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Teaching Psychomachia in *The Castle of Perseverance*

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The Castle of Perseverance is a foundational text in the history of English drama. The earliest English morality play to survive in its entirety, it is emblematic for its use of the motif of psychomachia, that is, the battle for the human soul. The critics' focus on the conflict of good and evil forces in the play originally stems from their search for analogies and continuities between the poem *Psychomachia*, written by the Late Antique Latin poet Prudentius in the early years of the fifth century, and the dramatic tradition of medieval moralities. Critical interest in the link between medieval drama and Prudentius's poem can be traced back to the German scholar Wilhelm Creizenach and his *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*, published in successive volumes from the year 1893 onwards (Schell 235). In English literary criticism the connection between *Psychomachia* and medieval moralities was noted as early as in 1910 by E.N.S. Thompson in his monograph "The English Moral Play," which rests its argument on an analysis of *The Castle* as a model of psychomachia (Kantrowitz 69). The motif of psychomachia, so prominent in *The Castle of Perseverance*, is not chronologically limited to the medieval period, and its influence can clearly be seen in Renaissance English literature, both drama and poetry. For this reason, alongside its completeness, complexity and theatrical scale, *The Castle* deserves to be included in the syllabi of academic courses in the history of English literature. The following article offers a new translation from the original Middle English of a key scene of verbal psychomachia in the play, which can serve as a basis for an in-class discussion and close reading of the playtext. Beginning with a theoretical introduction to problems implicit in the notion of psychomachia as such, it provides a comprehensive analysis of the verbal battle for the soul of Mankind and offers suggestions for further discussion of later texts influenced by the medieval dramatic tradition. Presenting the play to the students in the manner outlined below will ensure such learning outcomes as (i) an understanding of the theological significance of the play's mode of staging, (ii) a comprehension of the two modes of psychomachia employed in the play and of the ambiguity of the allegorical figures participating in it, (iii) an appreciation of the role of references to Mankind's movement in the play and (iv) an awareness of the difference in the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed the by Good Angel and the Bad Angel in their attempt to win the soul of the human figure.

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The Castle of Perseverance survives in a single manuscript known as the Macro manuscript, now housed in the Folger library in Washington, DC. Although MS V.a.354, as it is known, contains the text of two other morality plays, *Mankind* and *Wisdom*, it should not be considered as a single unit, since it consists of separate manuscripts bound together (King 243). Two leaves are missing from the text of *The Castle*, leaving out about a hundred lines from the otherwise complete text (Klausner 5); the surviving text is 3649 lines long. The manuscript of *The Castle* is believed to date back to 1440 (King 243); however, topical references to contemporary fashion suggest that the play originated in the first quarter of the fifteenth century (Klausner 5). *The Castle of Perseverance* presents "the whole ontology of man" (Klausner 1), from birth to death and beyond to the scene of final judgment. As James Keller notes, "[m]orality plays are commonly based upon any of three metaphors: the representation of life as a pilgrimage, the pattern of fall and repentance, or the battle between the forces of good and evil (psychomachia)" (159); *The Castle of Perseverance* makes use of all three. Representing human life allegorically, it pitches virtues and vices, and a good and bad angel, against each other to struggle for the soul of the figure of Humanum Genus (Mankind). Their verbal and physical skirmishes are punctuated time and again by numerous references to movement made by Mankind and the actor's actual movement on-stage, with the play representing "theatrically as a physical journey" the pilgrimage of human life "from birth to death" (King 244) with all its shifts of moral alignment.

The play is unique among medieval English moralities in containing a diagram illustrating its mode of staging. The stage was circular, with four main scaffolds constructed at compass points – that of God (in the East), Devil (North), World (West) and Flesh (South). Mankind finds himself in the midst of all this, most likely born from a centrally located bed above which rises the eponymous castle, where he will later find shelter and face the siege of the vices. The layout of the scaffolds immediately suggests that the challenge facing Mankind consists in making a choice between prioritising the bliss of eternal life in the otherworld to the point of dismissing the allure of earthly existence or orienting himself onto earthly pleasures in the physical world he is born into. The arrangements of the scaffolds also stops short of positing the Devil as an enemy of God; while the conflict between virtues and vices may be seen as part of the universal struggle between good and evil forces that exist in the world, the layout of the stage grants Mankind agency, making it clear that the Devil is God's subordinate. With the Devil seated at the right hand of God, the whole setting is reminiscent of the arrangement between God and Satan in the biblical Book of Job. Rather than being a pawn in an eternal conflict between two opposed forces, Mankind is to make his own choices in this moral landscape – choices that the Devil can only influence from the sidelines, and which God is free to interpret however he pleases, in his infinite mercy granting Mankind salvation in the end despite his repentance coming in the last possible moment. The task ahead of Mankind is difficult, with three directions leading him towards temptation and only one signifying a life of righteousness. There is also a fifth scaffold, that of Greed, located between God and the Devil, "perhaps implying that money in itself is morally neutral and can be used either for good (almsgiving) or ill (overindulgence in the things of the world)" (Klausner 4). Interestingly, the orientation of the scaffolds suggests that the play may have been staged outside churches. With the altars of medieval churches facing east and their entrances looking westwards, the space of the stage may function as a continuation, or analogue, of the sacred architectural space with all its symbolic significance.

The Castle of Perseverance is a mixture of serious didacticism and comedy aimed to entertain the masses. It relies on low humour, including scatological elements, both verbal, as in the speeches of the vices, and performance-wise, as in the stage direction advocating that special care be taken

to ensure the actor playing the devil Belial should have pipes filled with burning gunpowder in his hands, his ears and his arse ("he that schal pley Belial loke that he have gunnepowdyr brennynge in pypys in hys handys and in his erys and in hys ars whenne he gothe to batayl" – Klausner 9). Designed to be entertaining, the play is nonetheless structured to convey a didactic message. It allocates the seven deadly sins into three distinct groups, aligning the sings of the flesh with none other than Flesh himself (Sloth, Gluttony and Lechery), grouping the three spiritual sins under the banner of the Devil (Pride, Wrath and Envy) and singling out Greed as the servant of the World and perhaps the greatest challenge to the spiritual well-being of Mankind. One must acknowledge the hermeneutic tension between two possible interpretations of Mankind's struggle against these vices and what they represent. On the one hand, they stand for inner drives and impulses of the human being; on the other hand, they embody forces of evil believed to operate among men.

While the mode of staging the play seems to underline Mankind's free will in making his way through the temporal space of human life, the psychological reading of the virtues and vices, as well as of the two angels, is a point of contention among scholars. It should be noted that *The Castle*'s indebtedness to the tradition of psychomachia manifests itself above all in the scene of the siege of the castle, with the vices being ultimately repelled from encroaching upon the latter's battlements by a shower of roses from the virtues – a fitting symbol of Christ's sacrifice and the shower of blood that redeems humankind. Thus, as in Prudentius's poem, "the conflict between good and evil takes the form of a pitched battle" (Diller 36). The verbal psychomachia at the beginning of the play shows a different understanding of Mankind's role in all this; while in the verbal exchanges between Humanum Genus and the two angels Mankind makes his own choices, in the scene of the siege he is only a witness to the confrontation of good and evil forces. This constitutes the greatest difference between the two scenes of psychomachia – one predominantly physical and the other verbal – and provides for a lot of ambiguity in the understanding of the nature of the allegorical characters that Mankind interacts with and the extent of his free will. Summarising the genre, Arthur Kirsch notes that the morality play, "though by definition a homiletic presentation of the moral struggle between personified virtues and vices for the soul of man, is also at the same time an intrapsychic drama, a depiction in concrete images of an action *within* the soul of the play's protagonist" (Kirsch 94). Max Harris presents an alternative view, arguing that "the dramatic scope extends beyond the ongoing struggle between good and bad impulses in every man to embrace a conflict on the same scale as that of the Corpus Christi plays: the war between Christ and Devil over the fate of mankind" (Harris 56–57). Harris reads the vices as devils, Satan's minions, noting a lack of symmetry in having the virtues represent the gifts of the Holy Spirit rather than angels (Harris 57). He stresses that "[i]t is Christ, and not man alone, who battles with vices. And it is Satan and his minions, not man alone, who resist" (Harris 62). G. A. Lester warns, however, that "to envisage man's soul as merely the prize of war is to deny man the power to influence his own fate," and, since *The Castle* strongly implies that "man has the free will to choose the right way or to reject it, the *Psychomachia*'s importance should not be overstressed" (Lester xvi). It is also worthwhile to note Helen Cooper's suggestion that in the Middle Ages and the early sixteenth century the allegorical characters stand for powers independent of men whereas a certain change is to be observed later, with Renaissance drama presenting them already as "impulses within the original soul" (Cooper 86). With different critics contending for one option or the other, perhaps it would be instructive to follow Harris in his ultimate conclusion:

> The insistence of the texts that the vices are to be seen as devils, in an age that believed in Satan and his subordinates as real beings, raises questions about the modern psychological interpretation of the plays. The solution … is that we are not in fact faced with a mutually exclusive choice between

> "human frailty" and "diabolical evil"; the vices represent both human sin and supernatural demons in the service of Satan. (Harris 56)
>
> That the vices … are, in one respect, "human manifestations of sin" none would dispute. But to deduce that they are therefore "not abstract evil powers" is to deny the mediaeval imagination, despite its known propensity for allegory and typology, the possibility of signifying two things with a single symbol. (Harris 60)

To adopt this view is to acknowledge *The Castle*'s allegorical mode, at the same granting the possibility that the various figures urging Mankind to follow them may represent actual supernatural beings and not just physical embodiments of inner drives or impulses. Natalie Crohn Schmitt reminds readers of the play that "[t]he distinction between passions and thought on the one hand and the material world on the other is not medieval" (25). This duality of meaning is something that modern readers have to bear in mind when they approach the play.

The action of the play takes place in an allegorical space of a generic nature, with the space of the stage representing not just the physical but also the moral extremities of the universe. Time is here as universal as space, and the linearity of Mankind's pilgrimage through life gives way, through the allegorisation, to the cyclical nature of his experience, common to every human being throughout the ages. The play opens with introductory speeches by the three generals of the vices – World, Devil and Flesh – which leave the audience with the impression of a "timeless, impersonal conflict, and timeless force" (Schell 241). This is when Mankind begins to speak. Edgar Schell notes that "with the entrance of Mankind we are thrust very quickly into time" (241). This is a good starting point for a close reading of the psychomachia scene that is to follow (lines 275–419):

> MANKIND:
> In the fashion of our first father
> This night I was of my mother born.
> From my mother I go, I walk;
> Fully feeble and faint I stand before you.
> I am naked of limb and loin,
> The way Mankind is shaped and fashioned.
> I do not know whither to go or to dwell
> To help myself at midday or morn.
> For shame I stand stupefied.
> I was born this night in bloody condition,
> And naked I am, as you may see.
> Oh, Lord God in Trinity!
> How feeble is Mankind!
>
> Why I was brought into this world
> I do not know; but to woe and weeping
> I have been born, and have nothing at all
> That might help me in anything I do.
> I stand perplexed, full of anxiety.
> Bare and poor is my clothing:
> My head is covered only by the baptismal garb
> That I received at my christening.
> Certainly, I have no more.
> From dust I came, I know right well,
> And as dust I face this season;
> It is great pity of Mankind!
> Lord God, I beg for your grace!

Two angels have been assigned to me.
This one teaches me to be good;
On my right side you may see him;
He came from Christ, who died on the rood.
Another is also ordained to be here
That is my foe wherever I go.
He is busy in whatever way he can
To draw me towards the mad devils
That throng in hell.
Every man that is alive has two of these
To rule over him and his wits.
When man does evil one would absolve him,
While the other draws him to wickedness.

But since these two angels have fallen to me,
Lord Jesus, I ask a boon of you
That I may follow, wherever I go,
The angel that came from the heavenly throne.
Now, Lord Jesus in the heavenly hall,
Hear when I make my moan!
Attentive Christ, to you I call!
As a grisly ghost I groan and complain,
And I am, I know well, full of anxiety.
Oh, Lord Jesus, whither may I go?
A chrisom I have and nothing more.
Alas! Men may be wondrously woeful
When they are first brought forth.

GOOD ANGEL:
Indeed, in truth, it is evident
That man may sing of dire woe,
For each creature can fend for itself,
Except man, as it comes into the world.
Nevertheless, turn yourself away from harm
And serve Jesus, the heavenly king,
And you shall, by green groves,
Fare well in all things.
That Lord that lent you your life –
Have him always in your mind,
Him that died on the rood for mankind,
And serve him till the end of your life,
And certainly you shall not lack anything.

BAD ANGEL:
Peace angel, your words are not wise.
You give him wrong counsel.
He shall draw himself to the service of the World
To dwell with emperors, kings and knights
So that none in the land shall be like him.
Come with me, you that stand as still as stone!
You and I to the World should go,
And then you will see shortly
How soon you will become rich.

GOOD ANGEL:
Oh, peace, angel! You speak folly!
Why should he covet worldly goods
Since Christ and his followers
All stood in poverty here on earth?
Worldly weal everywhere
Fails and fades as water in a stream;
But the kingdom of heaven is tried and trustworthy.
There sits Christ, bright as blood,
Without any distress.
To the World he did not long
But forsook it completely.
Example I find in the Holy Writ,
Which will bear me witness.

Divitias et paupertates ne dederis mihi, Domine!

BAD ANGEL:
Yeah, right! Oh, Man, do not believe him,
But come with me wherever I go!
When you taste a morsel of what the World has to offer,
You will find it sweet and agreeable.
A fair Lady shall be given to you,
That will remedy your sorrow in her chambers;
With riches you shall be showered,
With fine silk to furnish your seats.
I counsel you, let prayer beads be!
When you are full of health
And cheer at food at hand,
Why should you follow God's service?
Come and follow me instead!

MANKIND:
Whom to follow I do not know!
I stand bewildered.
I wish I were fabulously rich
And yet I wish I could also save my soul.
As wind in water I waver.
You would like me to go to the World,
And he wishes that I forsook this path.
Now, so God help me and the holy book,
I do not know which one I shall have!

BAD ANGEL:
Come on, Man! What's your worry?
Go to the World, I'm telling you, quickly;
For there you will be able to fare very well
If that is indeed your wish.
No lord shall be like you.
Think of the World
And fix you attention hard on it;
With gold and silver and rich revenues
You will soon be rich!

MANKIND:
Now, since you have promised me all this
I will go with you and give it a try.
I will not stop until indeed
With the World I go and play,
Certainly, a little while.
In this World is all my trust
To live in indulgence and pleasure:
When we have joined together in a kiss
I trust we shall not part.

GOOD ANGEL:
A! No, Man, for Christ's blood,
Come back by any path you choose!
The World is wicked and full of madness,
And you will live but for a while,
So what do you covet and hope to achieve?
Man, think on your final day
When you will be covered with clay!
And if you think on that moment,
Certainly, you will not sin.

Homo, memento finis, et in aeternum non peccabis.

BAD ANGEL:
Yes, why not ponder on your soul in due time,
But now come forth, Man, and do not take heed of him!
Come on, and restrain it for now;
Your flesh will grow and feed
on the lovely food of life.
With the World you need not fear anything
Until you reach the age of sixty winters.
When your nose begins to get cold,
Then will be the time to turn to goodness.

The following section of the article lists questions that the instructor may ask of students to help them in their close reading and offers brief answers that raise all the key points the students would be expected to mention. Questions concerning the lines spoken by Mankind may include: (i) What is the vision of human life that emerges from Mankind's initial speech?; (ii) What emotions are conveyed by the words of Mankind?; (iii) What is Mankind's relationship with God?; (iv) What natural inclinations does Mankind have? Does he tend towards good or evil?; (v) Find all references to movement in the lines spoken by Mankind – what is their significance? Questions dealing with the two angels may involve issues such as: (i) Which angel is a better tempter and why? (ii) What are the differences between the ways in which the two angels try to persuade Mankind to follow them?; (iii) Imagine you want to adapt the scene to film by showing the images the two angels respectively talk about. What would be the difference between these images?; (iv) What kinds of imagery dominate in the lines spoken by the two angels?; (v) Who do the two angels address when they speak?; (vi) Which angel is more likely to succeed?; (vii) How do the two angels make use of the idea of time in their final lines cited above?; (viii) If one of the two angels makes a better impression on Mankind, what does this say about the human predicament? From the perspective of Christian morality, is this a convincing vision of the moral dilemmas facing every individual?

The vision of human life as presented by Mankind is bleak and portrays him as vulnerable and confused as to what action to take. He stands "stupefied," "perplexed" and "full of anxiety." There is no clear sense of direction for him, and he stands motionless, asking which direction to take and unable to make up his mind. In the third line of his speech he makes it clear that he has no other option but to "go," to "walk," and this implies a necessity of choice as to which direction to take, which communicates the necessity of a moral choice in human life. However, Mankind seems unable to accomplish anything on his own, and stresses his own nakedness and helplessness, prompted by the anguish he experiences to utter a desperate "moan," a plea for help. Significantly, this plea is one of a number of instances in which he addresses God. Mankind is aware of his Creator and asks Him for mercy and guidance. In particular, he singles out Christ, which testifies to the power of the special relationship between the Son of God and Man. This relationship is solidified right at the start of Mankind's journey through life by the sacrament of baptism, which leaves him with a chrisom, a baptismal garb, which is the only thing that offers him any protection against the challenges and dangers of the life that awaits him. Significantly, it is Christ that Mankind asks for direction in the final line of his opening speech. This signifies a natural openness to the Word of God, as Mankind's realisation that he faces two angels that want to draw him in opposite directions leads him to ask directly for help in making the right choice.

The two angels' rhetorical strategies are completely different, and the bad angel easily comes across as a better tempter. Above all, the things he offers can provide immediate gratification in the earthly life, whereas the good angel appeals to Mankind's concerns about his ultimate fate and his future existence in the afterlife, whose lure is far less pronounced in Mankind's perception than the riches and bodily pleasures promised by the bad angel. It would appear that the bad angel understands the hierarchy of human needs, while the good angel fails to address the basic physiological needs of the naked and confused Mankind and raises issues that the latter is in no condition to consider in depth given his overall suffering. In fact, the good angel even resorts to threats, implying a sorry end for Mankind if he does not "think on [his] final day." At the same time, he positions himself as a source of authority, creating a sense of distance between himself and Mankind, and inspiring feelings of guilt and remorse in the human character. It is likely that the Latin lines were not meant to be spoken by the good angel (Klausner 6), but if they were this would have certainly reinforced a sense of detachment between the good angel and Mankind, which clearly emerges from the dynamics of the interactions between all three characters. Significantly, the good angel first addresses the bad angel to correct him, whereas the latter refuses to engage in a theological debate with his adversary, ignores him, and immediately addresses Mankind in a most direct fashion. The imagery used by the two angels is also strikingly disparate. Images summoned up by the words of the bad angel are pleasant and easy to imagine and long for, which stands in direct contrast to the only two concrete images that the good angel makes use of, that is, the poverty of Christ's followers and the vision of Christ enthroned in heaven. It is either the image of Christian poverty or a very vague picture of the afterlife that his words convey, and this can in no way compete with the opulence of the luxurious vision of his evil counterpart not only because it is less appealing but also because it is simply difficult to picture in the first place and lacks the ability to spark Mankind's powers of imagination. It does not come as a surprise that the first round of the battle for the human soul is won by the bad angel, especially since his language, full of concrete images and lacking the abstraction of the good angel's discourse, matches Mankind's style of linguistic expression.

The bad angel seems to accept the good angel's point about time and acknowledges that a time will indeed come when Mankind may need to repent and surrender himself to the will of

God, but he argues that other needs must be satisfied first, which makes perfect sense from the perspective of human psychology even if it defies Christian morality. It would thus seem that the natural, biological drives within Mankind are in conflict with his spiritual development. This is exactly what the staging of the play represents by positioning Mankind between God and the coalition of World and Flesh – it is a battle between body and soul. The choice has to be made between this life and the distant vision of life in heaven, and the immediacy of what the World and Flesh have to offer gives the bad angel an advantage over his adversary. The temptation of World and Flesh is actually so strong that one may easily forget about the third member of the evil coalition, the Devil himself, just as Mankind may fail to see anything wrong in satisfying his bodily needs. *The Castle of Perseverance* thus offers a comprehensive explication of the hardships inherent in following the path of a good Christian.

The motif of psychomachia survived well into Renaissance drama, and an understanding of how it works in *The Castle* may be of help in appreciating the structure of plays such as Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Marlowe uses the theatrical machinery of medieval moralities by introducing the characters of the good and bad angel and the seven deadly sins, whereas Shakespeare modernises it by positioning the character of Othello between the pernicious snares of the evil Iago and the civilising and restraining effects of Desdemona's love for the Moor. It should be noted, however, that both Marlowe and Shakespeare introduce a similar twist to the relationship between the tempted one and his two angels. In *Doctor Faustus* the good and bad angel have their doubles in the characters of the Old Man and Mephistophilis, and at one point Faustus orders the latter to torment the body of the Old Man and thus to neutralise his effect on the Doctor's soul. In *Othello*, the Moor actually kills his good angel himself by murdering the innocent Desdemona under the spell of Iago's accusations. It would appear that Renaissance drama allows for more variations in the relationship between the tempted one and the two tempters. An appreciation of the original, medieval mode of employing psychomachia, such as *The Castle of Perseverance* offers, and the dynamics of the interaction between the three characters that it involves, allows readers to trace the later developments of the motif and understand the nature of its transformation.

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