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THE STRUCTURE OF THE CASTLE OF PERSEVERANCE

ABSTRACT

*The essay attempts to suggest some possibilities of positing a typological unity and structure for The Castle of Perseverance after first surveying the critical context. It comments on aspects such as necessity and probability, the figural technique, multiplicity and sequential narrative (an idea that has been taken up by many writers). The analogy of organic form is also regarded as being helpful, and relationships especially should be examined. The emphasis in the article falls mainly on the characterization of the central figure and the medieval use of typology. The typological model is suggested to be a useful approach to the structure of the play. Examples are then provided of typology acting as a unifier of the play.*

At least since J. Payne Collier's comment in 1831 that *The Castle of Perseverance* is "a well-constructed and much-varied allegory" (1831:286), the structural unity of the play has not been seriously in dispute except where exception has been taken to the play or to the genre as a whole, as for instance by Eva M. Campbell (1914:11, 16, 38). Nevertheless one detects a certain willingness in the critical literature to defend the play's structure and unity, as if there were uneasiness on this score. To the knowledge of the present writer, though, no work exploring the undoubted *typological* (or *figural*) structure of this play has yet appeared.<sup>1</sup> Several writers have touched on this subject or related aspects, but none has made it his central concern. As examples of these one might take Robert A. Potter, who rightly talks of the medieval passion for correspon-

<sup>1</sup> Auerbach has shown the importance of this concept in his *Figura* (1973) and *Mimesis* (1957).

dences (1975:21), Arnold Williams, who shows that a search for universal meaning beneath the flux of phenomena is central to the morality, and leads to elaborate parallels being drawn and a whole system of correspondences being set up (1963:9, 10), David Bevington who draws on Madeleine Doran for medieval ideas of multiple unity, with each element of the particular art form being self-sustaining and co-equal with the others, co-ordinated with, not subordinated to, them (1962:3; also Wölfflin, 1932:15, 159), and in particular J.D. Hurrell. He shows that it is possible to combat the idea that medieval drama is formless without falling into the error of trying to discover a conscious medieval theory of unity. Medieval dramas represent a world in which there is a simple unity of all created things and of all aspects of life: God's work informs all phenomena, no matter what these are (1965:509, 603).

While all these critics perceive the essential nature of typology, which is that it sees certain biblical or extrabiblical events as prefiguring others, and as being fulfilled, or partly fulfilled, in these latter <sup>2</sup>, and while these writers are aware of typology's significance for medieval drama, none of them views *The Castle* itself as possessing a typological unity and structure, and it is the concern of this essay to suggest some possibilities after first surveying the critical context.

Edgar T. Schell interprets Aristotle's traditional theory of imitation as providing "the perception of the relationships among discrete episodes"; Aristotle stating the quality of such perception "in the most neutral terms, characterizing the best plots as those held together by necessity or probability" (1968:237). Schell's comment holds good for most dramas, of course, and certainly for *The Castle* and most early moralities, which with their singleminded concentration on salvation are certainly held together by necessity and the natural course of man's life. He sees the relationships as taking place in the defining context of the pilgrimage

<sup>2</sup> See the excellent study of Charity (1966). An example might be the sacrifice of Isaac as prefiguring that of Christ, which is itself carried further by the sacrifice of the Christian in serving his Lord.

through life, which gives them their coherence; but it seems to me that an even more fruitful context is that provided by the figural, where the meanings of events are enriched by cross-association with each other, so that an earlier event may prefigure a later, and the later occurrence may reflect the earlier and be given added significance by it. Probably the best example of this figural cross-reference in the play may be found in Mankind's first fall (ll. 393 ff) which prefigures his second fall (ll. 2531 ff) and makes the latter more poignant from the audience's point of view. As the second fall occurs, one is inescapably reminded of the first occasion. These two dramatic surrenders to temptation are given added weight by the biblical paradigm of Adam's temptation.

Even Madeleine Doran's book (1954: the remarks are to be found on pp. 17, 18, 370 - 373), perceptive though it is in drawing our attention to the importance of multiplicity and sequential action in medieval art forms generally, does not make mention of the figural technique *per se* and hardly refers to the morality play at all. It is true that in *some* of the cycles (not necessarily all, as she suggests) the simultaneous multiple staging must have been fairly closely related in principle to those scenes of visual art which represent all the salient features of a saint's life in a single frame, but she does not mention the possibility of multiple staging in a large-scale morality such as *The Castle*. Certainly though, *The Castle* exhibits both multiplicity (in the large number and variety of character, scenes and time, if not of events, for there are only certain events, and these are repeated significantly) and sequential narrative — events taking place in natural, historical sequence.

This idea of sequence has been taken up by many writers. Most generally, *The Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (Fowler:1973) describes "structure" as the "developing unity" of a work. Criticism must assume "that every work is a distinct and verbally-created universe and must have a self-created logic or sequence for which the author is responsible. The work will have its own expectations and probabilities which constitute the unity of that universe". Clearly, *The castle of Perseverance* (as with other so-called 'ful scope' moralities) will evince the natural sequence provided by a man's life, while our expectation that

he is doomed is twice foiled. All this simply reminds one of the author's single-minded concentration on the doctrine of repentance and is quite typical of the progressive and episodic structure which was basic to the whole intent of medieval drama (Bevington, 1962:119). And yet this is only part of the story.

There is no question that the play proceeds relentlessly to the inevitable end of *Humanum Genus's* life in a series of quantum leaps, and that it takes one step beyond this existence; for "The play is not over. All that has gone before is preparation for what follows, for the main concern of the piece is the meaning of death" (cf. Williams, 1963:8; Mackenzie, 1914:59).<sup>3</sup>

Certainly - but this is only part of the story, too. Possibly the modern reader is too conditioned by Aristotelean poetics with its logical emphasis on linearity and development to realize that part of the strength of *The Castle* is a certain movement about a point, rather than a coming to that point; not so much a focussing on a point as a movement circling it. And so progression, episode and metaphysical questions about death are perhaps not as important as a recognition of the "reflective" quality of some episodes, a sort of *Alice through the Looking-Glass* quality which not only reflects but also transmutes episodes. The memory of the one enriches the other; the anticipation of a later one increases our understanding when it eventually arrives. (See the conclusion of this essay for discussion of some key instances.)

The analogy of organic form, which suggests a close relationship of parts to each other and implies that the entire work is thought of as being greater than the sum of its parts, is helpful here, though it should be used with due discretion (Fowler, 1973. *vide* "organic"). Indubitably the 'doctryne' of this play grows naturally out of its handling of the full reach of man's life, but much else — the formal stanzas and other patternings — might seem to a present-day reader to be artificial. What are

<sup>3</sup> Mackenzie declares that *The Castle* holds itself sternly, from beginning to end, to the allegorical struggle in the soul.

more important here, however, are the relationships involved. It is almost as if one is examining the play as a lyric poem or a sonnet, discussing the relation of octave to sestet, pointing out and interpreting reflections, memories, repetitions and other areas where the patterning of *The Castle of Perseverance* rises above mere formal dignity (Potter, 1975:7, 8, 41, 44; Gowda, 1972:26; Wickham, 1974:112).<sup>4</sup> Nor is it correct to maintain that the form of the play can be explained by seeing it as an "emblematic joust", with its main structural assets physical combat and verbal argument (Wickham, 1974:112, 116, 121). Indeed, Wickham goes so far as to say that the morality play is not structured on progressive, typological narrative (1969:22). This view I believe to be quite untenable.

The fact that there is no unanimity amongst critics is evidence that none of their approaches quite fits the case. This is especially true of those writers who analyse the play in terms of rhetorical or stylistic patterns. Generally these analyses shed light on particulars rather than on the work as a whole, or tend to state the obvious. Here one could instance Richard Southern, who observes that from the very beginning, three trios of evil characters are quite clearly specified (1975:10) or Merle Fifield, who has devoted a monograph and an article to rhetorical structure in the morality. She discerns a five-action structure in most moralities, but then is forced to argue that *The Castle* in particular deviates from this apparent norm. (1975:340-342).<sup>5</sup> And Michael R. Kelley, who has produced a detailed study of flamboyant style in the play, examines the combination of directly realistic description with "those rhetorical devices appropriate to the ornate grand or high style" and highlights the symmetrical structure of the stanzas themselves (1972: 17, 21), but does not probe the larger structure of the morality.

<sup>4</sup> Potter says, however, that the events in a morality are not mimetic, representations, but analogical demonstrations of what life is about.

<sup>5</sup> Fifield (1975:347) defines a morality as presenting a *moralitas* through interaction of characterizations based on allegory or typification, by which she presumably means *typological* characterization.

As already suggested, it is not especially helpful to view the play solely in terms of a linear sequence, though this sequence is certainly suggested by the controlling framework, the span of a man's life. (Perhaps the analogy of a spiral might be more apt: as one travels along it, he passes stages resembling those he has already been through, and every such stage is closer to the centre.) A claim, such as this by Potter, is thus both obscure and wide of the mark: "Human life, in the sequential actions of the morality play, is a dialectical pattern, a linear problem which unfolds its own solution" (1975:57). More sensitive to the exigencies of drama are David Bevington's observations, which are worth quoting from at length, though they are mainly relevant to late medieval drama (1962: 3, 4).

The fallacy of enforcing classical precepts upon late medieval structure is not so much the invidious comparison of greater and lesser as it is confusion of incommensurate qualities ... .

In drama as well as in graphic and plastic arts, the simultaneous presentation of separate scenes led to a panoramic, narrative, and sequential view of art rather than a dramatically concise and heightened climax of sudden revelation ... .

Circumscribed by these conditions, late medieval drama ... had its own structural aims, problems, and potential solutions that bore no relation to "classical" principles. Chief among these problems was one of emphasis in a field of vision that provided little perspective or foreshortening. In its handling of plot, how was the drama to discover meaningful statement from a linear, episodic, and progressive sequence? The inherent danger was unselective choice of episode ... . The ideal was organic totality in which each freely existing member contributed to the final design without surrendering its own sovereignty, and in which the connecting bond was an unfolding theme deriving its richness and variety from the combination of each part.

The simultaneous presentation of various scenes referred to here finds

an echo in the several scaffolds used in our play, which are mostly occupied during the action, if not its focus; and the staging of *The Castle*, however it was achieved, was indubitably panoramic in scope, logically sequential certainly, but all the while drawing nearer to the centre. Bevington reminds us too that the problem of determining significant episodes is germane to our discussion: as with the cycles, the choice would fall on episodes weighted both dramatically and didactically. But we need to add that in several important cases these episodes would also be chosen for their typological significance which, together with the "unfolding theme" of the way to salvation, would form the connecting bond.

What we have in the morality, then, is the tension inherent in the juxtaposition of two, not necessarily compatible, facts. Firstly there is the factor that the protagonist is a human being living "in that moral world of stresses and strains between good and evil where humanity by reason of its choice shapes character"; as Farnham puts it (1936:177), neatly suggesting the shifting and variable nature of the ground on which the dramatist, too, must stand in order to give expression to the chances of man's existence. And, secondly, there is the desire of the playwright to do justice in a sufficiently dramatic way to the theme of salvation which so possesses him. Williams's view is that *The Castle's* playwright has a considerable understanding of dramatic structure, and he calls attention to the author's control of his medium and material and the "unity of mood and tone" (1961:153). My discussion does not query the existence of control and unity, but suggests a possible approach to the way in which they are created.

It seems clear to the present writer that any approach to the structure of the play should take into account two factors which have not received due attention: the characterization of the central figure,<sup>6</sup> (he is increasingly presented in terms of Adamic fallibility) and the medieval use of typology. Perhaps it is worth noting that Mankind's Latin title, *Humanum Genus*, suggests the most general, the widest possible, reference:

<sup>6</sup> Eccles (1969:xxv) has mentioned that the unity of the play depends on the figure of Mankind. This text is used throughout.

one might view him as the counterpart and sum of all the human characters, evil or good, to be found in the cycles (without of course suggesting any direct descent from them). And since our author was certainly a clerk, if not in major orders, it is unlikely that he was not familiar with medieval typological interpretation. Some at least of this seems to have adopted a theory similar to Augustine's in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Such a model sees the life of Abraham or Isaac, for example, as prefiguring that of Christ; Christ's advent would therefore fulfil the type or sign inherent in their existence. However, this would not be a complete fulfilment, for Christ still has to return again; his existence in this earthly life, therefore, only partially completes the fulfilment of God's kingdom. In the same way, man's existence on earth can be thought of as being a "continuation" of Christ's existence, which is partly lived out in the believer's own life (as Galatians 2:19, 20 puts it, "I am crucified with Christ; so it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"). Since *Humanum Genus* is, explicitly, every Christian man, the typological model is a useful approach to the structure of the play.

In conclusion it is appropriate to adduce some of the more important of these structural, typological links. Perhaps the richest example is also practically the first one in the play, the fact of *Humanum Genus*'s nakedness. Not only does this image his helplessness and insecurity, contrast severely with the rich attire of his tempters, and awaken biblical and liturgical echoes, but it is a direct parallel to the life of Christ himself, born in lowliness, tempted, and stripped bare on the cross. Mankind's bare body of the beginning is a type of his utter stripping at the play's end, and we are never allowed to forget his essential poverty for long.

As mentioned above, Mankind's first fall prefigures the second, which is more serious and in a sense fulfils it. Coming events cast their shadows before: the classical temptation of the first fall (the temptation to manliness, l. 595) is reflected in the second temptation, which takes place when Mankind is no longer weak in youth, but feeble in age (ll. 2482 ff): the scenes are not only carefully paralleled (reflecting medieval concerns with symmetry) but typologically related, thereby drawing these



two widely separated sections of the drama together. (Similarly, Peace's observation, "he haue now not al hys wylle"; l. 3208, is adumbrated by l. 739, the ironic reversal of which is expressively worked out in the body of the play.)

A particularly interesting example of typology acting as a unifier of the play, is to be found in the remarks of the Virtues and the Good Angel after Mankind has fallen for the second time (ll. 2557 ff), where they uniformly take sides against Mankind, pleading various reasons to excuse themselves. In this scene *on earth* they point forward to the debate in *heaven* between the four daughters of God, where Truth and Righteousness adopt the same legalistic, juridical view (ll. 3129 ff). In this court scene the earthly arguments find an ultimate antitype. Owing to the demands of theatre however, there is no sentence of *mercy* uttered while Mankind is still alive. God's sudden decision in this regard, when all seems to have gone terribly wrong for *Humanum Genus*, comes therefore as an effective dramatic surprise and is not structurally inappropriate.

This essay has done no more than briefly indicate some of the inadequacies of present-day structural investigations of the morality play, and in particular of *The Castle of Perseverance*. I hope to have suggested, though, that the field of typological examination will yield a rich and satisfying harvest.

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