

Poetry and its Language

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Some Thoughts on the Language of Devotion at the Edges of the Canon

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I begin with *Everyman* – a strange point of departure, perhaps, for an essay in a volume dedicated to poetry and its language. But we must recall that this “treatise...in manner of a moral play”¹ is written in verse. Doctrinal and theatrical matters may call for our attention first, but there will always be time to examine the writer as a poet. No one ever has to apologise, after all, for discussing the poetry of Shakespeare’s plays. In any case, my remarks on *Everyman* will lead me elsewhere, to the edges of the canon and back.

In our university courses, *Everyman* finds its proper place in a survey of early drama and, consequently, its theological content may frequently be undervalued. I shall return to this. For the moment, it is sufficient to suggest that *Everyman* is not in itself a remarkable piece of theatre, although there are perhaps too many unknown factors for it to be given a fair assessment. There are no records of any performances and the text of the play provides scant information about how it was staged – if it ever was. An occasional reference (such as “Whither art thou going/ thus gaily”, 85-6; “Thee availeth not to cry, weep, and pray”, 140; or “I must needs laugh, I cannot be sad”, 456) gives some indication to the director how to advise his actors. But there are fewer than twenty of these and they offer little information, apart from a brief indication of movement of some sort. Many readers feel that the play is sadly static, that the characters come on and make their speeches, but that the text as we have it contains little in the way of dramatic presentation and precious little characterisation. “I have the cramp in my toe” (356), says Cousin, while *Everyman*’s lack of good deeds suggests the infirmity of the character of that name. But apart from these frequently quoted examples, there is not much else. Modern directors can do more or less what they like².

We should of course hesitate to make hasty remarks about the relative incompetence of the writer’s theatrical art. However poor the work might seem to us as a play, we must not forget that we now have centuries of theatrical masterpieces with which to compare it. The author of *Everyman* was handling a genre which was relatively new and his audience was presumably made up of

1 References to *Everyman* are given by simple line-number in the text. These words are taken from the unnumbered lines (1 and 3-4) of the subtitle or introduction to the play. I wish to thank my friend and former colleague, Margaret Tomarchio, for her careful reading of this essay and for suggesting improvements.

2 Not that the play is often performed. Indeed, its rare appearances in the theatre hardly suggest theatrical greatness.

simple folk – little in the text suggests a sophisticated or learned public. We can presume that they did not often have the opportunity to watch theatrical entertainments. Their expectations were presumably modest and their theatregoing experience slight. If *Everyman* reads like an amateur rather than a professional play, it is because that is what it is. Professional theatre did not really exist as yet.

In such circumstances we are all, perhaps, easily pleased and quickly captivated. Even today, in remote rural areas, youngsters eagerly look forward from one year to the next to the annual village fête, while visitors passing through from the city look on in amazement at the poverty of it all and stifle a yawn. Half a century ago, small-town repertory theatres were usually of a standard that would hardly have satisfied West-End audiences, and we occasionally see, on television or in Arts Cinemas, early silent films which, in comparison with what is produced today, seem primitive and incompetent. For some, of course, that is their charm. Back in the 1920s, however, such films had audiences flocking to the new Picture Palaces to revel in a world of unimaginable glamour. The sheer novelty of a work like *Everyman* was presumably quite enough then for it to have a considerable theatrical impact. But the same can hardly be said of the writer's contribution as a poet. And, in this, it cannot be claimed that the literary past offered little as an example by which to set standards.

The basic problem with *Everyman* is that though the urgency of the narrative itself has a certain impact and calls on some of our most basic sentiments and fears, the overall effect hardly seems to derive from any literary excellence in the text. The writing is laboured and pedestrian: the author limps his way through a text strewn with tags, clichés, ready-made expressions, tortuous word-order, and scarcely competent rhymes.

I agree: such features are frequently found in the literature of the period. There was still much of what amounted more or less to oral composition. Texts were produced with a limited quantity of preliminary rough drafting: writers composed almost as they went along. Much of the "writing" must have been done, not only without revision but even without "writing" as such. Foul papers were few and even, at times perhaps, non-existent. Consequently, stock phrases and expressions were a godsend.

What's more, an audience would be unlikely to object. When a text is to be listened to and picked up immediately on the ear, complexity and density are not necessarily virtues. Keats advised Shelley to "load every rift... with ore" (Gittings 390); one could almost say that medieval poetry has to be the poetry of unloaded rifts. I am of course exaggerating: Chaucer's poetry and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, have their share of tags, set phrases, and expressions that pad out a line more than they add to its meaning, but such features appear in works which are rich in their verbal invention. My objection to *Everyman* is that, on the whole, the surrounding text is rather thin.

T.S. Eliot, for one, would seem to disagree: he speaks approvingly of the play and says “it is a relief to turn back to the austere, close language of *Everyman*” (Eliot 91). But Eliot is comparing the austerity and closeness of the earlier play to the bombast and rhetoric of certain Elizabethan dramatists. In comparison, *Everyman* is indeed spare and restrained; but in comparison with the rich fabric of *Troilus and Criseyde* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, its language is, I suggest, surprisingly threadbare.

On top of this, the writer makes no particular effort even when he brings God on stage. While Medieval painters used quantities of gold paint and gold leaf to portray the divine glory, the author of *Everyman* is not even able to manage a high style for his Maker. It is surely no easy task to portray the divinity on stage, but a God who has to draw attention to his own majesty (22) is unlikely to fill us with awe, and when the poet proves unable to pad out his lines in a more appropriate manner, it is not easy to conceal a smile:

I hanged between two, *it cannot be denied*;
 To get them life I suffered to be dead;
 I healed their feet, with thorns hurt was my head.
 I could do no more than I did, *truly* (31-34, italics mine).

Surely, the author might have realised that if there is anyone in Creation who does not need to assure us that He is telling the truth it is God.

It would also be unwise to refer to the playwright’s skill with metrical composition. He makes an attempt at the beginning of the text, but soon gives up. The play is opened by a messenger in a twenty-one line speech consisting of seven couplets with each one followed by a single line and all with the same rhyme, used seven times over – *play, day, away, gay, clay, may, say*. This could have made an elegant beginning, particularly since every third line, except the last of the seven, is shorter than the lines of the couplets. The lines are not of the same length, however, nor are those of the couplets. We can argue that an effort of some sort is under way, but perhaps we should not be too demanding.

Things change when God arrives. He uses crossed rhymes – abab, cdcd, etc – except that the “d” rhymes are imperfect (“mind” and “died”). The writer repairs matters at once: in the next three lines – rhymed ede – the “d” rhyme (“enied”) picks up from the earlier “died”. A rhyme scheme requiring twelve lines is squeezed into eleven.

We then have a couplet, followed by four lines with crossed rhymes. For the rest of the speech, God seems to make things easier for Himself (and the author) by speaking in couplets. The bulk of the play is, similarly, in couplets but at times, albeit for no apparent reason, the author moves, very briefly, to cross rhymes (657-60 or 675-678, for example) before returning to couplets. At times, though not often, the rhyme disappears entirely. With a more competent writer, one might be tempted to find an explanation, to say that this happens at moments of strong

emotion³, which is arguably the case in lines 131-3 or 171-2. And yet, however much we might want to give the author the benefit of the doubt, his use of a single missed rhyme now and then – for no apparent reason – is hard to justify. He simply starts rhyming again when he can put an easier word in final position. It is all rather rough and ready, as is the length of the lines throughout. The number of syllables varies, but for no obvious reason as far as I can see⁴.

Inevitably also, inversions of the word order abound. This, too, is common in early literature (to some extent, in all poetry), but the author of *Everyman* seems unable to handle rhyme otherwise. “*Everyman* called it is, /That of our lives and ending shows” (4-5), he writes, counting on us to read “shows” with two syllables to complete his rhyme⁵. It is of course important to take into account early-sixteenth century pronunciation and, consequently, we should not be surprised to find “certain” rhyming with “twain” (655-6). Partial rhymes are by no means uncommon in other writers, but it is the sheer number of imperfect rhymes in *Everyman* that is so difficult to justify: “hate” and “take” (478-9), “eke” and “feet” (503-4), “clear” and “fire” (617-18), “riches” and “there is” (387-8), the list could go on and on. And more often than not, the word order has to be inverted even to achieve these imperfect rhymes. It is not the occasional lapse or liberty that we have to excuse with the author of *Everyman*; everything seems to be somewhat hit or miss. And as I have said, he does not even bother at times with a rhyme. Technical brilliance is hardly the strongpoint of a writer who is ready to rhyme the grammatical ending of words – “-ing” with “-ing” (“speaking” and “ending” at 470-71), just as elsewhere, he is ready to rhyme a word with itself: “thing” with “thing” (524-5)⁶. It is hard to find words that do justice to artistry of this calibre.

I am perfectly aware that negative criticism is a fruitless game and that it is not just because the present writer seems blind to the poetic competence of the author of *Everyman* that the author is indeed incompetent. Simply, I would like to see somebody provide the evidence for his excellence. The play has its admirers; I have already mentioned T.S. Eliot and his regard for the “austere, close language” of the

3 This has been suggested for the speech from *Richard II*, when the Duchess of Gloucester is with John of Gaunt (Act 1, scene 2). The Duchess speaks in rhymed verse which occasionally moves back, briefly, to blank verse. Andrew Gurr suggests this produces “the subtle effect of struggle between incipient breakdown and emotional control” (Forker: 206)

4 Some of the irregularity might be explained by the difficulty of accommodating early-sixteenth century pronunciation with a modern spelling edition of the text. Some, but by no means all.

5 Throughout the play, third person singular present indicative verbs end in “-eth”. This is the only example of a third person ending in “-s”. Interestingly, it comes at the end of a line as the writer looks around in vain for a rhyme. We have no way of knowing whether he regularly pronounced the ending as a separate syllable. The scansion of the text can tell us little since there is no regularity in the rhythm or even in the line length. It all seems rather haphazard.

6 This is not an example of a feminine ending to a line, with the rhyme falling on the preceding word. The writer rhymes “every thing” with “good thing”.

play, but I wish I knew – with examples of particular felicities – what those words meant. Each time I read the play, however much the plot and the situation move me, I feel convinced that this is rather poor stuff. It may have a clear importance in the history of the theatre, and my own feeling is that its place in the history of theology has been underestimated, but we can hardly wish to spend too much time with our students on works clearly lacking in literary excellence. Where gifted writers have a rich store of stock phrases with which to disguise their repetitions, and know how to use conventions without becoming a slave to them, the author of *Everyman* rarely seems to dominate his medium, and the language that Eliot calls “austere” and “close” could also be seen as undistinguished and pedestrian. What the French call *dépouillé* – spare, minimalist, without embellishment – can, to another reader, appear simply impoverished.

This of course is something our students might be ready to understand since a close equivalent exists in the world of popular music. Alongside a Cole Porter or a Leo Ferré, with their metrical mastery and cleverly worded texts, are all the talentless writers, with their ephemeral hits, who do everything for a quick buck. How many young people have fallen in love by the light of the moon in June while humming a tune? How often does grammar get thrown overboard? “Like I do” (although “as I do” would fit the scansion just as well) is a commonplace, and “for you and me” occurs often enough until a rhyme requires grammatical tolerance. In that case, “for you and I” will do nicely. My favourite is “this ever changing world in which we live in”⁷, a line that was written by a man whose song-writing has made him rich beyond any academic’s dream. Why didn’t he do a better job? “That we all live in” could easily replace the final five words while respecting the metre. Does he never bother to revise? Does he consider his first thoughts to be so inspired that they are untouchable? There is no need to be ungenerous: he was probably blissfully ignorant and would, I suspect, accuse me of pedantry. But in our context here, the answer is more problematic.

Just as many songwriters would say that grammatical accuracy is less important than sincerity of sentiments, in the same way many early devotional writers, a good number of whom could indeed do no better, might well say that poetic skill was of less importance than righteousness of sentiment. And this is something we recognise only too clearly in another context: when we look at church hymns we are forced to draw the same conclusion. It is an exquisite irony that the Church, which has been the vehicle of some of the greatest early art – literature, music, and painting – has also saddled us with a collection of “fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music” in the words of no less an authority than C.S. Lewis (Lewis 1970: 61-2).

As a poet himself, a church-goer and a distinguished Professor of Literature, Lewis speaks with authority. His remark is something of a generalisation of course,

7 This is from the song “Live and Let Die” written by Paul McCartney for the James Bond film of the same name. The song was even nominated for an Oscar.

since certain items in the various English hymnbooks were written by poets whom Lewis surely admired: Herbert, Cowper, and Bunyan, for instance⁸. But a quick glance at English hymns reveals characteristics we have seen in *Everyman*: strange inversions of word order to achieve dubious rhymes, and vocabulary that is both full of the same old expressions and, at times, frankly odd. As a child, I never realised that “board” meant table, although if I had thought of “sideboard” I might have worked it out. But hymn-writers hung onto the word as a convenient rhyme for “Lord” when it had disappeared from regular usage, just as “sod” (*turf, earth, grass*), a word which has set generations of school children giggling, was fossilised as a rhyme for God long after it had disappeared from polite conversation⁹.

And it was among children, who learnt hymns by heart before they were old enough to read and check the text, that a number of simple and amusing jokes circulated – such was the gap between their everyday language and the language of hymns. The most famous is the story of the child who called his Teddy Bear “Gladly” because it seemed to squint. He got the idea from a hymn he sang at church: “Gladly, the cross I’d bear”. Whether this story is authentic or a comedian’s invention, I do not know, but it gives clear expression to a reality. As a small child singing Christmas Carols, I wanted to know where the kingdom of Orient was. I was not yet able to read and the generalisation “orient” was not part of my vocabulary. Thus “We three kings of Orient are”. was something of a problem.

Such aspects of the language of hymns were not alone in arousing Lewis’s impatience, however; the whole notion of communal hymn-singing was alien to him. One can almost hear the disdain in his voice as he writes of “the lusty roar of the congregation” and the “bellowing from the pews” (Lewis 1967: 96):

Is it ... obvious that the people are edified by being allowed to shout their favourite hymns? I am well aware that the people like it. They equally like shouting *Auld Lang Syne* in the streets on New Year’s Eve or shouting the latest music-hall song in a tap-room. To make a communal, familiar noise is certainly a pleasure to human beings. (Lewis 1967: 95)

The word “noise” recurs: “I have often heard this noise; I have sometimes contributed to it” (Lewis 1967: 96), he says, as though he were getting something off his chest, relieving his conscience. And yet strangely he forgets the Psalmist’s

8 “King of glory, King of peace”, “Let all the world in every corner sing” and “Teach me my God and King” are well-known hymns by Herbert. Bunyan wrote the equally famous “He who would valiant be” although the verse was regularised by Percy Dearmer. A glance at the poetical introduction to *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is enough to show that, although Bunyan was a master of prose, poetry was not his strongpoint. “God moves in a mysterious way” and “There is a fountain filled with blood” are probably Cowper’s most famous hymns.

9 The word is also used for its rhyme in the poem by F.W.H. Myers discussed below. See *Saint Paul*, 2 and 5. In the first tenth of the poem, he uses the rhyme twice.