the audience: ‘I com wyth my leggys wnder me,’ he promises (line 454). He then puts a board under Mankind’s plot, so that it is too hard to dig, and sends a call of nature to divert him from his prayers, and the temptation is thereby effected.

The specific didactic burden of Mankind concerns honest labour as a remedy for the sin of sloth. This opposition not only governs the action and setting of the play, but is carried right through to rhetorical details (334), as Mercy’s measured latinate verse is set against degenerate nonsense consisting of parodies of that style, blasphemy and scatological expletives. Mercy issues an early warning to the three minor vices: ‘Thys ydyll language 3e xall repent’ (line 147). Mankind’s fall may be charted by whose language he speaks. Titivillus, who also appears in the Towneley Last Judgement play and in the sermon collection Jacob’s Well, was traditionally responsible for idle gossip, collecting in his bag, for instance, all the words left out of the divine office by slovenly priests (331).

The temptation is to sloth and the remedy is presented throughout the play as agricultural labour, supported by scriptural authority, drawing centrally on the book of Job. The play’s set consists solely of Mankind’s plot of ground and his only prop, his spade. Yet Mankind is not necessarily tailored to the tastes of an audience of peasants any more than is Piers Plowman. Labour metaphorically represented the life of stable spiritual endeavour.
necessary for the accomplishment of mercy. His designation as an agricultural labourer enhances the allegorical range of Mankind himself, for he is not only a personification of all men, a representative of any member of the play’s audience, but he suggests typologically the fallen Adam, often depicted in the visual arts with a spade, beside Eve with her distaff. The play’s use of Latin, not just as translated tags but exploited wittily and dynamically within the text, mitigates an entirely bucolic performance context.

The play has intense regional and seasonal affiliations. Place-names in the text clearly fix it in East Anglia, and seasonally the play makes sense only as part of a Shrovetide festivity on the eve of Lent. The texts that Mercy quotes from Job are part of the Ash Wednesday liturgy, whereas the activities of the minor vices have more in keeping with the carnivalesque revels of Shrovetide (335), the climax of the Christmas revels. That they make the audience sing a very bawdy ‘Christmas song’ is in no way incongruous, as the celebration of Christmas traditionally continued right up to the beginning of Lent.

Attention is often drawn to what are apparently intrusions from the mummers’ play tradition (336, 363). Mischief, in curing the defeated minor vices, echoes the quack doctor familiar in mummers’ plays of recent tradition, offering cures which involve amputation of the wounded member. The initial arrival of the vices in the place occupied by Mankind and Mercy can also be equated with similar traditions, but here it is presented as an intrusion, perhaps akin to the house-visit of seasonal licence associated with Shrovetide celebrations, although unfortunately the text is missing a leaf in the middle of this section. The play’s inventive incorporation of what may loosely be referred to as ‘folk’ elements does not necessarily preclude a well-to-do audience in some private house or institution such as a guildhall or university college, where uninvited players customarily burst in on seasonal revelry with some entertainment.

Mankind contains various structural provisions for ensuring that the audience submit to its processes and become involved in the action, so that the moral lesson becomes an object lesson. The dramatist employs the practices of the traditions on which he draws to stimulate responses in the audience that parallel those of the protagonist. Newgyse, Nowadays and Nought persuade the audience to sing a rude song, addressing them directly:

\begin{verbatim}
NOWADAYS: Make rom, sers, for we haue be longe! delayed long
                We wyll cum gyf yow a Cristemas songe.
NOUGHT: Now I prey all ye yeomanry that ys here yeomanry
           To synge wyth ws wyth a mery chere. (lines 331-4)
\end{verbatim}

The entire entrance employs so-called ‘popular’ theatrical conventions – the ‘make room’ formula, direct address and a song, but the audience has, by the end, fallen into idleness of tongue ahead of the protagonist. Something
Morality plays

that has the auspices of a digression turns out to be structurally significant and implicating.

Precisely the same technique, by which familiar theatrical convention is manipulated to operate structurally, occurs with the entry of Titivillus. The motive for calling up a spectacular devil slips from the fictional one of destroying Mankind to the factive one of entertaining a paying audience. The actor performing the role of Newgyse delivers lines of direct address to the audience in parody of Mercy’s rhetorical register, but in content as a performer:

Now gostly to owr purpos, worschypfull souerence, devoutly
We intende to gather mony, yf yt plese your neclygence,
For a man wyth a hede J?at ys of grett omnipotens. (lines 459–61)

The audience is faced with the clear proposition that the play cannot continue until they pay, the fiction is then re-established and it becomes apparent that the audience has participated in a black mass and enabled Mankind’s final downfall to be effected. They have done this for reasons of practicality, adopting the line of least resistance. This is also how Mankind will fall. If The Castle of Perseverance places its audience in its mimetic universe, Mankind, an altogether more intimate play, uses traditional dramatic practices to involve them in its action.

WISDOM

Both The Castle and Mankind present a phenomenological, experiential account of the action of grace upon man. Wisdom is much more intellectually analytical. The formal psychology of the fall into sin is examined in Wisdom in a way that makes Mankind and Humanum Genus’s succumbing seem arbitrary. God and the devil are presented directly in the play as Wisdom and Lucifer, but all the other dramatis personae are parts of a complex protagonist. The soul is initially presented as Anima, but the action of fall and redemption is delegated to the three ‘Mights’ – Mind, Will and Understanding – interacting in strict sequence. The play also includes an array of non-speaking characters, all of whom are also dimensions of the psyche of the protagonist. No deeds of sin are represented as exempla in Wisdom: the fall is an intellectual one, disfiguring to the soul, which is then cleansed by penance. The play’s sustaining metaphor is marriage, Wisdom describing himself as,

Spows of pe chyrche and very patrone, pattern/patron
Wyffe of eche chose sowle, chosen
(lines 15–16)
and Anima being presented as the recalcitrant bride. The sacrament of penance, which is the underlying focus of the play, is, therefore, represented within the action by another sacrament.

The play opens with a scene in which Wisdom and Anima explore their relationship, laying the foundation for later action. Wisdom's appearance, minutely described in the first of many elaborate stage directions, indicates that he is an embodiment of Christ in Majesty, but carrying the symbols of the whole Trinity, the cross of the Son, mounted on the orb of the Creator, and the sceptre of the sanctifier, the Holy Spirit. The iconography of his appearance is supported by what he says, identifying himself with the Trinity together, but with the Son 'properly', 'by reason'.

St Augustine's *De Trinitate* is the source which offers the quintessential explanation of wisdom as the entire Trinity, but especially the Son (326). Augustine founded his argument upon the text of John 1.14: 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us.' John's 'word', drawn from the Greek *logos*, is fused with the 'wisdom' bestowed on Solomon in Hebraic tradition, existing prior to the Creation, and God's most precious gift to man, defined by St Paul in I Corinthians 1.20–24:

> hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ... For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness: But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

Augustine concludes that man's way to salvation lies through his participation in the wisdom of God, which amounts to a knowledge of God the Son. This is what Anima is urged to move towards by Wisdom, clearly established visually and verbally as the Trinity and the Son, three-in-one, God and man. As word-made-flesh, Wisdom also represents the essential duality of Christ as God and man, imperfectly mirrored in the soul. In the soul this duality is defined as reason and sensuality, thus the iconography of Anima's costume is explained – white and black to represent this duality, which is also her inherent instability, the potential of which will be realised in the ensuing action.

One of the properties of the fallen condition of man is his subjection to time and change. Hence, when the soul is represented as its own trinity of Mind, Will and Understanding in the play, its aspects appear successively, separate but initially harmonious, singing tenor, bass and the 'mean'. Anima's very vulnerability lies in her reducibility, which explains doctrinally why the central character is fragmented, even if this fragmentation appears dramatically injudicious.
Morality plays

The fall of the protagonist depends on an extension of the proposition of imperfect likeness into the realms of spurious likeness, disguise and deceit, as perpetrated by Lucifer. As each of the Mights falls, he, too, takes on a false likeness or disguise: Mind becomes ‘Maintenance’; Understanding, ‘Perjury’, and Will, ‘Gentle Fornication’. These distortions of identity are reflections of the nature of the temptation offered by Lucifer. In this play it is not one single sin which the composite protagonist is lured into, so much as an alternative way of life: Lucifer argues that the contemplative life is less pleasing to God than the mixed life, but what he puts forward as the mixed life is purely secular. Disguise, dissimilarity and distortion of person have their counterpart in the unreason of fallacious argument in the fall scene.

The doctrine of the play is Augustinian, therefore, but its means of expression through dialogue owes much to fourteenth-century contemplative writers, particularly Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and the German Henry Suso (323, 327). The sustained metaphor of marriage in the play not only gives it intellectual coherence, but also allows for the relationship between Christ and the individual soul to be expressed in terms of love imagery, with an emphasis on the passionate and instinctive nature of that relationship. This play, therefore, rather than seeing the soul as a battleground between good and evil, draws on a tradition suggesting that the soul is the multifaceted object of contemplative exploration. All the strategies of the play, its careful placing of characters on its envisaged set, its elaborate symbolic costumes, its apportionment of role and its use of the marriage metaphor, substantiate this approach to the interrelatedness of the many aspects of the soul, in fact the psychology, that it promotes.

Placing so genteel and doctrinal a drama as Wisdom in a plausible milieu is tricky. Much of the topical reference material is relevant only to courtiers. Mind when he falls becomes Maintenance, or the practice of hiring surplus retainers who will bear arms on one’s behalf in return for protection. He has a reciprocal relationship with Perjury, Understanding’s fallen identity, as the chief protection offered in so-called bastard feudalism was protection from the law of the land, effected most simply by the bribing of jurors.

The tendency was to link the play with a London audience until Gail McMurray Gibson (324), on grounds of the external, casual evidence of manuscript marginalia, suggested reviewing its East Anglian connections and persuasively demonstrated several circumstantial links with the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds, Cox Macro’s home town. The recent discovery that the scribe and earliest owner of the Macro copy was a monk of Bury (see above) goes far towards substantiating the suggestion. The subject matter, being a consideration of the relative merits of contemplative, mixed and secular lives, is well suited to an audience such as might be found in one of
the richest abbeys in England, one which, although nominally full of contemplatives, also owned and ran the prosperous cloth-town in which it was situated. It was also embroiled in national politics and frequently entertained the court. At the time around which it was likely that the play was written, the Abbey was busy ingratiating itself with the Yorkist monarch, Edward IV, having supported the defeated Henry VI. Kingship and authority are major themes within the play: Wisdom and Anima, although their meaning is eternal, are clad in the manner of a contemporary monarch and his consort, and the fall into sin within the play features contemporary issues concerning the abuse of authority.

A view of the play that fixes it in a specific social context also illuminates the play's strategies for involving its audience. The initial tableau of Wisdom and Anima, if played at a banquet for the visit of the real monarch and his consort, not only suggests a moral doctrinal truth, but substantiates it with an intelligible visual mirror of the political circumstances in which the action is set. The banqueters become loyal subjects of the king and Wisdom. The fall of Will into the temptations of the flesh has a direct humorous analogue with the banquet context, whereas the fall of Mind and Understanding into political corruption reflects more darkly the crimes to which courtiers and their acolytes could be tempted in such turbulent times.

Once one begins to look at the way in which the stage picture in Wisdom develops metaphoric connotations it becomes apparent that visual aspects of the play do rather more than support meaning as conveyed by spoken text. Costume and set in particular open up other dimensions of meaning in the play. In the opening scene Christ as king is seated centrally and enthroned, suggesting not only an earthly monarch by his sumptuous clothing, but Christ in Majesty at the Last Judgement as it can still be seen in numerous paintings, especially the chancel-arch frescoes of the Judgement so common in East Anglian wool churches. It is inconceivable to imagine the ensuing action without the kind of horizontal symmetry and vertical hierarchy which that implies. In addition to symmetries and oppositions, there is change, another aspect of the play’s moralised process, which is visually and emblematically developed. Garment change accompanies change of name to indicate change in moral status and identity. Appropriately, Lucifer, the prince of disorder, abuses this language by disguising himself as a goodly gallant whilst remaining unchanged in his moral character. Hence visual expression is succinctly given through the language of the theatre to his inherently deceitful and unstable nature.

Codes of appearance are given their most extravagant expression in Wisdom in the non-speaking masque elements of the play. The Five Wits belong to Anima in her incorrupt state and are consequently dressed all in
Morality plays

white, a supportive signal of the purity of the soul. All these disguisings embedded in the action are unambivalent and are removed and replaced when a moral change takes place. Hence the white robes, liturgical song and procession of the Wits are later replaced by the three masques of Maintenance, Perjury and Gentle Fornication. Mind/Maintenance’s masquers are dressed in a livery which parodies the ostentatious traffic in badges that characterised bastard feudalism, and Understanding/Perjury’s masquers wear double-faced masks, whereas Will/Gentle Fornication’s masquers are all anonymously identical.

These non-speaking elements contribute to the play’s meaning not only through their content but by reference to the other theatrical forms they represent. Liturgical procession and song are equated with good, whereas the disguising, the kind of entertainment courtiers expected at a feast, is equated explicitly with fallen virtue. Many later plays incorporate masque or mumming elements to enhance their properties as visual spectacle, but none gives it so potent and witty a semantic value as Wisdom. A normally morally neutral and celebratory theatrical form is set in such a way as to give it derogatory moral bias. Wisdom is a curious metatheatrical composite, in which the entire masque element is transposed as the play’s antimasque, to be assimilated as order is confirmed. It therefore confirms orthodox Christianity, recommending the harmonious marriage of the individual soul with Christ and of the church with the state. It may also controversially insinuate that true authority and harmony can best be achieved by the submission of secular authority to modes of ecclesiastical authority. Despite its apparently arcane theological argument, Wisdom is intended to be visually sumptuous and demands that its audience bring to it not only an ability to understand its theology but an experience of contemporary theatrical forms, in order to comprehend its strategies and discover its range of potential meaning.

EVERYMAN

Although Everyman has long been seen as the archetypal moral play, the first medieval English play of any kind to be revived in modern production, it is generally believed not to be a native English composition at all, but a translation of the Dutch Elckerlijc. The question of priority has been the subject of extended critical debate. The Low Countries had an unbroken tradition from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries of urban theatrical activity institutionalised in guilds of rhetoricians, the Rederijker Kamer. These held competitive festivals of drama, as well as publishing plays written by their members, under their own imprint. Elckerlijc was written for a Rhetoricians’ festival in the 1490s in Antwerp. The surviving English
tradition cannot match the Dutch either in proliferation or sophistication until the sixteenth century, but the survival of *Everyman* and its Dutch source testifies to a degree of cross-fertilisation that one could only expect in the case of two near trading neighbours. Although the English version varies slightly from its original, both show the influence of the current of continental reformist religious asceticism known as the *Devotio moderna*. *Everyman* survives in four printed texts, two printed by Pynson, two by John Skot, all undated; but the play in English may be as late as the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

It is another play about every man’s journey towards death, but this time it begins in the last act, concentrating wholly on the preparation for death, or how to avoid dying like Hamlet’s father,

Unhousel’d, disappointed, unaneled;
No reckoning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.
O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!

*(Hamlet, 1.5, lines 77–80)*

It draws upon contemporary commonplace teachings on the subject, such as *The Book of the Craft of Dying* and particularly *The Mirrour of St Edmund*, by Edmund Rich, Archbishop of Canterbury. Its characters are personifications, its theme the salvation of the soul, expressed through the customary device of sustained metaphor, in this instance the reckoning of an account. Yet *Everyman* is very different from the Macro Plays, most assailingly so in its even tone of high seriousness. As the protagonist’s fall into sin has taken place before the action begins, there is no conflict, no *psichomachia*, but simply an orderly progress towards a predetermined end.

The play’s prologue sets up its didactic nature:

This mater is wonders precyous; wonderfully
But the entent of it is more gracys,
And swee to bere awaye.  

*(lines 7–9)*

It also makes the assumption that all its audience are sinners and employs no ruses which suggest that the play might be designed purely for diversion. They are required to listen ‘with reverence’ (line 2). The theme, which lies behind the action yet never takes place, is judgement. 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 judgement each individual will meet at death with the Last Judgement.

Judgement becomes pilgrimage as Everyman sets out in search of the most fitting companions to accompany him. Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin
and Riches will not go with him, Good Deeds is too weak. This accords with the orthodox Augustinian doctrine of penance, which makes clear that salvation cannot be attained by good deeds alone. Everyman learns from Knowledge that the necessary grace comes from the sacrament of penance, which he approaches via Confession and the gown of contrition, thereby strengthening his good deeds. The parts of the sacrament of penance – contrition, confession, absolution, extreme unction and satisfaction – are all worked through in the play in some detail. At this point in the action he has overcome the first crisis. He then embarks on finding companions to accompany him yet again, and after unsuccessfully attempting to recruit Beauty, Strength, Discretion and Five Wits, he is finally left to face Death with only his Good Deeds, though Knowledge accompanies him to the graveside.

The play reverses the accepted morality play focus on defining evil so that the audience may better recognise and avoid it, and concentrates on defining the good. The resultant want of conflict between vice and virtue, of good and bad angels, clears the way for a different and poignant message about man’s condition in the face of death, for Everyman is a play about abandonment, focusing on Everyman’s want of a comforter. The central irony is that, in order to balance his account, Everyman must subtract, yet he persists in seeing his plight in terms of simple mercantilism, and he pathetically attempts to bribe Death.

Structurally the play deals in two sets of meetings, separated by a reversal of situation when the first four companions leave. The second attempt to muster companions can look like a senseless repetition, but is in fact a development. John Conley (337) identifies the first group as ‘goods of fortune’ that are external to the protagonist. These are tested according to the classical definitions of the good friend found in, for example, Cicero’s De Amicitia, and are found to be wanting. A good friend is one who has been tested, who is eternal, who is virtuous and whose virtue is of supernatural origins, a gift from God. The tests are to be found in Proverbs 17 and in Ælred of Rievaulx’s De Spirituali Amicitia. Only Good Deeds and Knowledge are fit to pass these tests. The second set of would-be friends are subjected to the same tests, but they are different in kind, being ‘goods of the soul’, attributes integral to the protagonist. These are not friends that Everyman has selected but those he has inherited, and their leaving him mirrors his movement through life. They are not vicious in leaving him, but merely reflect the limitations of human nature. Hence, although the play’s action apparently begins at the end of life’s pilgrimage, it has embedded within its second half the extended time scheme of Everyman’s whole life, represented in his abandonment first by Beauty, then by Strength, Discretion and Five Wits. Once Everyman comes to self-knowledge in the middle of
the play the pattern of his life, arranged in terms of the attributes associated in turn with Youth, Manhood, Middle Age and Old Age, passes before his eyes as a series of treacherous transient companions.

The play, therefore, has a most subtle time scheme, where the time of the action is the same as the stage time, as is the case with *Mankind*, but a further extended time scheme is conveyed by personification allegory. The play is also full of references to time and its inexorable passage. The message is a pessimistic one—life is unreal, death is the only reality. The audience is made aware of the inevitability of death, and death’s finality; suffering and loneliness eclipse any sense of what may lie beyond. *Everyman*’s companions are not false vices, they are simply irrelevant, existing on a superficial plane. By extension, it suggests that life’s companions are delusory, that the fallen condition is one of perpetual abandonment. Most strikingly, as *Everyman* cannot be redeemed this side of death, the focus of this play alone approaches the tragic, whereas all the other native morality plays, in their final spiritual optimism, conform to the resolution of a comic ending.

*Everyman* is a relatively complicated play in several respects, certainly reflecting the sophisticated and competitive context of its original. The suggestion that death is the final reckoning, requiring the balancing of an account, is apt in the mercantile urban world of the *kamers*. Rhetorically the play adopts a middle style, with sections of lively dialogue between *Everyman* and his companions. He then moves up into a higher style in soliloquy, his language becoming increasingly biblical as he moves towards death. As far as the play’s staging is concerned, at least seven actors are required to play on a set which has to include a raised place for God as well as houses for the friends. A fixed set with several scaffolds seems most probable.

*THE PRIDE OF LIFE*

The fear of confronting death unprepared is also central in the one text that remains to be discussed. The problematic 502-line fragment known as *The Pride of Life* is probably the earliest surviving text in English that conforms to the criteria defining the morality play. The manuscript version of the play was written in cramped columns on the reverse of account rolls from Holy Trinity Priory, Dublin, dating from 1337–46, and was lost in 1922 in an explosion at Four Courts’ Building in Dublin. Subsequent editions have depended on the description and edition made by James Mills for the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland in 1891, which included an image of one page of text made by photozincography (85, plate 3). The play was clearly
copied later than the accounts in the manuscript, but beyond that it has proved hard to establish a date. The extant copy has been placed in the early to mid fifteenth century because of its apparent generic relationship to the Macro plays and, for similar reasons, an English original has been suggested. More tangible relationships to non-dramatic Anglo-Irish poetry, notably in the early fourteenth-century Kildare manuscript, in the area of metrics and scribal practices, must permit the possibility of a fourteenth-century date and Irish provenance for this play.

The general outline of the play's action can be cautiously constructed from its long prologue, equivalent in function to the banns of *The Castle of Perseverance*. The protagonist, the King of Life, is introduced, royal of birth, haughty and afraid of no one, particularly,

(He) dredith no deth for to deye.

He is warned to prepare for death by his queen, then – when this has no effect – by a bishop. He then sends his messenger, Mirth, to issue a challenge to Death. At this point the text breaks off, but the Prologue indicates that the King dreams of Death taking everyone. On waking, he fights with Death and loses, so his soul is conveyed to Hell. It is then saved by the Virgin Mary, who prays to her Son to intercede.

To the literary critic the most striking characteristic of this play is the plethora of analogues – dramatic, pseudo-dramatic and non-dramatic – suggested at every turn. In terms of its overall plot structure, concerning life, death and salvation, it is typical of the morality play as observed so far. There is no developed *psychomachia*, as the potential for damnation is integral to the character of the protagonist from the outset rather than being externally imposed as part of the action of vice figures operating on him: Fortitudo and Sanitas, his two guards, serve to corroborate the King’s erroneous moral stance rather than to construct it. Mirth, the messenger figure, is more agent of misrule than vice, part commentator, part court fool. The movement towards death and the failure to prepare for death adequately are, however, reminiscent of *The Castle of Perseverance*, as is the last minute retrieval of the soul from hell by the power of grace. The roles of the Queen and the Bishop construct a pattern of action reminiscent of *Everyman*, where the protagonist proceeds on the path to self-destruction in the face of increasingly emphatic warnings from the play’s other characters. If the Prologue is to be accepted as an accurate description of the play’s later action, and there is no reason to suppose otherwise, the last scene involved first the appearance of devils to carry off the soul, then the appearance of the Virgin Mary to plead for the soul’s salvation (342).

If the play is accepted in this way as a straightforward analogue to
Wisdom or The Castle of Perseverance, however, it is theological nonsense, for there is no pattern of repentance in the protagonist. Even allowing for the most extreme Augustinian belief in the primacy of grace, the play read in this manner carries a rather suspect didactic message. The protagonist of The Pride of Life is radically different from that of the other plays studied so far, for he is not a representative of all mankind in the face of death, but a personification of the life-force itself and, therefore, the natural opponent of death. The absence of a pattern of psychomachia does not lead to an absence of conflict from the plot as it does in Everyman; rather that conflict is presented as the more primeval combat between life and death (311, pp. 14–15). This aspect of the play may be related to the more nebulous area of sub-literary dramatic activity assumed to have persisted throughout the Middle Ages in the form of folk rituals associated with the agricultural year. That death should prove not a problem to be overcome, but the solution to the regeneration of the life-force, may be associated with the harvest in which the grain must be cut down before it can bring forth new life. We have already noted in the context of Mankind, how, in recent versions of mummers’ plays, the quack doctor character as a cure for the headache offers to cut off the head of the afflicted and set it on again. Beheadings leading to regeneration are frequent, particularly in Irish folklore. The literary critic must proceed with a certain circumspection in these areas, but the general area of connection with what is understood of such rituals appears assailing. The opening speeches of Fortitudo and Sanitas are also insistently reminiscent of the many variants on the character called Slasher in recent mummers’ plays. There is one parallel in literary drama, in the N-Town play of the Death of Herod, which seems also to be influenced by the idea of a struggle between the kings of life and death.

The confrontation between the King of Life and Death in the play is preceded by the King of Life’s dream, described in the Prologue:

Deth comith, he dremith a dredful dreme —
Welle a3te al carye; ought, be anxious
And slow fader and moder and þen heme: slew, him
He ne wold non sparye. would not spare any
(lines 81–4)

This description suggests that the action of the King’s dream was performed on stage, perhaps as a dumb-show in which Death struck down the King’s father and mother, and perhaps others. There is sparse evidence, but clearly a dramatic opportunity here for the inclusion of a miniature Dance of Death, the familiar textual and pictorial tradition of the late Middle Ages in which a personification of death seized representatives of different ranks in
society, demonstrating, as the play does, the inevitability, unpredictability and socially levelling properties of death.

It should also be observed that the play, being given a court setting in which the characters include a king, a queen, a bishop and two knights, not only demonstrates the levelling properties of death in the traditional Dance of Death manner, but takes the form of another feudal allegory, where man’s relationship with God is explained in terms of a contract of rights and duties. More specifically, however, the action of the whole play, but particularly the Queen’s attempted protection of her King, is assailing suggestive of the game of chess, not uncommonly employed in medieval didactic allegory, notably in the protracted complaint of the Man in Black in Chaucer’s Book of the Duchess.

The Prologue does not make clear whether the King of Life’s own combat with Death was part of the dream – played out in dumb-show possibly as a Dance of Death or as the denouement of a game of chess, or a combination of the two – or followed his waking. After the King’s death, however, it is clear that a separate character, representing the King’s soul, entered the action. The corrupt nature of the text again means that it is not clear precisely what form the ensuing action took, but there was some exchange at this point between the body and the soul. Again there is a rich field of possible analogues in the popular body and soul debates of the later Middle Ages. If the play did not contain an actual disputation, it probably at least included a complaint of the soul to the body, such as occurs near the end of The Castle of Perseverance. Dramatic poems in which the soul bewails its fate accusingly to the body are a recognised sub-group within the body and soul debate tradition as in, for instance, the Anglo-Saxon Address of the Soul to the Body.

The play, in short, suggests analogies with a large number of medieval literary and sub-literary traditions concerning the coming of death, the major of which have been indicated above. The popularity in the late Middle Ages in northern Europe of literary, didactic and visual materials exhorting the Christian to prepare for his own death is well attested. Within the play, the Bishop’s sermon directed at the King of Life, but, of course, also at the play’s audience more directly, is an embedded standard complaint against the abuses of the age, in which all the things of this world are presented as corrupt and empty, and the only certainty impending death:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ricmen spart for no } & \text{ping} \quad \text{spare} \\
\text{To do } & \text{pe por wrong;} \quad \text{poor} \\
\text{\textregistered} & \text{ pingit not on hir ending} \quad \text{think} \\
\text{Ne on Det } & \text{pat is so strong.} \quad \text{(lines 363–6)}
\end{align*}
\]
Despite the physical problems presented by the text of *The Pride of Life*, which limit the amount of weight it can be given, the play serves admirably to demonstrate the inherent dangers central to any study of the English medieval morality play. The criteria by which the genre is defined are extremely general and permissive, particularly in the area of theme. Central to all the plays discussed is the nature and brevity of the life of man, the nature of death and the necessity of making suitable spiritual preparation for death: this might be said of the vast bulk of late medieval religious writing. There are undeniably features that these plays have in common in the treatment of these themes as dramatic text, particularly in the devising of dramatic character and the presentation of man’s potential for damnation and salvation as a temporal process. As soon as one examines their dramaticurgy more closely, however, their debt to other dramatic and pseudo-dramatic forms becomes apparent.

**CONCLUSION**

The five plays that constitute the corpus of medieval English moralities do not really supply adequate evidence of a coherent ‘movement’ within the development of native theatre. For this reason, one must be very careful in privileging them corporately as the nursery of Renaissance drama. To persist in imposing that retrospective burden on these plays also seriously distorts and underrates many of their own characteristics. Each play, far from representing a beginning, demonstrates an allusive, self-conscious theatricality. The texts show a variety of ways in which their authors manipulated the boundary between the play world and the real world, often addressing the audience directly and using the varied communication codes of the theatre to draw them into the action of the play. The assumption within the texts of audiences sufficiently competent and experienced in the workings of theatre to comply with such strictly metatheatrical devices again seems to bear witness to the maturity of the form.

Such devices are arrestingly exploited in Henry Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucre* (88), written in 1497. The play is not a morality play, but a dramatisation of a humanist treatise on the nature of true nobility. It is both the earliest surviving English secular play and a tour de force of theatrical manipulation, suggesting a strong but now lost tradition of play writing in this mode. The play has a sub-plot, in which two characters, A and B, emerge from the audience, become servants of the two suitors of Lucre, and unsuccessfully woo Lucre’s maid, Joan. In their early banter, A cannot determine whether B is a player or not. As B denies that he is other than just a member of the audience, A complains, with heavy irony, that it is difficult to
Morality plays

tell a player from another man. Later, when B is determined to become Cornelius's servant, A says,

Peace, let be!
By God! Thou wilt destroy all the play.

His companion retorts,

The play began never till now.

Medwall was writing for an elite London audience, but such self-conscious devices are not so very far removed from the manner in which Mankind's author manipulated an audience which has always been designated strictly rural.

Aspects of the dramaturgy of our five morality plays do turn up in the sixteenth-century interlude with a coherence that argues more strongly for the genre than do the individual surviving examples. The pattern of innocence, temptation, fall and redemption was exploited, in the protracted and turbulent years surrounding the Reformation, as an organ of political satire and religious propaganda. Skelton's Magnyfycence (90), written around 1520, has a protagonist who is a universal prince figure, preyed on by vices who are all too tangible as corrupt courtiers and bad counsellors, and who adopt false names and identities in order to bring about the fall. The political, religious and historical are combined in John Bale's King Johan (94), written under Henry VIII and revived under Elizabeth, in which the vices are scions of the Roman Catholic faith. In this very complex play, the vices, in addition to disguising themselves as good counsellors, have historical aliases which suggest an analogy between contemporary circumstances and the period of the reign of King John. John is the protagonist of the historical layer of the plot, whereas the state, represented by the estate figures of Nobility, Civil and Clergy, takes on the role of protagonist of the political morality. Respublica, probably by Nicholas Udall, was written for the first Christmas of the reign of Mary Tudor and, consequently, reverses the argument, creating vice-figures who are presented as self-seeking protestants. As the subject of these plays was not the reform of the self, but of the state, a new figure, representing the people, the victims of misgovernment, entered the cast of characters. He saw his apotheosis in John o' the Commonweal in Sir David Lindsay's play Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis (96), a large-scale political morality play, written in Scotland for outdoor performance in the 1560s.

Plays continued to be acted by both amateurs and professionals, with many, showing the economy of characterisation of Mankind, probably written for touring troupes. Many of the plays written for the court were, however, performed by schoolboys. Although a lot, like Respublica, were
designed for an adult audience, there are those that employ the admonitory plot-structure and themes of the morality play to offer homely education suitable for a youthful milieu. Many have proverbial titles, such as *Enough is as Good as a Feast*, and *The Longer thou Livest the More Fool thou Art*. Educational themes were dealt with in plays written for and by those interested in the new humanist learning, particularly John Rastell, whose *The Four Elements* (91) is a vehicle for material about the New World, but has characters that bear vestigial hallmarks of the traditional Vice and Virtue. The Vice was particularly persistent, even in plays of an entirely different order, especially comedies, in which he became a harmless agent of misrule, rather like Mirth in *The Pride of Life* (307).

The seventy or so surviving interludes written between the period of the medieval saints' plays, cycle plays and moralities and the construction of the first Elizabethan theatres represent a major period in English theatre history in their own right. In the present context, they are important in suggesting that there was some consensus about the morality play form, a form which was adapted for the changed perceptions of the world that developed during the sixteenth century. It is a form which is imperfectly attested by the five extant English medieval moralities, not because they are in any sense crude or ill-fashioned, but precisely because each demonstrates an individuality and inventiveness which in turn bears witness to its own place in a sophisticated, varied and thriving theatrical tradition.

NOTES

1 The first modern production was in the very influential adaptation directed by William Poel in 1901 (see 311, pp. 1–5), the text of which is preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
