

## LITERATURE

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF POWER AND PRIDE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH *PRIDE OF LIFE*

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This paper examines the construction of power and pride in relation to the political allegory in *The Pride of Life* (c. 1350). The play, although fragmentary, being the earliest existing morality, remains pivotal in our understanding of the dramatic form of morality plays, even though it combines the dramatic potential of both the mystery as well as the morality plays. This morality constructs a character which reveals the subversiveness of medieval thinking; on the one hand, royal power is God given, on the other, one of the most frequently used motifs are related to the idea of corruptive power; kings and nobility are the target of the most severe criticism in all morality plays. It is the humble who are cherished and the powerful who are chastised. Referring to the sin of (worldly) pride the play presents a context for a philosophical and political reading. The greater their social status the greater the spiritual fault represented by their use of transgressive language, and therefore the greater the degree of sin. Rulers who abuse their power are evil, but low status characters who use transgressive language are generally more sinful. "These social distinctions are especially significant in the biblical plays, while social differences are less important in the fifteenth century moralities, which dramatize the corruption of humanity in general. In both genres however, dramatists vary their use of forms, style, and contexts associated with transgressive language to create subtle and didactically pointed characterizations." (Forest-Hill 2000: 26).

In allegorical exposition the moral sense is not a matter of taking events or people from Scripture simply as literal examples of general moral truths, as Cain might be taken as an example of the sin of envy (which in fact is *modus exemplificativus*). Burrow claims that allegorical significances (in the narrower sense) belong, like the literal events which carry them to time and history (Burrow 1982: 101). Hence, although the literal level of allegory stands for the actual events, one has to agree with the medieval philosopher Hugh of Saint-Victor that history follows the order of time, while allegory follows the order of knowledge (Minnis 1988: 82). Being more or less a conscious hypostatization of ideas, allegory is related to medieval cosmology. The four levels of meaning (literal, allegorical, tropological or moral and anagogical), illuminate and rationalize the structure of authority, both spiritual and temporal, within its society providing working analogies<sup>1</sup> in both a literal and non-literal framework, and as such allegory remains essentially related to the sense of concern about man's duties and destiny that had inspired it. Authority and hierarchy were frequent preoccupations of theologians and political writers (if one may force such a distinction).

The bragging King<sup>2</sup> sees his office and place in the hierarchy primarily in the literal sense. He is wealthy and powerful, surrounded by skillful flatterers. Consciously, he remains careless whereas unconsciously he wrestles with the unknown opponent who he, at the time, cannot place in the hierarchy of beings. The unknown (to him) force, Death however, is inevitable and stronger than his reign. The whole Christian life-pattern is set forth in cosmic terms inviting the spectator to acknowledge the existing hierarchies and his own human insignificance: "Qwhen þou art grauen on grene/þer metis fleys & molde;/þen helpith litil, I wene,/þi gay croun of golde" (ll. 443-446). The moral allegory offered here is chiefly concerned with virtue. What at first appears to be an entirely pragmatic account of the corruption of vice gradually becomes a deeper concern with human choices and freedom offered by unadulterated faith and enslavement in the hands of the vices. In *The pride of life* power is conferred by wealth, and wealth in turn signifies demonic control, both in the sense of being immersed in the world as well as one's flesh. The soldiers in the play are Strength and Health. Through the metamorphosis by

<sup>1</sup> I am well aware of the criticism of the analogical thinking presented by Delany (1990) and the fact that the fourteenth century was ideologically and scientifically a very complex period. Delany links the limitation of allegory with the crisis of nominalism and abstract categories like Mankind (1990: 37). Still with the development of drama, as the abstract entities are transformed into social types allegory proves a vital form and an effective means of interpretation. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The beginning is similar to the other non-cycle play, e.g., *Dux Moraud* which also starts with the title character's boastful speech.

which the soul becomes truly Christian, like in Prudentius' poem, it eventually becomes the temple of God, pure, and whole. Everyman in a morality play progresses from bodily change (at the verge of death) to spiritual change (after confession s/he is given the state of grace). Unlike its earlier models (*Metamorphoses*) and later rewritings (i.e., *Mundus et Infans*) the sinner does not undergo an organic change nor does he grow old and worried about the "afterlife". The chief character in *The pride of life* follows from the change of the external into inner reformation. Allegory of the laws concerns not the cosmos and man, who is in the cosmos, but the hidden mysteries of the cosmic world. Writing out the pattern of the spiritual journey of the soul which rises above the visible world of Christian allegory shows a man within his natural surroundings, which do not have to be real. They reflect the spiritual reality of a Christian, and Englishman, a European.<sup>3</sup>

In *The pride of life* one encounters both personifications as well as realistic figures modeled on biblical drama. Hence, the battle for the soul is represented on two levels: the allegorical tug of war between forces of reason signifying an internal battle within the soul, and the external argument conducted by Bishop and Queen trying to induce penitential ethos on the main character. The struggle between the characters is based on the contrastive use of language: the happy "carnavalesque", if I may use a Bakhtinian term, behavior of Mirth vs. the grave sermonizing of Bishop. The play shows an interesting mixture of typically morality-like personifications and more of the mystery play type stock figures. In the preserved fragments, similarly to the Prudentian poem, one witnesses the struggle which the King must continue with his false courtiers (the soldiers) and his own pride. This battle is according to C.S. Lewis the core of allegory (1958: 66-73). As Potter asserts this play "emphasizes man's nobility within medieval limitations – appointed king over all creatures on Earth, yet subject to the higher monarchy of death" (1975: 42). Assuming the highest position on Earth doesn't give the king the prerogative of the victory over death. For a medieval man a vision of authority was of an essentially hierarchical nature. Hierarchy was applied to all human beings and was, in some sense, a natural way of perceiving man within the cosmos, which is essentially akin to political allegory. Hierarchy guaranteed order within the universe and society, provided

<sup>3</sup> Most of the theatrical performances, and, according to Fletcher, especially the interludes (with elaborate dances) did not feel real at the time with a magical décor which makes drama look as magical and not out of this world (1995: 138).

that all members of a given society lived according to God's precepts.<sup>4</sup> The chief message of *The pride of life* is that rebellion against the natural hierarchy is a rebellion against God and should, therefore, be punished. The King and his soldiers are stock figures belonging to folk plays and mummers plays (Potter 1975: 11-15) while Death, Bishop and Messenger function similarly to other morality play personifications, like the ones (except for Bishop who resembles Mercy) we meet in *Everyman*. Challenging Death to combat the King exposes human weakness and his own effusive self-deception.

The character of Rex, the chief dramatis persona of *The pride of life*, does not outline a didactic intent of the play, rather he opens the play with a boasting speech descriptive of the infiniteness of his powers. His partner, conveying the counter-force to his boasting, is the Queen Regina of whose introductory speech the last stanza alone is preserved. The King is not tempted throughout the play, neither do we get the typical progression from innocence to experience and sin. He has already sinned, and his sin is vainglory and excessive pride. All of that is outlined in the introductory speech of the Prolocutor. The conventional beginning draws the audience's attention towards the play, the "listen all" device, "men and women þat bet her/ bot lerit & leut, stout & bold." (ll. 3-4). The prolocutor points out the figure of the King of Life "of þe Kyng of Lif, i wol zou telle/Qwho stondit first biffore/All me þat bet of flessch & fel/& of women i bore" (ll. 17-20). The cosmic scope of the first of the above lines, is contradicted

<sup>4</sup> Both earlier and later Middle Ages were concerned with the ideal kingship. The fifteenth century *Secrets of old philosophers*, a translation/adaptation/elaboration of Aristotle's *Secreta secretorum* by John Lydgate, and after his death continued by Benedict Burgh, outlines the principles of a good reign. Lydgate concentrates on a feature of the character of a king warning the ruler against bribers and flatterers (in the play exemplified in the figures of the soldiers, Fortitudo and Sanitas) who "... growth ffrawde and Covert fals poysoun,/And sugryd/honeyd with Callusoun" (Lydgate, ll. 881-882). Lydgate sketches the vices unbecoming the king, like avarice and covetousness, he is primarily preoccupied with a model individual (i.e., *dignitas* of the king meant all kinds of responsibilities towards his subjects, the king, for example, should be seen in all his estate once a year (ll. 1093-1099)). Burgh, finishing the treatise Lydgate started, is concerned with the health of the king's body urging him to beware excess of drink and food. Burgh discusses the miracle of man as the "litel world" (ll. 2290) relating the properties of the body politic, as well as the king's physical body. Thomas Hoccleve (or Occeleve) wrote his *Regiment of princess* between 1411-1412 for the Prince of Wales. Hoccleve's work is based on the same principle as Lydgate's and is a very common type of 'mirror' of the Prince; it offers advice on moral virtues and good government. It is primarily what is commonly referred to as the mirror of a prince assimilating fifteenth century advisory literature. Working with a number of classical texts including Aristotle's *Secreta Secretorum*, Hoccleve outlines the prospective vices of a king giving advice as to how to avoid them. Reinforced with classical authorities and exemplary stories, similar to Lydgate's work, the text idealizes good kingship.

with the common human origin of him, who calls himself the King of life. Although he is of kingly race, and therefore by many medieval people perceived as divine, he is nevertheless mortal. His queen who is worthy and "lettrit in lor/As cumli becomit for a quen/ & munit hir mac euirmor/as a dar for dred him to ten" (ll. 45-48). The Prolocutor stresses human mortality by highlighting the fact that death does not know social divisions; "Death spare neith Knytis, cayser ne kyng" (l. 56). Death and life strive together, but when death's messenger is sent for, the King of life is doomed. This long speech could be linked to the later introductory speeches of *Everyman*. The invocation to "Our lady" who shall pray for the soul (ll. 105-108), is a traditional Catholic way of seeking intervention with the mother of God. The Prolocutor as a character who is truly outside the play, controlling and summarizing its action, does not appear later in the play. In a self-referential fashion, he refers to drama as a self-conscious artifact: "for þis oure game schal gin & ende/Throgh jhesu Cristis swete grace" (ll. 111-112).

*The pride of life* concentrates on precisely the representation of the idea of worldly life as superior to the spiritual. Davenport professes, applying, probably unconsciously, Darwinian criticism in the tradition of Chambers, that the play "is suggestive rather than accomplished" (1988: 17). It is indeed fragmentary, but certainly not "embryonic", as Davenport (1988: 17) maintains. On the contrary, as it introduces one of the most notorious sins of the Middle Ages, the sin which directly contradicts the most cherished Christian virtue, humility, it exposes complexities of the seemingly unambiguously defined sin of pride.

The King: "King ic am, kinde of kinges ikorre  
Al þe worlde wide to welde at my wil  
Nas þer neuer no man of woman iborre  
Ozein me withstonde þat I nold him spille" (ll. 121-124).

The king brags about being of a chosen race modeling himself on the myth of the chosen king of Mankind, the messiah. Having soldiers: Health (*Sanitas*) and Strength (*Fortitudo*) as his allies, this royal figure is closely connected with chivalric romances, which also were not free from personifications and allegorical representations. His insistence on his royal dignity: "Bringit wyt zou brit brondis, /Helmis, brit & schen;/For ic am lord ofir al londis/& þat is uel isen" (ll. 137-142). Fortitude, Strength are his allies and the conviction that his royalty and his power grants him everlasting life stands in direct opposition to the Christian ideal of nobility and meekness. All of these elements are ridiculed in many medieval moral treatises. Pride is the root of all wickedness and itself comes from seven sources which the author of the work identifies. "Pryde destroyeþ all grace and vertu, and fordoth & leeseþ alle gode dedes. For pryde makeþ of vertu vice ... (*Myrroure of the lewde man and women*, 104) and what is more important "pride sterith a man to coueite hye state & power aboue alle

opre" (*Myrroure*, 105), which echoes King's words: "I schal lyue evermo/&crounber as kinge;/I ne may neuer wit of wo/I lyue at my likinge" (ll. 175-176).<sup>5</sup>

Although pride is recognized as a worldly sin branding and exposing the overzealous concentration on transitory things like wealth, health and good fortune, concurrently, one should recall the medieval conception of *dignitas non moritur*, the legalistic sense of the never dying dignity of a king of the "virtual identity of predecessor and successor" (Kantorowicz 1959: 402). Related to the notion of the body politic the "corporational", to use Kantorowicz's term, modes of thinking reached in England a state of full consciousness under Edward IV (Kantorowicz 1959: 403).<sup>6</sup> The formulation of the idea of the King's two bodies, the royal body and the physical body was fused (or confused) with the notion of "mystical body" which never dies and always has continuity. The English lawyers made it perfectly clear that the King as "Dignity" or "Body Politic" is immortal although each King eventually dies. The famous French *le roi es mort, vive le roi* encapsulates that idea of the triumph of death over mortal man and the triumph of life of *dignitas* over death.

Concurrently with the criticism against the sin of earthly pride, we see a social commentary on those who govern the lives and frequently deaths of others. The preoccupation with the nature of earthly power was not alien to many medieval thinkers, like Thomas of Aquinas. In his political writings, Aquinas draws extensively on Aristotle's political theories ("man as a political animal") as well as on St. Augustine ("ruler as the shepherd"). Repeating a very powerful medieval image Aquinas says: "... in the individual man, the soul rules the body; and among the parts of the soul, the irascible and the concupiscible parts are ruled by reason. Likewise, among the members of a body, one, such as the heart or the head is the principal and moves all the others" (1982: 6) which reverberates John of Salisbury's famous theory of the body politic. Aquinas asserts that the chief goal of a king is to establish order and peace and kingship is bestowed on the basis of virtue. Thus, qualifications of a Christian king who "procures the

<sup>5</sup> One can recall here the early fourteenth century *Pe disputacyon between þe bodi and þe soule* which begins with the dead knight's ghost leaving his body and the following "disputation" delineates medieval concerns with death and good life. Charting the bodily transgressions and worldly sins (like gluttony and pride) which have to be purged in the purgatorial fire, the text reminds the reader of the inconstant nature of beauty and youth. The suggestive images of hell fire "and slungen hit wip a mody mayn/Ryzt into þe deppest pit" (p. 105, ll. 507-508) and "bodily torture" applied by the fiend, are contrasted with God's mercy to which the speaker appeals at the end of the poem.

<sup>6</sup> Kantorowicz also reproduces the whole complex legal case of the Duchy of Lancaster (1959: 403-404). The jurists argued that "a Body natural and a body politic together invisible; and [that] these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person, and make one Body and not diverse, that is, the body corporate in the Body natural, et contra the Body natural in the Body corporate" (Kantorowicz 1959: 438).

unity of peace" (1982: 11) are similar to the spiritual leader who should look up to God for the reward. The desire for glory, however, is not altogether condemned by Aquinas, although he claims that "... the man who desires glory either endeavors to win the approval of men in a the true way, by deeds of virtue, or at least strives for this by fraud and deceit", and quoting Aristotle warns that the magnanimous man does seek honor and glory, but not as something which is the reward of virtue (1982: 34). Such is the chief character of the King before he learns that all things in life are mortal, including the greatest and most powerful rulers, and earthly things are indeed inconstant and transitory.

A fourteenth century scholar, John of Paris wrote his treatise *On royal and papal power* to make a contribution to a debate about the political implications of sacerdotal and papal power. Conventional in structure and the selection of arguments, this text discusses the merits of monarchy as opposed to the "demerits" (in Aquinas's words) of tyranny. Addressed to the fictitious king of Cyprus,<sup>7</sup> the treatise discusses the origins of royal power, and the necessity of monarchy in Christian kingdoms, fusing classical and Christian imagery. Trying to find a balance between the claims of royal and ecclesiastical power, John of Paris refutes the existence of abstract entities, like the church, claiming that the church consists of a group of individuals which legal language cannot join into unity. Critical of analogical thinking<sup>8</sup> he constructs authority on a temporal basis, i.e., the property does not belong either to the king or to the pope, asserting the spirit of the medieval transitoriness of life, and argues that each authority is only a temporal lord over earthly goods and subjects. Drawing on biblical and patristic sources, through his writing he hopes to preserve peace between royalties and popes. A kind of moral and spiritual council or consolation remained a popular literary form in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Regina in the *Pride of life* plays the role of Mercy (*Mankind*) trying to warn the King that life in itself is fleeting and all things must eventually die (ll. 205-206), switching back to the reality of mortal life. Rex belittles her words by claiming that this is "nis bot women tale" (l. 209), a derogatory approach to woman's words reflecting common medieval notions of women's words having the same nature as other unstoppable female bodily fluids. The lack of control over her own body reflected the lack of control over her words.<sup>9</sup> He boasts: "I schal neuer deye/For I am King of Life;/Deth is vnder myne eye" (ll. 211-213). Reminding Rex that "Þis world is but fantasye/And ful of trechurye (l. 231-232)

<sup>7</sup> The translator and editor of the treatise, Gerald B. Phelan gives a few possibilities as to the real addressees of that work (1982: xxvi-xxx).

<sup>8</sup> For more see Delany (1990: 19-60).

<sup>9</sup> For more see Blamires (1992: 122-124), Thomasset (1994: 43-69). A more sustained discussion would, however, require a separate paper.

Regina once more attempts to turn her husband's thoughts from the material reality towards the spiritual one. Supported by his soldiers and Mirth, the messenger, whose boasting is similar to that of the King himself, and asserts that Rex is the King of Life. Equating the World with "gold and siluer and robbis riche" (l. 289), the world of royalty and nobility is unrivaled among others. Flattered by his soldiers Fortitudo and Sanitas, the two characters which are the closest to the characters of the Vices in the later Morality Plays, Rex is fully submerged in the kind of social vices the soldiers represent. The King believes in his everlastingly strong and healthy body of an immortal ruler and no sad reminders on the part of the Queen, nor Bishop who is summoned by the Queen can change his views. Bishop's monologue expresses a somewhat pessimistic view of mankind, and attacks the rich, powerful and aristocratic, with the usual homiletic tone.<sup>10</sup>

Episcopus [Bishop] urges the King to think about his end, and preaches the sermon of the deeds of Charity and the Savior's teaching "þou schalt do dedis of charitie/ & lernen Cristis lor/ lib in heuin-lit/To sauy þi soul fro sor" (ll. 403-406). Evoking the charity of Christ has to counterbalance the love of life and the world on the part of the King, and Charity is supposed to ensure the King's salvation. The figure of the King himself is already so corrupted by earthly pride that he does not need temptation, like the encouragement from his Soldiers and Mirth. He distorts the meaning of *dignitas*, falling short of recognizing the difference between King's two bodies. Thus, in the play the scenes of temptation are substituted for the effective scenes of vital dialogue in which showing off occupies a central place. Similarly to legalistic language the notion of immortality has to do with the continuity of existence. Although in order "to live forever", one has to die, the death and rebirth are joyful things. Ridiculing Bishop does not alter the message he is offering, neither does the fact that the King is young "In mi yyng lif" (l. 420) has high office and "no ned to char" (l. 432). The ending is a typical morality play ending, the acceptance of one's destiny with a lesson for everyone ("Listen to me young and old") with a fervent lecture that one should maintain the foresight of death during one's life.

Conflating the moral and anagogical level of allegory, the play works on the eschatological theme constructing its characters in the context of a political discussion on the nature of kingship. Although the King openly admits that he does not want to have anything to do with the church, Bishop does not instruct him on the importance of *ecclesia*. Leaving the King in the hands of Christ, he with-

<sup>10</sup> The adversary of Mirth, The Bishop, enumerates all the sins. "Sot men bet bleynd & lokit al amis (ll. 343-344). Love is letchery" (l. 339), every holy day ends in gluttony (l. 341), what the poor do is wrong in the eyes of the rich (ll. 355-358), etc. The Queen who functions here as a moral guide fails, as it often happens in Moralities, to turn the King onto the path of righteousness, and it is not because of the intervention of the Vices.

draws once again reminding the King of death. Contrasting the images of life's beauty and pleasures (as King does) with death and decay (in Bishop's speeches) presents the two poles of medieval thinking paramount to the medieval notions of the fear of earthly life alongside the concept of enunciation of the world and the fear of death.<sup>11</sup> The fourteenth century was a historically and ideologically complex time. Commentaries upon kingship are intermingled with the debate on universals and the criticism of analogy. Forcing certain types of interpretation, allegory in a way controls its own interpretations. Political allegories show a considerable awareness of the audiences, listeners and readers. Moral implications reflect social ideologies, mirroring everyday reality, while anagogical ones belong to eternity. In the boasting of the King, his arrogant attitude toward the Queen and the Bishop, and his coarse witticisms directed against them, we see the ruler whose pride is criticized and whose behavior is far away from the medieval ideal, and yet perversely real.

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<sup>11</sup> As Johan Huizinga aptly summarizes this: "ecclesiastical thought of the late Middle Ages knew only two extremes: the lament over perishability, over the end of power, glory, and joy, over the decay of beauty, and on the other hand, jubilation over the saved soul in the state of bliss. Everything in between was unexpressed. In the fixed representation of the dance macabre and the gruesome skeleton, the living emotions are ossified" (1996: 172).

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