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Debating the Primacy of *Everyman* and *Elckerlijc*

Authorship and the Reformation in Theatre of the Middle Ages

The English play *Everyman* (also known as *The Mirror of Salvation*) and its Dutch counterpart *Elckerlijc* (also known as *Elkerlyc*, *Elckerlijck*, or *The Mirror Bliss of Elckerlijc*), are both commonly referred to as the crowning work of their country in the Middle Ages. The plot centers around Everyman, a man who is called to the Judgement Day, and must find an allegorical virtue to accompany him. In the end, he finds that only Good Works can go with him to the afterlife. From 1865 until present day, a debate about whether the Dutch or English holds primacy endures, and no satisfactory conclusions have been reached, though the Dutch argument holds the intellectual advantage to the majority of scholars. To say either play was definitively first is overlooking the nuance of the work that makes it interesting. I assert that it is more likely British due to the Orthodoxy of the text in the context of the culture and the evolution of the work as a whole, as well as how the Renaissance effected the idea of authorship.

Scholars are certain that the plays were written down in one language and then translated into the other given that most of the lines are literal word-for-word translations of one another, and therefore the similarities cannot be coincidental or remembered through speech; instead they must have been written. *Everyman* is uniquely situated in history on the verge of the Renaissance and Reformation, both of which impacted the idea of authorship as well as the public perception of many of the themes in the play such as good deeds and repentance. The primacy debate shifts the timeline of when the works were performed: if the English was first, it must have been before the first known printed version of the Dutch (in 1495) whereas if the Dutch was first, the English

would have to be pushed back at least a decade crucially into the time of the Reformation and Renaissance.

The English play *Everyman* was printed in four editions between 1509 and 1535 (Tigg, Potter, Crawley). It was most likely first performed much earlier, however, when is quite disputed. Crawley asserts that it was before the end of the fifteenth century, while Valerio says it was before the end of the fourteenth century, though she does not cite specific evidence for this claim. Ultimately, due to the fact that manuscripts were most often written decades after they were first performed (Denny), when the manuscript was written gives little insight into its primacy or its first performance.

Looking into the theatrical tradition of the time in England, *Everyman* is categorized by most scholars as a morality play, defined as plays written in the Christian Tradition, not based on a specific story or character, but instead focusing on theme often by use of allegory. *Everyman* is often cited as the typification of this dramatic form; however, it has a surprising number of differences from most English moralities. As Tydeman points out, it is said to be the “least typical” of the morality genre due to its serious tone and concentration on the final phase of the protagonist’s life (*English Medieval Theatre* 18). For this reason, many scholars instead define *Everyman* as an interlude. The definition of this theatrical form is more amorphous; however, the primary characterization is that they were (or at least could be) shorter than the full day performance typical to morality and miracle plays of the time (*Early English Stages*, 234). This would account for the brevity of *Everyman* and its focus on the last stage of life. Additionally, Wickham points out that interludes had to be within the beliefs of Roman Catholicism (*English Moral Interludes*, vii). This also aligns with *Everyman*, as the emphasis on good deeds as the path to salvation is a Catholic ideal which the Reformation Humanists Luther and Erasmus

would fight against (Stone 196). White points out that the tendency of scholars to streamline English theatre into a clean evolution from morality plays to Shakespeare and Marlowe ignores the diversity and nuance of medieval works (White 75). Ultimately, it is difficult to tell if a work fits into the theatrical tradition of this time due to the limited and conflicting information that exists, but it does seem that *Everyman* can safely be said to fit the definition of moral interludes.

The first known printed version of *Elckerlijc* was created in 1495 (Best, Crawley 205, Strietman 246, Tigg). As with *Everyman*, the play was almost certainly performed before it was printed, so this means only that it was first written before this date. This version is different from the English in that it has a named author, though his exact name and backstory are debated. The names given to him include Peter Dorlant (Brockett and Hildy 98), Brabanter Peter of Diest or Carthusian Petrus Dorlandus (Waite 46) and Pieter van Diest (Best) (hereafter he will be referred to as Peter van Diest). Looking into his possible backstory, the term “Brabanter” is most likely referring to the Brabant Chambers of Rhetoric in Antwerp, which held an annual competition of plays. Strietman asserts that though *Elckerlijc* fits with the tradition of such competitions, there is no evidence that it was performed there or won, as some translators have claimed (246). The other possible backstory of the author is as a Carthusian Monk (Waite 46). It is interesting that the primary historical note of interest on the Carthusian Monastic Order in the Middle Ages is their “Opus Pacis,” a treatise on the copying of Manuscripts (Egan). Additionally, words used to describe the order as a whole include “silent,” “austere,” and “pious” (Gribbin). Due to the fact that they are associated with translations and copies and did not seem to support artistic endeavors and new works in the ways some other monastic orders of the time did, it is most logical that if a Carthusian was in any way involved with this work, it would be more as a translator than an author. Additionally, their piety and Orthodoxy do not fit with the Reformation

leanings of *Elckerlijc*. Though the discovery of a named author at first glance appears to clarify the origin of *Elckerlijc*, ultimately, the inconclusive and conflicting information around his backstory lead to more questions than answers.

Similar to *Everyman*, *Elckerlijc* does not completely fit with the dramatic tradition of its time. Morality plays with a central mankind figure who encounters allegorical characters and in the end faces judgement are very common to the Low Countries in this time. In contrast, *Elckerlijc* is much shorter than these, and does not extensively show the life of the central character before he encounters death, as is typical of Dutch Morality plays (Ramakers). Within the English theatrical tradition, there is an explanation for this in the form of interludes, however in the Dutch Tradition, no reference is found to other plays of a similar length. Additionally, *Elckerlijc* is less intense and macabre than most Dutch morality works of this time (“The Low Countries”).

Though on the surface the detail that one work (*Elckerlijc*) has a named author and the other (*Everyman*) does not may seem to imply that *Elckerlijc* came first, this is not necessarily the case. Due to the unique situation of this play on the brink of the Renaissance, the idea of authorship was changing. As the Reformation moved the church away from material culture, sponsorship of the arts moved to wealthy individuals and the artists began to separate from guilds, making the artist more celebrated as a person as opposed to the earlier emphasis on the work and God (Boorstin, Gilbert). This shift over time could mean that *Elckerlijc* having a named author actually makes it the later work, and the anonymity of *Everyman* is an expression of the religious humbleness of the author, in which case Peter van Diest would be the translator. Another theory of the anonymity of *Everyman* is that it may have had multiple authors, which also could explain its use of both verse and rhyming couplets (Valerio). Valerio asserts that both

may have come from a common source. Though this may be a clean settlement to this argument, no other sources have been found to corroborate this assertion and the two texts are too clearly translations of one another for this to be the case.

Some of the most debated points for the primacy of the play have been on language and rhyme. Many scholars claim that Tigg's philological work in 1941 settled the origin completely (Vanhoutte, Potter, Strietman). Tigg's argument states that often the rhyming words are stronger in the Dutch version while the English uses more simple rhymes (such as words ending with "e") or tags (unnecessary additions to the ends of lines in order to make them rhyme. One of his examples is, a line which in the English version reads:

Here, in this transytory lyfe for the and me
The blessyd sacramentes seuen there be.

In *Elckerlijc*, the same line reads

Hier in desen aertschen leven
Die heylighe sacramenten seven,

Tigg argues that, "Obviously it was rather the Englishman who added the tags, and rhymed weakly with his favorite rhyme in 'e'" (Tigg 123). Robert Potter argues that Tigg's points, though convincing, are not definitive (Potter 174). Another of Tigg's arguments is that the Dutch has a more standard format and formula. A counter argument for this is Valerio's assertion that the English may have had multiple authors. If *Everyman* had several authors writing in their own hand, this may have led to multiple different rhyme schemes. However, as translating is quicker work than writing an original, it is more likely that this was done by one person. This person may have worked to make the formula more consistent as he translated, and therefore it is fully possible that the translation and not the original may be that with the more consistent formula.

Tigg's last major point, which he claims is his weakest are instances of mistranslation. These are points in which the Dutch word makes more sense than that used in the English. However, as both Potter and Tigg himself point out, there are examples where one can argue that the English is a mistranslation of the Dutch as well as examples where one can argue that the Dutch is a mistranslation of the English, and therefore this argument is unconvincing. In fact, the name *Elckerlijc* is seen by some scholars as a mistranslation, as "elckerlijc" is a Dutch adjective, archaic even at the time it was written, which Van Diest uses as a noun, unlike the English, which makes more sense as a proper noun (Vanhoutte). Though Tigg's arguments are certainly some of the most convincing currently existing in this debate, they are far from definitive as some would like to believe.

Many scholars also claim the arguments of Streitman to have definitively settled the question of priority. Streitman has researched into the transmission of ideas and plays between The Low Countries and England. She claims that printed texts followed the printing press from the continent to London and integrated with metropolitan society (Johnston). Strietman also argues heavily in favor of Tigg's philological findings, and claims that De Vocht's rebuttals are stubborn attacks more than true intellectual arguments. Part of what makes the debates on primacy heated is that many scholars argue for "their side" without room for argument from the other. As Potter points out, the most convincing arguments are currently on reverse nationalistic lines, with Tigg, an Englishman arguing the primacy of the Dutch, while De Vocht, from Louvain, argues for the English. Potter is one of few who gives credit to both sides fully before asserting his own opinion. He claims that though the Dutch side currently holds the advantage on primarily philological grounds, he sides with the English on the literary grounds that Dutch primacy would push the English too far into the time of Luther and Machiavelli (Potter 174).

Another basis for the arguments of priority is religion. As has been mentioned, this play was written on the brink of the Reformation, which began in the late 15th century in the Low Countries, reaching its peak in 1509 with Luther's 95 Theses (Stone), and beginning in the Early 16th century in England, culminating in the break with the Catholic Church in 1534 (White). Even the few years it would have taken for a translation to reach across a border completely changes its meaning in the historical context. Morality plays in general are uniquely situated in the Reformation, as they were used to strengthen the Catholic Church, but also paved the way to the Reformation as it encouraged people to focus on the words of the Bible (Valerio). As morality plays appealed to intellect instead of emotion, which to some extent was their downfall (Norland), the Reformation shifted religious experience from images, relics, and the body of Christ, to the word of Christ, and intellect (Milner).

There are several connections between *Everyman* and *Elckerlijc* and the Reformation in the form of literal plot points. The importance of Good Deeds as well as the idea of self-flagellation in order to repent are extremely Catholic ideals which the Reformation fought against. It is also of note that the two plays, though almost word-for-word translations of one another, do contain some differences in theology. *Everyman* is characterized as "safer," more serious, and more Orthodox Catholic than *Elckerlijc*, which is characterized as unorthodox, reforming, and humorous (Vanhoutte).

Interestingly, this fact (like most facts in this debate) can be argued in favor of both sides. De Vocht claims that *Everyman* is first, and was written by a member of the clergy, leading to its very conservative stances on religion. De Vocht, Potter, and Crawley claim that a later date is not logical for a work this Orthodox. Waite supports this, saying that very few scripts defend the Catholic Church to the extent of *Everyman* (47). As English society was affected by the

Renaissance and Reformation, it would be less and less receptive to a message of strong Catholicism. Additionally, the more liberal wording of the Dutch *Elckerlijc* show a trend towards the Reformation, which fits with the historical movement.

However, opponents like Wortham and Vanhoutte see the safer choices as a way to tone down the irreverent words of an ignorant author (Vanhoutte). As time progressed, the play was translated into many more languages, most famously the Latin translation *Homulus*. Each of these works became progressively more Protestant (Best). With this context in mind, it is not logical for *Elckerlijc* to evolve into the more Orthodox *Everyman* and then the less Orthodox *Homulus*. The evolution is much more sensible if it flows from *Everyman* to *Elckerlijc* to *Homulus* as these would get progressively more Protestant in line with the ideals of their times.

The primacy of *Everyman* has been debated for centuries, and it is almost certain that a conclusion will never be reached which satisfies every scholar due to the lack of concrete information about the writing and performing of plays in this time. I tend to favor the arguments of De Vocht and Potter and believe that *Everyman* could not have been successfully performed after the start of the Renaissance and Reformation in England. The philological arguments in favor of *Elckerlijc* can be explained by the idea of multiple authors and some good fortune on behalf of Peter Van Diest. The English version is stronger religiously, while the Dutch is stronger linguistically, and both sides can be argued for primacy as well as superiority. To ignore the debate and stubbornly stick with a side is to ignore the nuance and history of this beautiful piece of literature.

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