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The Morality Play Revisited in Margaret Edson's *Wit*

Abstract: Taking into consideration the contrasting views of two medieval drama scholars, this article will explore the elements of a medieval morality play in Margaret Edson's modern play *Wit*. The proposed hypothesis assumes that although *Wit* cannot be treated as an example of a full-scope "modern morality play," it may be seen as a twentieth-century derivative of the genre. The play presents the story of terminally-ill literature professor Vivian Bearing, for whom the last months of her life turn into a pilgrimage towards an education in ethics which she neither expects nor welcomes. Gradually, as in *Everyman*, all her earthly resources, and above all her knowledge of metaphysical poetry, become irrelevant as she realises that life and death are entirely new concepts when not discussed in the abstract. In order to locate the play within the paradigms of morality play tradition, *Wit* will be compared to several medieval and Renaissance plays. The aspects of the morality play to be considered in relation to *Wit* include its potentially instructive purpose, medieval motifs, the idea of the protagonist's universality and a number of dramatic devices and solutions.

Keywords: drama, morality play, allegory, medievalism, contemporary theatre

The objective of this article is to analyse Margaret Edson's¹ Pulitzer-Prize-winner play *Wit* from 1995 in terms of its adherence to morality play tradition. It must be stressed, however, that although the title of the article may suggest otherwise, *Wit* cannot and shall not be examined as an example of a full-scope morality play. There are only some aspects of medieval and Renaissance moralities that should be considered and declared as present in or absent from *Wit*. Determining the morality play genre as still existing in modern drama is probably a hypothesis which is impossible to defend. It is feasible, however, to observe the interrelation between the morality play genre and Edson's modern play. The final aim of this article will

¹ Ms. Edson has only had one play produced. *Wit* was inspired by her experience of working as a clerk on the cancer floor in a research hospital in Washington. The Donne references in *Wit* result from hours of library research; Edson admits she had not read much Donne herself. She has never truly expected *Wit* to be staged (McGrath 2012: n.p.).

be, therefore, to support one of the contrasting views represented by researchers of the moral play tradition. Is a morality play still relevant to modern audiences and capable of, as Robert Potter claims, “show[ing] us what we least expect to find, which is ourselves” (Potter 1975: vii)? Or is it, as A.M. Kinghorn states, “as insubstantial as an echo” (Kinghorn 1968: 128)?

The first question to be asked is indubitably: to what degree does *Wit* conform to the characteristics of the morality play genre by displaying a didactic impulse? As Marion Jones asserts, “the moral plays are designed to convey and comment upon a selection of doctrine, and to recommend certain patterns of choice and action to members of the audience” (Jones 1983: 215). Whereas the first part of the definition must be questioned and discarded as impertinent to *Wit* (religion in the play constitutes a separate problem and will be investigated in detail below), the second part is relevant and definitely applies. The earliest surviving copy of *Everyman* (from John Scot’s edition) starts with a clear declaration of a strictly instructive purpose: “Here begynneth a treatyse . . . in a manner of a morale playe” (qtd. in Jones, 17). *Wit* may be perceived as a form of treatise as well, as it is, if nothing else, a play about the importance of education: “[t]his way, the uncompromising way, one learns something from this poem, wouldn’t you say? Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present” (Edson 1999: 15). Although delivered by Vivian’s mentor, Professor Ashford, the lines express Vivian’s own approach to literature and to life, the main objective of which should be to learn and to teach. The notion of education, however, gradually transcends its scholarly connotations (“I have made an immeasurable contribution to the discipline of English literature” (Edson, 16)) and extends to include a more elusive, ethical meaning. Vivian’s initial assertion that being a scholar of Donne’s poetry she “know[s] all about life and death” immediately portends future verification of this statement later in the play. “I should have asked more questions, because I know there’s going to be a test” (Edson, 13) states Vivian, after receiving her diagnosis. It is a natural and subsequently confirmed inference that the test she is going to undertake will be of an ethical character.

Throughout the play, the scholarly concept of wit as a poetic device is contrasted with the concepts of humanity, kindness and moral wisdom: “[n]ow is not the time for . . . wit. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness” (Edson, 55). The contrast prompts an instant association with a morality play from 1475 entitled *Wisdom*, where true Wisdom is identified with God, and above all with John Redford’s Renaissance morality play *Wit and Science*. The play dramatises the conflict between knowledge and wisdom and contains what Schell and Shuchter call “sophisticated but pious Humanism” (Schell and Shuchter 1969: xvii–xviii). They claim that *Wit and Science* embodies “the Humanist trope of the wooing by *euphues* of *sophia* (pure intellectual wit and pious wisdom), one of the key metaphors of all of Renaissance literature” (Schell and Shuchter, xviii). Edson’s *Wit* also dramatises the conflict between intellect and soul. And although the dichotomy problematised

by the play is devoid of religious context, the analogy between *Wit* and *Wit and Science* must be noticed.

Jones determines the organising principles of every morality play as “[p]recept, example and exhortation” (Jones, 215). It seems that *Wit* adheres to these principles, even if not in their original, religiously-conceived sense. Conscious of her own existence within a dramatic plot, (“[i]t is not my intention to give away the plot; but I think I die at the end” (Edson, 8)), Vivian states: “[n]ow I suppose we shall see, through a series of flashbacks, how the senior scholar ruthlessly denied her simpering students the touch of human kindness she now seeks” (Edson, 48). Her declaration, which has a strong instructive quality, may serve as an example of moral teaching and a secular equivalent of the once-theological precept comprised by medieval plays. The actual flashbacks which situate Vivian in a lecture hall and which display her sternness, her want of understanding and of kindness towards her students (“[d]o what you will, but the paper is due when it is due” (Edson, 51)) can be viewed as corresponding to what Jones calls an “example.” The final facet of Jones’s definition is evidently present in *Wit* as well, especially at the moment of Vivian’s *anagnorisis*, when at the end of the play she decides that humanity is more valuable than intellectual acumen or formal education: “now is not the time for verbal swordplay ... Now is time for simplicity” (Edson, 55). “Exhortation” seems also to be expressed in the tell-tale moment when Vivian is finally giving in to unconsciousness. This scene is not only an instance of what Aristotle defined in *Poetics* as “a change from ignorance to knowledge” (Butcher 1951: 41) but also a form of powerful persuasion: a warning that it is better to comprehend the value of humanity before it is too late to exercise this knowledge. The point of a morality play was to “bring the moral home in a more beguiling way than by giving a sermon” (Jones, 252), and *Wit* does that by providing the audience with a comment on and a criticism of universally problematic issues such as pain, mortality and indifference.

In *Moment of Self-Portraiture*, Joseph Leo Koerner determines the perception of death by western civilisation as “one of the extravagances of Western thought” (qtd. in Neill 1998: 201). He claims that death is regarded as “the necessary companion of knowledge, as if without death to mark off the boundaries of what we are, there can be no interpretation, no ‘meaning’ of life” (qtd. in Neill, 201). The character of most of medieval moralities, as well as of *Wit*, seems to confirm his assertion by presenting death as a key to moral enlightenment and redemption. While in medieval moral plays death precipitates the final reckoning and the comprehension of Christian values, in *Wit* it is a condition of acquiring knowledge of both life and literature, and also of the difference between wisdom and wit. “I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. But I see that I have been found out” (Edson, 56), states Vivian, adding “I want to tell you how it feels. I want to explain it, to use *my* words. It’s as if... I can’t... There aren’t... I’m like a student and this is the final exam and I don’t understand the question and I’m *running out of time*”

(Edson, 56). As in many medieval moralities, the protagonist of *Wit* perceives death as a form of examination.

As far as the problem of death in the play is concerned, the aspects which must be addressed are the confrontation scene and the image of death. Jones describes the moment of confrontation with death in *Wisdom* as “the greatest moment of this play,” a “turning point” which “makes a breaking of mood and contrast of tone to match the visual and ethical confrontation” (Jones, 257). A change of mood is what accompanies Vivian too in her final moments. The generally ironic tone of the play (“What’s left to puke? ... You may remark that my vocabulary has taken a turn for the Anglo-Saxon” (Edson, 28)) becomes startling when Vivian approaches her end: “I’m scared,” “[t]he time for extreme measures has come. I am in terrible pain,” “[o]h, God, it is so painful. So painful. So much pain. So much pain” (Edson, 56). Vivian’s *anagnorisis* which precedes her encounter with death, but at the same time portends it, can be seen as what Jones calls “ethical confrontation” (Jones, 258). Only in the face of death does Vivian experience a “moral” epiphany and acknowledge the superiority of human kindness over scholarly acumen. The most significant difference, however, between the moments of confrontation with death in medieval moralities and in *Wit* is its visual aspect. As Kinghorn notices, today’s audience can hardly be moved by a “sulphurous hell-mouth” (Kinghorn, 128), and while in traditional morality plays such as *Everyman* death was embodied as one of the characters and physically present on stage, in modern plays that would have little more than comic effect. There is no personified death in *Wit*, but it is still present by implication and by the immediate connotations of different items and situations: cancer, hospital setting, chemotherapy treatment, pain-management medication.

Another medieval element in *Wit* is the motif of the seven deadly sins. As Kahrl puts it, morality plays have been claimed to derive from Paternoster plays “in that the seven separate clauses of the Lord’s Prayer were held to be specific antidotes for the Seven Deadly Sins” (Kahrl 1974: 105). He mentions a part of the York play which a document from 1399 calls *ludus Accidie*, that is “a play of Sloth” (Kahrl, 105). Referred to in these terms, *Wit* could be denominated “a play of Gluttony.” The gluttony explored by Edson is of a figurative nature and relates to Vivian’s uninhibited desire to acquire knowledge. As the protagonist herself admits in her moment of recognition, it was the drive for knowledge which led her to the present predicament: being alone and afraid of death, which turns out to be even more frightful than Donne’s poetry suggested. Sometimes Vivian gives an impression of being almost addicted to learning, as demonstrated by her initial reaction to her diagnosis: “Must read something about cancer. Must get some books, articles. Assemble a bibliography. Is anyone doing research on cancer?” (Edson, 10). It seems that her conversation with Jason, a clinical fellow who at one point admits that cancer is “awesome” (Edson, 45), does not disturb her as much as might be expected. Quite the contrary, Vivian and Jason seem to reach an understanding:

“VIVIAN: Why cancer ... ? JASON: Oh yeah, why not *plumbing*. Why not a lube rack, for all the surgeons know about *Homo sapiens sapiens*. ... No, really. Cancer is... (*Searching*) VIVIAN: Awesome. JASON: Yeah. Yeah, that's right. It is. It is awesome.” (Edson, 45–46). A lust for knowledge is the main point of her only childhood reminiscence throughout the play: “I can recall the time — the very hour of the very day — when I knew words would be my life's work” (Edson, 35). Vivian's final epiphany: the acknowledgement that she does not know everything about life and death after all, suggests that in the end she sees her passion for knowledge as responsible for her loneliness. She also understands that knowledge has not given her the power for which she strove (“[o]nce I did the teaching, now I am taught” (Edson, 32)). Vivian's remembrance of university, in which she chooses to go to the library to correct her essay rather than join her friends outside, must also be mentioned in this context: “E.M.: (*Tenderly*.) Vivian. You're a bright young woman. Use your intelligence. Don't go back to the library. Go out. Enjoy yourself with your friends. Hmmm? ... VIVIAN: ... I went back to the library.” (Edson, 15). This scene evidently ascribes Vivian's loneliness in the moment of her death to her drive for knowledge. Another play that presents “knowledge glut-tony” as a reason for man's downfall is *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, which is often argued to fall into the category of morality play (Kahrl, 41), especially for its constant use of the *psychomachia*.

According to Jones, “in the context of a soul's salvation, the possession of physical and nervous vigour is a positive hindrance to taking at all seriously the urgent necessity of acquiring spiritual resources against the crisis of death” (Jones, 259). Vivian's initial attitude seems to confirm this statement. While her physical vigour wanes rapidly almost from the beginning of the play, the agility of her mind lasts till shortly before her death. This is the “nervous vigour” which gives Vivian the illusion of death as only a distant possibility and which seriously impedes her progression towards ultimate self-understanding. The acknowledgement of the importance of kindness: the recognition of the “good” which she should have chosen, comes only in her last moments. Finally, *Wit* can be referred to what Kahrl notices about some of the medieval moralities: “[w]hat we are watching is not a *psychomachia*, a struggle for the soul of the protagonist conducted by the rival armies of good and evil, but plays which seek as effectively as possible to universalize the patterns of moral choice in man's life” (Kahrl, 110). The moral choices which Vivian makes are choices of universal application; everybody has to decide for themselves about their approach to other people and about their hierarchy of priorities.

Another crucial question to be asked about the morality play aspects in *Wit* is whether or not Vivian can be perceived as a universal man. As asserted by Jones, it is “the sheer ordinariness of Everyman which gives his fate such impact” (Jones, 284). Is Vivian's character and story ordinary enough to entail universality and to move the modern audience? It seems that from the very beginning Vivian attempts to reject any claim of ordinariness imposed on her by other characters. In the

opening dialogue with Dr. Kalekian, she presents herself as a distinguished scholar: somebody who understands the doctor's demand for knowledge and somehow justifies his implied offer of rendering her a subject of an experiment. Her further interactions with other characters also reveal a considerable amount about her personality and achievements which definitely do not allow Vivian's categorisation as an "ordinary character." In the short conversation with a medical technician, she describes her "outstanding undergraduate career" (Edson, 17) and resulting academic success: "[a]fter twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is as good as I" (Edson, 19). On many occasions she mentions her scholarly articles ("a very prestigious venue for a first appearance" (Edson, 17)), her position within the university ("first my colleagues, most of whom are my former students, would scramble madly for my position" (Edson, 28)), and her powerful personality ("[i]t's not that I'm controversial. Just uncompromising" (Edson, 28)). In the light of her claims about herself, as well as the opinions of other characters about her ("Professor Bearing was very highly regarded on campus. It looked very good on my transcript that I had taken her course" (Edson, 27)), Vivian appears not to adhere to the morality play tradition of universal protagonists.

Before the notion of universality is discarded, however, two problems must be addressed. Firstly, from the moment of Vivian's admission to hospital, all her earthly resources which granted her her uniqueness become irrelevant; the only story of her life which the doctors are interested in is her medical history. Within the hospital walls, Vivian retains her title, but is deprived of her power, as a reversal of hierarchy occurs. The penetration during a medical exam emblematises a shift in power relations. In this expressive scene, Vivian is given a pelvic examination by her former student. Even if the examination is of a medical nature, it brings immediate associations with the examinations over which Miss Bearing used to preside at the university: "once I did the teaching; now I am taught" (Edson, 32), she admits. As an object of research she is "studied:" "*they read me like a book*" (Edson, 32). She becomes disembowelled and this dissection is of twofold character: literal ("[I]left, right ovaries. Fallopian tubes. Uterus. All out." (Edson, 32)) and figurative ("But I flatter myself. This article will not be about me, it will be about my ovaries (Edson, 43)). Analysed by Kalekian's students, to whom she is nothing more than a carnal entity, she feels as if she was one of the poems she used to scrutinise, an object of anatomical dissection. With her illness and new inferior position comes a loss of authority and identity: "I could be so powerful" (Edson, 40).

Secondly, the universal character of many traditional morality play protagonists seems dubious; for example in *Magnificence*, the central character is tempted by political vices and limited by political virtues. Nevertheless, as stated by Jones, "though essentially a lesson for a king, [*Magnificence*] has universal applications" (Jones, 217). In the same way *Wit*, though essentially about an accomplished scholar, is a play about issues of common importance: disease, ambition, compassion and death. Although exceptional, the protagonist finds herself in a situation

that can involve anybody, which is why the moral of the play which is inscribed in Vivian's personal conclusions indeed "has universal applications." According to Kahrl, moral plays tried to "universalize their characters as fully as possible, in order to strike a responsive chord in the lives of their audience" (Kahrl, 103). Still, it must be stressed that as the genre evolved, "subdivisions at the expense of universality [occurred], such as man engaged in trades and occupation or individual men affected by environment, fortune or creed" (Craig 1978: 378). In the light of this assertion, *Wit* appears to be in accordance more with the Renaissance than the medieval tradition, as Vivian remains a distinct representative of a specific social and professional group. Although Craig goes as far as to say that at some point the "English morality play almost, but not quite, lost its original distinctive feature of representing generalized humanity on stage" (Craig, 378), it would seem that *Wit* does not entirely adhere to his statement. As has been demonstrated, when placed in the hospital setting, Vivian does become a universal man. The story of her illness, determination, loneliness and despair is indeed "the plot of a microcosm over against that of macrocosms" (Craig, 344): the story of an individual contending with circumstances and truths beyond her power and comprehension. In that, Vivian can be perceived as a universal character, as such contention is a common experience of man.

Obviously, what must be discussed when it comes to the adherence of *Wit* to the morality play genre are its religious connotations, or lack thereof. Can the play be interpreted as an example of a "modern morality play" if it does not reiterate the most common feature of a genre which is claimed to have developed as a dramatised sermon? Jones refers to *The Pride of Life*, *Everyman* and *Nature* as plays "truly moral in the sense that a substantial body of [their] lines expound moral doctrine" (Jones, 221). Whereas *The Pride of Life* actually "contains a whole sermon delivered by a bishop on the 'worse was it never' theme" (Jones, 221), *Wit* is entirely devoid of explicit sermonizing and almost completely deprived of any religious references. Even Donne's Holy Sonnets remain secular in the mind of the protagonist, who dissects them with purely mathematical precision. It can be argued, however, that as with medieval moralities, *Wit* concentrates on "the process of repentance itself in the face of death" (Kahrl, 114). Since the "repentance" is of a moral (but not religious) character, a shift from Christian to ethical exhortation can be noted, (though whether *Wit* is a call for repentance or for reflection is a separate issue). It seems that in many respects *Wit* approaches the shape of Renaissance moralities, which preached neither the superiority of worldly values nor radical asceticism, but rather a balanced development of personality and moderation in behaviour. Like sixteenth-century moralities, *Wit* neither condemns the protagonist's earthly ambitions, nor prescribes a specific, ethically-approved mode of existence. Instead, by introducing E.M. Ashford: a character who managed to successfully balance human relationships with an academic career, it calls for restraint and a careful consideration of priorities. As a modern everyman, Vivian constantly has to

make choices: these are the choices between what is required of her as a professor and what is expected of her as a human being.

As acknowledged by Schell and Shuchter, a “success for a morality play is always some form of salvation, religious for the early plays, sectarian, political, or broadly social for the later plays” (Schell and Shuchter, vii). The question must be asked, therefore, as to what form of salvation grants *Wit* its potential interpretation as a derivative of the morality play. The answer is this: salvation in the form of an ethical conclusion. It is an instruction bereft of any religious or political connotations, but nonetheless relevant as a social commentary. According to Craig, “the Renaissance has brought with it a new interest in the here and now and that in turn replaced contemplation of the hereafter and the glorious history of the religious past” (Craig, 380–381). His assertion is only partly pertinent to *Wit*, which on one hand recommends a celebration of the present and an appreciation of worldly life, but on the other does not entirely discard the importance of a posthumous transitional experience. Evidence can be found in the final scene, where Vivian “*walks away from the scene, toward a little light*” (Edson, 66). What concurs entirely with morality play genre characteristics, however, is that, as in medieval moralities, “[i]n the end, we see the triumph of humanity” (Kingham, 113). This triumph can be attained only by making Vivian understand that humanity must always be valued above reason.

What must also be taken into consideration are the formal solutions utilised in both *Wit* and morality plays, such as direct address. As asserted by Potter:

The moralities are acts of presentation rather than acts of illusion. Freely acknowledging the audience’s presence, the plays customarily begin with a prologue in which the speaker (either a character in the play or a formal presenter) makes clear the argument of the play or sets the scene. Instead of asking the audience to imagine a fictional locality, however, the speaker is likely to allude directly to the playing area, suggesting that we equate it for the moment with a greater world. The speaker emphasizes that the events are contemporary rather than historical — they are occurring (as indeed they were, on stage) here and now. (Potter, 32)

In the opening scene Vivian assumes the role of a morality play speaker, which in this case proves to be not only a character, but a protagonist in the play. She begins by establishing common ground between the audience and herself: “(*In false familiarity, waving and nodding to the audience.*) Hi. How are you feeling today? Great. That’s just great. (*In her own professorial tone.*) This is not my standard greeting, I assure you” (Edson, 7). Thereby, as prologue-deliverers in medieval morality plays, Vivian recognises the existence of an audience. At the same time, she both sets the scene and, by providing a self-presentation (“I am a professor of seventeenth-century poetry, specializing in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne” (Edson, 7)) establishes the image of herself which will be crucial for the argument of the play. As for the morality play speakers, for Vivian the world which she represents is not a fictitious entity but a temporal reality. Thus, she is conscious of being a character in a play (“I would prefer that a play about me be cast in the

mythic-heroic-pastoral mode” (Edson, 8), which she nevertheless introduces not as a piece of art, but as an element of actuality that for the duration of the performance must be identified with “the greater world”: “I’ve got less than two hours. Then: curtain” (Edson, 8). It is evident then that what she relates is indeed occurring “here and now” rather than in a fictional present or past. The use of direct address in *Wit* is upheld throughout the play and transcends the medieval tradition of employing this device only in the opening section of the play.

There are numerous plot elements as well which can be discerned in both medieval moralities and *Wit*. Like *Everyman*, *Wit* begins with the protagonist being notified (by a messenger embodied by her doctor, Harvey Kalekian) of her upcoming death (“Miss Bearing, you have advanced metastatic ovarian cancer” (Edson, 9)). As *Everyman*, Vivian begins a pilgrimage which will verify her priorities, make her re-assess her previous conduct and which will enable her to complete her “book of count.” In a way similar to *Everyman*, Vivian is removed from all her earthly resources, which in her case means her professional position, her achievements and, above all, her knowledge (her initial conviction that she “know[s] all about life and death” changes when she realises that in the end what is being “discussed” are her life and her death). Like *Everyman*, she gradually learns to value what she has so far dismissed and neglected. Although there are no elements in *Wit* that can be argued as bearing religious connotations, the scene in which Sue the nurse “rubs baby oil on Vivian’s hands” (Edson, 61) is distinctly reminiscent of the anointment ritual. Also Vivian’s condition at the end of the play (“[o]h, God, it is so painful. So painful. So much pain. So much pain” (Edson, 56)) resembles *Everyman*’s painful atonement. *Wit* can in some ways be perceived, therefore, as a de-allegorized version of *Everyman*, in which allegorical entities are replaced by people and events presented in retrospective mode.

Since the convergences between *Wit* and the medieval morality play have been established, the differences must be pointed to as well. The most significant of these is the lack of allegorical characters, whose presence is commonly considered a *sine qua non* of the morality play genre. Kahrl, however, de-emphasizes the importance of this feature and, after Potter, claims that “allegory is a tool, a means of expression utilized by the writers of the moral plays, not the basic identifying characteristic” (Kahrl, 104). If then, the presence of allegorical characters is not a decisive element of the genre, its lack does not exclude *Wit* from being a modern derivative of a morality play. Furthermore, it seems that, by forsaking the use of allegories, *Wit* affirms Schell and Shuchter’s hypothesis that “the moralities were not replaced by a superior form of drama but rather absorbed into a different form” (Schell and Shuchter, vi). On the other hand, however, the characters in *Wit*, although not presented in allegorical terms, seem emblematic: Sue the nurse may symbolise humanity, E.M. Ashford may stand for the balance between kindness and academic success and Jason can be seen as a representative of gluttony and an uncontrollable drive for knowledge.

The multiple correlations between Edson's modern work and morality plays which have been discussed are meaningful in the sense that they present ideas about how some medieval solutions can find their way into contemporary theatre. The comparative analysis of one modern play obviously cannot supply any general conclusions about the return of medieval traditions to contemporary drama. It can, however, serve as a starting point for a discussion that may uncover perhaps more profound and widespread links between the drama of those two periods than is universally suspected. The question as to why Edson has decided to refashion *Wit* into a modern morality play is dubious: she was not a "professional playwright" when writing *Wit* and she had not received a formal literary education by then, which makes it highly probable that any analogies to morality plays in *Wit* are unintended. Nevertheless, what these analogies reveal is that there are such medieval motifs, purposes and devices which, albeit transformed, de-allegorized or de-Christianised, still function on the contemporary stage.

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