Skidmore College

Embodying *Everyman:*
Allegory in Medieval and Contemporary Performance

Cara Geser

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Advisor: Professor Kate Greenspan

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The additional twenty-ninth day occurring every fourth February, affectionately known as Leap Year's Day, is always aflutter with excitement and mystery. This past Leap Year's Day, February 29th of 2020, was particularly one of a kind: more than thirty spectators came to Falstaff's Hall on the Skidmore College Campus in Saratoga Springs, New York, to experience my staged reading of *Everyman* recited in its original Middle English language. The audience sat in rows of chairs directly facing the actors, who were seated in a semi-circle on a raised platform, and listened to the medieval poetry while following the play's plot with help from a corresponding performance program[1]. As I observed the audience throughout the reading, I noticed how they were intrigued, invested, and responsive to the foreign Middle English poetry; I had not anticipated such high levels of enthusiasm, and was amazed but ecstatic by their positive responses of laughter, gasps, and attentive stares. Many of the spectators, too, were surprised by their maintained attention spans, having assumed they would find the performance confusing, uninteresting, or trivial. These assumptions are due to the many preconceptions associated with *Everyman* – due to its overt literal, religious, and dramatic allegory, the play is often considered an important but boring piece of European English history. For my English Senior Project, I set out to create a production of *Everyman* that challenged these notions by purposefully investigating and investing in allegory's onstage power, practicality, and potential.

This corresponding paper will provide a deep examination of allegory, specifically in performance and in *Everyman*, arguing in favor of allegory's ability to yield discovery through personal interpretation achieved through theatrical exploration, reevaluation, and meaning-making. Despite protests throughout time, medieval allegory

[1] Please see the appendix for a sample from this program.

can be relevant today if the opportunity is taken to reevaluate its expectations; this is especially true in the theater, an inherently representational space where artist and audience use the onstage world to gain understanding of our earthly existence. The urge to explore *Everyman*'s allegory through performance, as well as bring the beauty of medieval Middle English poetry to present life, has drawn me to *Everyman* throughout my college career and will continue to entice me as a director, student, artist, and human.

A "DEFINITION" OF ALLEGORY

I initially intended to define "allegory" for the purposes of this essay, but the term proved far too complicated, disputed, varied, and conflated to precisely pin down. However, allegory is always applied to artistic modes where an item represents a pre-existing idea. From this, I offer a definition of allegory as an artistic device that utilizes embodiment (presenting the intangible in a tangible form) for the sake of clear, accessible storytelling. Many different artistic elements have allegorical potential: a character, an image or an object, a story and its events, and even the ways in which those stories are told can all rely on allegory to relay established information. There are numerous claims of how allegory is employed literally and metaphorically in art, performance, and literature, as well as multitudinous opinions of allegory's value in art and society.

Many individual scholars, theorists, and allegorists have attempted to divide the expansive term "allegory" into separate sections. One such thinker is Professor H.R. Lemmer, who delineates among three specific subsets of allegory. The first is allegory in the Christian Bible, which identifies four kinds of allegorical approaches in Biblical literature: the literal (the Bible as a historical document), allegorical (human life *as* the

life of Christ), tropological (providing moral lessons), and anagogical (the divine, given truth of God). These four allegorical modes were primarily how religious and secular allegory was categorized in the Middle Ages, with Lemmer's *allegorical* subset replaced by *typological* allegory representing the synthesis of the Old and New Testaments; this highlights how medieval audiences were familiar with experiencing different forms of allegory through physical and charactorial embodiment, the sharing of morals and stories, and religious events throughout time. Lemmer's second definition of allegory is as a "trope," indicating the "figurative use of language" to describe when expressions (e.g. words, images, stories) stand in for separate yet recognizable ideas. Finally, Lemmer identifies the "*extensive sense*" of allegory, which "represents or explains 'other' dimensions of life" – one could compare this to "metaphor" wherein a story, image, or character epitomizes a hidden and more complex notion (Lemmer 96). Allegory can encompass metaphorical, literal, emotional, fictional, truthful, and religious ideas, and oftentimes multiple versions of allegory exist simultaneously in a single piece of allegorical art.

Robert Frank, Jr. remarks on how medieval artists frequently employed numerous kinds of allegory "in the same piece of writing" or art piece, and he divides medieval allegory into two large subsets: *symbol-allegory* and *personification-allegory* (Frank 238). Symbol-allegory is when a "concrete image has an abstract value" that "is stated elsewhere or revealed by the context, never explicitly in the symbol itself" – it is an indirect correspondence between presentation and meaning, and a spectator of symbol-allegory must identify the "second meaning" of the allegory on their own (241). Personification-allegory, on the other hand, "uses abstractions as though they were

concrete substances – people, places, things" are clear stand-ins for concepts, resulting in a direct relationship between presentation and meaning (242). One could argue symbol-allegory's indirect correspondence between the *signifier* (an item or object, word or letter, image or character) and its symbolism (the *significance* represented by the signifier's presence, also known as the *signified*) yields mystery and examination, whereas the direct correspondence in personification-allegory yields explicit, overt, and therefore dull storytelling. Frank Jr.'s twofold definition of allegory implies that symbolism falls under the category of allegory under the name "symbol-allegory", but I maintain symbolism's *indirect* relationship between item and idea separates it from allegory, which relies on its *direct* nature to clearly communicate with audiences. Therefore, throughout this essay the word "symbolism" will encompass symbol-allegory's indirect correspondence, referencing artistic modes where its contents have so-called "deeper meanings" for audiences to uncover; in the same vein, the word "allegory" will imply personification-allegory's use of concrete, clear correlation between the signifier and the signified.

I find Frank's distinction between symbol and allegory particularly useful in discussing the theatrical application of allegory, in which characters are either symbolic representations or literal personifications of wider ideas. Frank asserts that symbolic characters are defined by their characteristics, relationships, and actions, whereas personified allegorical characters are defined by "*only* [their] relationships and actions" presented in the play (245). For further clarification, I will compare the personified character of Death in *Everyman* to Shakespeare's titular character in his symbolic drama *Hamlet*: "Death" is instantly and singularity identifiable by its name, leaving only its

relationships (God's "mighty messengere," l. 63[2]) and its actions (bringing Everyman the news of his reckoning with God) up for interpretation; on the contrary, one named "Hamlet" has no established traits, and therefore his many characteristics (his bitterness, his rash anger, and his inclination towards indecision – all from himself, not external embodiments of these emotions) as well as his assorted relationships (with Ophelia, his mother and step-father, and friends) and activities (such as *pretending* to be crazy and *really* stabbing Polonius) can be discovered and experimented with through various performances of the same play.

In both symbolism and allegory, there is a relationship between a character's presence onstage and the message behind that onstage appearance. But as a director and student, I am interested in pursuing allegory's potential for theatrical exploration, which is often overlooked by theater artists due to its easy discernibility. Through challenging, evaluating and analyzing allegorical characters, a seemingly one-dimensional role can become a fully realized dramatic persona – and when theatrical mindsets are applied to dramatic allegory, the drama itself can allow for theatrical exploration and discovery.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEATER AND ALLEGORY

Allegorical storytelling relies on the direct correspondence between a signifier and its significance to clearly convey meaning to spectators: the more apparent the correlation, the more easily and widely understood the art becomes. Therefore, allegory thrives on preconceived and well-established fictions in order to function, choosing to emphasize cliché rather than break intrinsic standards. There is no false pretense in this

[2] Throughout this essay, all text from *Everyman* was drawn from Bevington's edition in his anthology of Medieval Drama; please reference the Works Cited for full citation.

act – the painters, poets, and playwrights who use allegory "are well aware that the figures which they present to us are fictions," writes C.S. Lewis in his famous work *The Allegory of Love* (Lewis 48). Walter Benjamin, another famous theorist of allegory, agrees with this claim in his *Theory of Allegory*, claiming allegory introduces "a higher fictionality onto the scene" of its application due to its acknowledged fabrication (Cowan 119). Allegory's impossible duality as too-honest and transparent, while concurrently acting as a constructed fiction, is also seen in theater's simultaneous "true" and "false" existence: theater happens in real-time yet it's pre-planned and rehearsed; the stage represents a real world but is obviously one created by artists; actors seek to "behave truthfully under imaginary circumstances," to quote a phrase made famous by Sanford Meisner.

The acknowledgement of fiction in allegory is precisely why it is so well suited to the theater, a mode of storytelling self-acknowledged by all participants as taking place in a space of creation. Philosopher of theatricality William Egginton argues that "earthly life is theatrical life that is unaware of its theatricality," and I reverse his language to define theater as life that is aware of, and sometimes directly addresses, its theatricality (Egginton 115). The theater has always been a place of metaphor, the stage a stand-in for the "real world" we experience in everyday life; through this relationship, theatrical performances inspire their spectators to reflect on their real-life existence through contemplating the onstage real-world representation. But if the distinction between reality and fiction is taken away from the theatrical experience, this reflection cannot occur because the spectator would have no means of connecting the onstage world to her offstage reality. The same is the case with allegory: spectators understand the direct

correspondence between character and characteristic is a fiction used for the sake of storytelling, and thus should not be taken as literal or true. Audiences accept allegory as simultaneously true and false, just as they accept the theater as a place of simultaneous reality and fiction, and therefore allegory in its dramatic form is not demanding complacency but rather urging constant reevaluation. In the theatrical space, which is inherently fictional and curated for a purpose, a spectator is forced to ponder why a certain element is embodied (by an actor or object, presented for the purpose of display) and why they appear in the space at all. In other words, allegory gives the audience the *WHAT* but leaves them to figure out the *WHY*. Allegorical imagery is presented to theater artists and audiences alike for the purposes of clear storytelling, but through its purposeful onstage existence galvanizes participants to interpret and challenge what the allegory is supposedly "directly" representing. Allegorical drama only demands strict adherence to those who allow allegory's presumed stagnation set strict boundaries for performance – when an artist and audience encounter allegorical theater with an open heart and mind, granting exploration within the allegory rather than restraint, realizations and discoveries of the onstage and offstage world can be made.

Benjamin notes the connection between allegory and performance, at one point classifying allegory as "an outward form of expression" (Cowan 110); Lewis echoes this idea in his writings, claiming that as opposed to symbolism, which is "a mode of thought… allegory is a mode of expression" (Lewis 48). This further proves allegory's applicability to theater, an art mode of combined artistic expression through music, rhetoric and poetry, scenery, lights, props and costumes, among other expressive modes.

Theater often relies on visual imagery[3] to clearly present allegorical notions, but the actor employs allegorical embodiment through gesture, vocal tactics, and other physical expressions – therefore, I find the application of dramatic allegory to a performer's bodily communication particularly fascinating and stimulating as a theater artist. The idea that an actors' physicality, in performance and in rehearsal, yields discovery is much addressed and valued in theater theory and practice, including in Brecht's *Gestus*, Italy's *Commedia dell'arte*, and Tadashi Suzuki and Anne Bogart's work with Saratoga SITI Company. But this notion has a special power when applied to the onstage performance of allegorical characters, where embodiment is inherently present. The direct correspondence in allegory yields many preconceptions of a given idea, allowing an actor vast opportunity to consider and reconsider their onstage presentation of an allegorical drama. This constant reevaluation of the theater artist encourages the theater spectator to challenge her own preconceptions of the allegories shown onstage. Benjamin maintains that "the truth *is* the form" in allegory, meaning the presentation of a given allegory directly contributes to its interpretation (Cowan 114). This takes on a whole new context in experimental theatrical performance, for when allegory is brought into the inquisitive sphere of the theater it can become a "manifestation of a meta-reality," prompting

[3] Props and costumes are two examples of theatrical imagery that utilizes allegory to clearly communicate in the theater. I helped collect props for the 2016 Skidmore production of Caridad Svitch's *The Orphan Sea*, where the director insisted we find a genuine olive branch for the performance, as to elicit a message of peace through evoking the imagery of olive branch in the Biblical tale of Noah and the Flood; while some of the crew complained, this allegorical message was clearly essential in the director's mind. While watching the opening ensemble number of *Heathers: The Musical* off-Broadway, I was able to instantly tell who was who in the high school hierarchy thanks to costume pieces such as letterman jackets ("Jock" stock characters) and coordinated short skirts/high socks (the "Heathers," or popular girls). In both of these cases, the direct correspondence between item and idea sought to give clues as to how to watch the play. Although there is both simplicity and falsehood at hand – to jump off the Jock example, not all high school jocks or sports players wear letterman jackets every day in high school – the intention behind these theatrical allegorical examples is purposeful clarity for the audience's sake of understanding the story.

spectators to question the onstage allegorical world and thereby question their own lives (Lemmer 114).

Alongside outward expression, Benjamin classifies allegory as "intuition… the inner experience itself" (Cowan 110). All forms of theater combine intuition and expression – theater artists bring their emotional lives to their work in hopes of evoking emotional reactions from spectators – but I argue devised theater most fuses impulse and embodiment, and therefore is the most fruitful when taking on an allegory play. Devising is a theatrical process in which collaboration, instinctive exploration, and investigation of personal and interpersonal connections are used to build a show from no official, established script; I have long endorsed and directly experienced the benefits of devising with an ensemble, where actors share their truest selves to benefit the show's creation, and support their fellow actors in doing the same. The ensemble builds a mini-community through this soul-bearing rehearsal process, while simultaneously forming a performance displaying their communal growth and showcasing deep understanding of a given issue or idea. Devising relies heavily on predetermined notions so actors can form instincts crucial to creation, but devising also depends on an ensemble's ability to apply meaning to their initial impulses and constantly assess and reassess the work being generated. For this reason, devising is a wonderful way to approach allegorical drama, opening doors to inquiry rather than imposing strict interpretations of a play's characters, events, and other allegorical elements.

Understanding all this, I wanted to embark on a journey with *Everyman* exploring allegory's performative inclination towards impulse and discovery, using the ensemble's instincts to bring the play to life. There is no doubt *Everyman* is an allegorical play, as its

characters are personifications of literal and figurative nonhuman entities; this gave me the confidence as a theater director and student of allegory to embark on such a project with this specific play. Through onstage embodiment both physical and aural, I sought to create an academic reading of *Everyman* for my English Senior Project that employed allegory in performance to educationally yet entertainingly tell the *Everyman* story.

ALLEGORY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Allegory is, to quote the contemporary Italian novelist Umberto Eco, "'perhaps [the] most typical aspect' of 'medieval aesthetic sensibility'" (Brljak 697); medieval artists, storytellers, and religious leaders utilized visual imagery and its subsequent analysis to communicate with their audiences. In her article on medieval performance practices, Leslie Lassetter differentiates between *iconography* (the use of imagery to connote meaning) and *iconology* (defined by Winternitz as "'the analysis and interpretation… of pictorial representations'") – certainly, medieval minds considered imagery in both forms (Lassetter 91). Rhetoric, too, was used in medieval times to classify and elaborate on written ideas, and included the study of appropriate gesture; these rules were well known to "every educated person in the fourteenth century," as scholars since the Roman times had "assembled all the traditions of rhetoric in a number of prose treatises and illustrative verses" consequently studied for centuries (Coghill 15-16). Although allegorical art and literature has existed since before the Roman Era, it flourished in the Middle Ages and became an integral form of medieval communication.

Medieval creators of all kinds made use of allegory in their art, most notably through visual imagery and the written word. Chaucer, one of the most famous writers of

the Middle Ages, often employed allegory in his poems through storytelling devices as well as specific imagery; for example, his *Book of the Duchess* is an allegorical dream vision, a mode which allows Chaucer to insert himself as the "Dreamer" character and his close friend John of Gaunt as the "Man in Black" (the poem is almost undoubtedly a eulogy in honor of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche of Lancaster). This correspondence is further clarified in Chaucer's use of allegorical language throughout the book, such as when the Dreamer sees "Seynt Johan, on a ryche hil," a phrase reminiscent of John of Gaunt's position as Earl of Richmond (Chaucer 1. 1319); Chaucer also employs visual allegory in his writing, such as when the book's childlike Dreamer is led astray by a "whelp," which Knight defines as "a hunting dog too immature to run with the pack" (Knight 13). An example of a widely established medieval image, utilized in many forms of Middle English art, was the embodiment of Fortune and her wheel (*Rota Fortunae*) which she spun at random to determine one's current position in life. This allegorical image also had roots in the Roman era, as it was Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, that "crystallized this idea of a Wheel of Fortune and conveyed it to the [people of the] Middle Ages" (Radding 128). Various images and gestures were widely determined and understood in the medieval era, as demonstrated in Clifford Davidson's *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art*, a book that classifies specific physical positions and their corresponding medieval interpretations; it is clear medieval allegory helped showcase character, emotion, and information through written and demonstrated imagery.

Allegorical gesture was used to convey secular and even Pagan ideas, but was also crucial in medieval Christian non-verbal communication: the word *icon* itself comes from the Greek term "likeness," "image," or "picture," but in Christianity refers to

images of Christ and saints "for veneration in public and private spaces," which were often carved into "panels of wood" or presented as otherwise inanimate relics (Cooper 121). The Church also relied heavily on gestural communication, as demonstrated by Du Cange's listed compilation of "about 120 signs obtained by integrating the sign language of two European monasteries" – Du Cange, who collected these gestures during the seventeenth century, quotes medieval writers as he refers to the priests' use of "various 'hand languages' through 'speaking fingers'" (Romeo 356-57). Medieval liturgical gesture may have contributed to the use of dramatic allegorical gesture, or perhaps the medieval trend of allegory led to its onstage employment in the Middle Ages. However gesture came to medieval performance, its liturgical, allegorical, and medieval purposes combine perfectly in plays such as *Everyman,* which aimed to communicate Catholic messages through spectacle and enjoyment.

THE HISTORY OF *EVERYMAN*

The Dutch play *Elckerlijc*, reportedly written "by a certain Peter van Diest about 1470," contained the same core message as its later English translation *Everyman*: everybody dies, and no possessions or relationships can follow. This lesson is far more universal in *Elckerlijc* than in *Everyman*, leading many scholars to believe *Elckerlijc* was perhaps "a product of the Buddhist" mentality (Mills 127). *Elckerlijc* almost certainly won a top prize in an Antwerp dramatic festival roughly fifteen to twenty years after its initial printing, and this certainly contributed to the play's spread throughout Europe; it was popular in performance, but experienced "even greater popularity as a reader's text" translated into English, Latin and German (Davidson, *Everyman and its Dutch Original*).

Everyman was printed four times in England by "two different printers" from 1508 to 1537: Richard Pynson, whose two printings are incomplete, and Johan or John Skot, whose 1529 Britwell copy of *Everyman* is most widely used in contemporary academia and performance (Bevington 940). In his book chapter *The Theaters of* Everyman, David Mills describes the Dutch *Elckerlijc* as "ante-Reformation" and the English *Everyman* as "anti-reformation" (Mills 128). If one marks the start of the Protestant Reformation with Martin Luther's hammering of his ninety-five theses in 1517, this would certainly put *Elckerlijc* before the Reformation and Skot's *Everyman* afterwards. *Elckerlijc*'s message of Death's inevitability applies to both the religious and nonreligious, but the moral lesson taught in *Everyman* is innately Catholic: the notion that only one's Good Deeds will "speke for the[e]" in front of God's judgment is dependent on Catholic ideas of sin, repentance, Hell, Heaven, and Purgatory (l. 876). As it is a morality play, *Everyman* seeks to relay guiding Catholic morals to medieval spectators to help them lead good and Godly lives; it is thus, undoubtedly, a piece of Christian didactic, propagandist dramatic literature.

Everyman is an educational device but also a play, a play that artistically relies on allegory to teach, entertain, and thereby convince an audience of Catholicism's appeal. As mentioned above, the character Good Deeds literally speaks on behalf of Everyman and accompanies him into the "hevenly sphere" at the end of the play (l.899); here, Good Deeds' allegorical embodiment allows a spectator to see first-hand how one's good deeds contribute to the likeliness of a spot in God's Heaven. The name "Good Deeds" directly references the Catholic idea "good works," which in "late medieval theology" indicated Church-sanctioned "acts of religious devotion and charity" for the purpose of salvation

(Wengert 2); in Catholicism, good deeds in tandem with penance, the act of confessing one's sins to a priest for absolution, will help a good Christian get into Heaven. This notion is also reflected in *Everyman*'s allegorical plot, when the character Confession gives Everyman "penaunce" in order to "save [him] from purgatory, that sharpe fire" (l. 558, 617). Penance is allegorically objectified as a "precious jewell" and a "scourge" in *Everyman*, literalizing two important medieval methods of penance: self-flagellation, the acting of whipping oneself to embody the pain of Christ, and indulgences, a supposed "revenue-producing scheme of the papacy" in which a Christian could pay a "temporal penalty," usually in the form of money, to the Church for the remission of their sins (Shaffern 1). If we take penance's objectification as a precious gem to allegorically embody the wealth often associated with penance in the later medieval period, then the scene between Confession and Everyman fully demonstrates the three modes of Catholic forgiveness (confession, self-flagellation, and indulgence) through allegorical embodiment. The use of personification (Confession the character) and objectification (penance the precious stone and the scourge) solidifies the dramatic world of *Everyman* as thoroughly allegorical, directly contributing to the clarity of the play's didacticism.

Everyman not only relies on theatrical allegory to communicate coherently with spectators, but also uses theater as an art form to emotionally stir audiences and convince them of Catholicism's necessity. The play's use of beautiful Middle English rhyme scheme, pentameter, and repetition provide invigorating and eloquent spoken rhetoric, as is true in its Dutch original. But unlike *Elckerlijc*, Skot's *Everyman* frames itself as a play by including a Messenger's prologue along with the Doctor's epilogue: these bookmarks establish the beginning and end of a *performance*, and both characters' abundant use of

"you"/"ye" further acknowledge the audience's existence in these moments. Overall, the performance of *Everyman* implies a wide use of space in the sense that Everyman literally travels from encounter to encounter on his inevitable journey; this is demonstrated throughout the play's text, such as when Everyman sees Kindred and Cousin "yonder" and decides he "will go" try to garner their support (l. 317-18). There is also strong possibility, noted by many scholars of *Everyman*, that actors moved "from the heavenly sphere [of the stage] to audience level," breaking established boundaries of the performance space (Mills 137); Bevington argues the staging "appears to require some high space" for the actors playing God and godly characters, such as Confession, the priest, and the Angel, to reside (Bevington 939). The self-acknowledged theatricality of *Everyman*, through its text and literal performance, expands the play's possibilities as more than a means of teaching but a piece of theater: as a result, *Everyman* was likely performed as both a liturgical drama and a piece of dramatic literature. The play's ability to thrive both in and out of the church led to its "wide demand" during the early sixteenth century and proves the play's popularity among medieval spectators (Mills 128).

ANTI-ALLEGORY ARGUMENTS

Throughout history, many have argued against allegory's placement onstage and in literature due to a supposed simplicity or falsehood spurring from its direct correspondence. In his essay *Everyman in America,* Earl G. Schreiber asserts allegory is unchallenging to audiences because it "confirms" belief rather than attempts to "persuade or convert" spectators into new ways of thinking (Schreiber 103). Similarly, C.S. Lewis argues symbolism is "more real" than allegory because it "leaves the given to find," as

opposed to allegory's instantaneous understanding through direct correspondence (Lewis 45). Lewis also maintains there "is nothing 'mystical' or mysterious about medieval allegory," further perpetuating the belief that allegory, and specifically medieval allegory, is drearily obvious in nature (48). Despite allegory's aid in quick, universally understood storytelling, its direct correlation between the signifier and the signified has condemned it as drab, uninteresting, and anti-thought provoking.

Allegory was wildly popular in the Middle Ages, but fell out of fashion sometime in between Skot's printing of *Everyman* and the turn of the seventeenth century: post-medieval artists deemed allegorical figures too conventional and irrefutable to help yield new, creative artistic images. Artists like Michelangelo sought to "'break down the life [ingrained culture] of the Middle Ages in order to escape into the future,'" and attempted to rewire his spectator's iconology through new-wave iconography (Brljak 717). Criticism of medieval allegory as an archaic art form lasted well into the nineteenth century, exampled by the English poet and literary critic J.A. Symmonds' assertion that writers of the later sixteenth century began to "'emerge from medieval grotesquery and allegory into the clear light of actual life'" (ibid). It is highly possible that allegory's direct nature, which relies on widely known and established notions, pushed post-medieval artists, writers and performers to utilize less direct, more metaphorical modes of storytelling such as symbolism, realism, and abstraction. One certainly notices this trend in dramatic literature post-*Everyman* where playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and John Milton begin to "settle in the inner world" of the play, creating complicated landscapes consisting of characters with rich internal lives (Cowan 121). For this reason, many contemporary theater artists are hesitant to explore allegorical

plays such as *Everyman* for fear of boring actors and audiences alike – contrary to symbolic characters, who exist in three-dimensional worlds and whose minds are multifaceted, allegorical characters are assumed unchallenging to perform and uninteresting to watch in performance due to their overt identities and characteristics.

As is established earlier, allegory consists of both internal and external expression of established ideas. Unlike those who consider allegory unchangeable, I argue that through theatrical exploration involving internal and external expression, actors can reevaluate supposedly stagnant allegorical plays and characters. Theatrical performance is often called a *play* because it gives one the opportunity to play within a true yet fictional world, allowing the imagination to ask *"What if?"* of real life. In the same vein, allegory's identity as a piece of fiction allows its spectators to question its identity, purpose, and very meaning of its existence. Whereas symbolic drama can control an actor's opportunity[4] through spoken text, stage directions, and even the imposition of reality (as is the case in documentary theater or historical plays), allegorical characters can open actors up to opportunity, creativity, and deep understanding in performance.

ALLEGORY AND *EVERYMAN* IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

This past winter, I challenged myself to put on a production of *Everyman* that urged theater actors and audiences to draw meaning from the play's dramatic allegory

[4] In an interview with Branden Jacob-Jenkins, playwright of the 2018 adaptation of *Everyman* titled *EVERYBODY*, he remarks on our recent culture's "overwhelming proclivity for thinking that actors can only play other people," whereas "five hundred years ago it was totally okay for an abstraction to be played by a person" (SignatureTheatre). This is just more evidence of theatrical symbolism's power over the stage and its actor, restricting the spectacular and otherworldly element of live theater in order to "accurately" describe the world around us. No doubt this inclination towards metaphor has contributed to "naturalism [becoming] our default mode of storytelling" in the theater, a mode that heavily restricts theatrical exploration and expression in favor of more so-called "realistic" ways of storytelling (ibid).

through theatrical examination. Myself (as director and the "Messenger") and an ensemble of eight actors read *Everyman,* in Bevington's edition of Skot's original Middle English text, on Leap Year Day at Falstaff's on the Skidmore College Campus. My main interest in *Everyman* during this project, as both a director and literary student, was to further explore the play's use of intense dramatic allegory. Metaphor, trope, and allegory have been employed in theatrical storytelling since theater's roots, but the allegory in *Everyman* is specifically rich in its extreme embodiment of character, text, and use of space. For this reason, many theater artists are particularly hesitant to bring *Everyman*, especially in its medieval form, to the contemporary stage: these artists say the play is great to study, but in performance it's "tedious," "dry," and just plain "boring." The intention behind my recent reading of *Everyman* was to respond to these artists by asking them to experience the play in its original form, reevaluate the allegory at hand, and examine their own takeaways from the event. Throughout the rehearsal process of this recent reading, I invited my actors to explore allegory through instinctual, physical, and emotional investigation, hoping this would help them form new opinions on the play *Everyman*, its allegorical characters, the vast notion of theatrical allegory, and themselves.

Everyman is perhaps the quintessential allegorical play, relying on allegory to teach lessons of Catholicism, communicate clearly with medieval audiences, and entice spectators through entertainment. For this reason, it is the perfect play to use in an experiment of allegory in performance; however, I was initially drawn to *Everyman* not because of its allegory but because of its language. I first encountered Middle English drama my freshman year during a Medieval Literature course's performance of *The*

Second Shepherd's Play: the Middle English instantly touched my soul, evoking images of a wise yet rambling soft-mouthed Shakespearian ancestor. The following year, I read the Norton Anthology translation of *Everyman* in a Drama Literature course, furthering my love of medieval literature; I was reintroduced to *Everyman* in my studies abroad, and studied the play's religious identity in a *Gods and Literature* module. I began to read and study the play in its Middle English form after reading Chaucer's poems in Middle English for a corresponding Skidmore course, and from this poetic investigation my passion for *Everyman* began to swell. I find *Everyman* in its Middle English language brings audiences to a medieval mindset, as it truly embodies the Middle Ages; this, in turn, allows audiences to more readily receive allegory. The Middle English poetry pays homage to the honest and matter-of-fact humor in the text, reminds audiences of other ancient English poetry, and graces the ear and mouth of the actor and spectator alike.

I am particularly, and continuously, drawn to *Everyman* as a performative text: it is plain and simple yet infinitely complex. It lends itself readily to a devising process where we can take small ideas and enlarge them, run with them, mold performances with them – not only does the text offer many events, characters, and ideas that could yield new creations, but *Everyman* is also in the public domain, giving any ensemble complete legal right to play with the play as they desire. By devising with the *Everyman* text, theater artists can ask and explore the difficult questions *Everyman* presents us: every one must die, yes, and that's tough enough to swallow, but what does it mean to defy your friend in their hardship, death or non-death related? Who is "Beauty" and what makes them more or less beautiful than anyone else? What does it mean, to you, to face your own death, and what does it mean to help – or not help – someone face their own?

Although my ensemble and I were not able to address all these questions in our brief rehearsals of our *Everyman* staged reading, which primarily focused on the pronunciation of the text and the reading's onstage imagery, I still believe the process of building the reading allowed the ensemble to come together in community; indeed, I believe tackling the Middle English (which many of the actors felt was equivocal to learning an entirely new language) provided a communal hardship that truly helped bring the ensemble together. The intention of theater, in my opinion, is to join performer and spectator together in mutual examination and evaluation of the entire world, prompted by the performance at hand. Call me cheesy, but I do believe theater can change the world ("when it is any good," to quote Hallie Flanagan), and underneath all the allegory and Catholic didacticism and playful theatricality, that's the true message of *Everyman:* be a good person.

I believe in theater's importance and contribution to humankind: theater artists and theorists throughout the twentieth century such as Antonin Artaud, Augusto Boal, Hallie Flanagan, and Sarah Kane have argued in favor of theater's ability to change spectators for the better through the shattering and subsequent reevaluation of presented fictional worlds. The creative scrutinization of onstage text, objects, characters, and events can help yield incredible realizations; this is particularly true for onstage allegory, which encourages constant assessment and reinterpretation. There is immense value in deeply exploring theatrical allegory, and some argue liturgical dramas can create "many kinds of possible performance" if an ensemble allows themselves to fully participate in theatrical play, exploration, and performative creativity (Tudor 141). This past winter, I sought to demonstrate *Everyman*'s theatrical potential by exploring its allegory through

imagery, poetry, and actor exercises and discussions; I am sure this play and these intentions will continue to spur artistic endeavors of mine in years to come.

THE JOURNEY OF MY *EVERYMAN* STAGED READING

In the very first rehearsal for our reading, I prompted the actors to share their favorite or least-favorite "trope" from traditional high school movies (e.g. the "ugly" girl takes off her glasses and becomes "a hottie," or the unassuming character offers a seemingly random piece of information that becomes essential to the plot's solution) alongside general introductions of name, year, and pronouns. I then asked the actors if they thought these tropes were useful or harmful to telling high school stories; some actors noted the tropes could get "repetitive" and thus uninteresting, and one actor asserted these tropes are more fun when they are broken than when they are maintained. After some discussion, our general consensus was these direct correspondences aid the establishment of character and story. I then compared trope to allegory, identifying both as representations of established connotations, and insisted we all rely on allegory in various modes of storytelling, especially in performance. With this in mind, I asked them to acknowledge, play with, and fight against the allegorical mode of *Everyman* throughout the process, and use their instincts to examine the seemingly two-dimensional characters in the play, then reevaluate those instincts and why they appeared.

Before embarking on the Middle English, I wanted my actors to be confident in their understanding of the *Everyman* story itself. For this reason, our first exercise in rehearsal was to read aloud Laurio's very modern abridged English translation of the

text[5], which actors found very helpful even if they already knew the play and it's basic events. I then guided the actors in an embodiment exercise, asking them to choose a character in the play and create short, repeatable gestures representing that chosen character. I prompted the actors to continually experiment with different gestures, finding various ways to embody the same character and corresponding idea; eventually, they began interacting with each other and creating shared gestures and tableaux. In our group reflection after this exercise, the ensemble expressed their appreciation for this activity's ability to spur new ideas about the play's individual characters, their directly corresponding notions, and their place in *Everyman*'s world.

At the end of our first rehearsal, I gave the actors Bevington's Middle English copy of *Everyman* to look over and familiarize themselves with; in the following rehearsals, we focused primarily on gaining confidence and comfort with the Middle English rather than continuing to explore the play's characters in movement and instinct. This was due to our very limited rehearsal time: between scheduling the show for February to give myself proper time to write this paper, and wanting to hold relaxed rehearsals for the actors since they were doing me a huge favor for no credit, we only had so much time to get the reading ready for performance. However, I still urged the ensemble to make discoveries while preparing for the reading: I asked them questions about their characters' motivations and internal lives, prompted them to experiment with their physical instincts, and encouraged them to find the characters' unique voices. By the end of the process, many of the actors expressed how they were initially challenged by the prospect of performing allegorical characters, but through the rehearsal process came

[5] Please reference the Works Consulted for full citation and link to a PDF of this adaptation.

to appreciate allegorical dramas as a storytelling device as well as an opportunity for theatrical world-building and character development.

As a director, I was set on highlighting the presence of allegory specifically present in a *performance* of Everyman, in which character personification is further allegorized by an actor's personification – in other words, the self-acknowledgement of *Everyman* as a piece of theater is further self-acknowledged simply by the fact that actors are consciously performing *Everyman* as a play. I achieved this primarily through casting five actors as the role of Everyman, which highlighted the allegory of the character's name (Everyman's name signifies how every man, woman, and person must one day face the "generall rekeninge" of Death, l. 20). I made a small hanging sign with *EVERYMAN* written in large letters, which was worn and passed from Everyman to Everyman; this sign itself enhanced the performance's allegory by embodying character, text, and the all-encompassing nature of Everyman's name in a single object. I have been wanting to incorporate a "name tag sign" into a production of mine for many years, and the choice to quintuple-cast Everyman provided a ripe opportunity to do so: not only did the sign itself embody text and character, but the act of *wearing* the sign paid homage to the literal objectification present in *Everyman*, specifically connoting the garment of penance Confession gives to Everyman to wear around his neck.

As well as honoring *Everyman*'s allegory through physical embodiment, the actors (and myself, as I introduced the start of the production by delivering the Messenger's opening monologue) allowed the Middle English language and poetry to become an oral embodiment of the medieval period. My hope as a director was this would help aurally and orally locate all present participants in the ancient era of medieval

Europe. As mentioned above, the actors reviewed Bevington's text in their own time after our first rehearsal, and when we returned as a group they expressed how it was easy to read but proved terribly difficult to read out loud; this is unsurprising, as most of the actors were unfamiliar with Middle English pronunciations. Therefore, in the following rehearsal we focused on learning the specifics of the language: we made the difference vowel and consonant[6] sounds as well as practiced elongating our mouths and softening our consonants when reciting the text. In our second to last rehearsal, Professor Kate Greenspan joined us to further guide us through the Middle English pronunciation, a session which the actors found extremely beneficial and enlightening. Many of my actors commented on the similarities between the Middle English language and others (such as French, Gaelic, and German), and we discovered that giving into our established linguistic instincts increased the comfort and speed at which we recited the Middle English text; I therefore encouraged the actors to play into those familiar linguistic elements. This resulted in the actors' individual confidence, but led to a lack of universal ensemble sound in the final reading. While I initially intended to honor *Everyman*'s medieval qualities through an "authentic" pronunciation of Skot's poetry, various post-production conversations and research helped me realize there is no one proven way to recite Middle English poetry: the Middle English language was influenced by foreign languages of its time, Old English, and local dialects within the language, and the spelling of words were multitudinous until Shakespeare's time (whose name was notoriously spelled in a variety of ways). Therefore, to maintain one "correct" standard of

[6] We would chorally and individually recite the Middle English vowel sounds "aa eeh eee ooo uuu uhh," which correspond to *a, e, i, o, u,* and the "schwa" of the tagalong "e" sometimes following a word. Some differences in consonants are a rolling of the "r" and the guttural "gh" sound. Please reference the Works Consulted for Scott Kleinman's helpful handout on Middle English grammar.

speaking Middle English proves both unnecessary and impossible. By the final reading, I ended up rather enjoying the variety of the accents for the sake of aural diversity as well as a means of displaying the different linguistic influences on the Middle- language.

I also pushed the actors to follow the poetry of the text and let the familiar flow of the Middle English poetry guide their instincts and performances. As I have mentioned, early Middle English poetry contains the vocal and rhythmic emphases that give way to iambic pentameter, the English rhyme and rhythm scheme most notably found in Shakespeare's plays but employed by English poets throughout history. Such evidence is present throughout the play, and here I highlight a use of iambic pentameter and rhyme to set up the play's Catholic realization:

> EVERYMAN. O Jesu, helpe! All hath forsaken me.
>
> GOOD DEDES. Nay, Everyman, I will bide with the[e]. (ll.851-52)

If one omits the schwa after "helpe" because of the following vowel (*a* of "All") and pronounces it after "bide" due to the following consonant (*w* of "with"), the crucial message that Good Deeds will remain with Everyman during his judgment is delivered in the powerful rhyming iambic couplet. Because all the actors had experience reading or reciting Shakespeare's work, it was easy for them to locate these innately English rhythms in *Everyman*; I encouraged the ensemble to find comfort in this familiarity, and worry not about falling into instinctual patterns in this regard. Accessing these poetic tendencies allowed the ensemble feel comfortable and confident in their recitation, helping them unlock their acting abilities through the play's performative rhetoric. The rhythm of the Middle English also helped them emphasize the humor in *Everyman*, which

is often overlooked by contemporary theater artists – by leaning into the rhythms given in the poetry alongside playing with tempo, inflection, and accent, the actors found the play's natural set-ups and punchlines. The actors also experimented with the text using their own senses of humor: one example of this was during the Kindred/Cousin scene, in which a clear juxtaposition was established between Everyman's sharp and pitchy request – "My Cosyn, will you not with me go?" – followed by Cousin's soft, low, and iconic matter-of-fact response: "No… I have the crampe in my to[e]" (l. 354-55). These moments of intentional, poetic aural recitation helped bring the Middle English language back to life, while also helping the ensemble lean into the theatrical aspect of our performance.

I also wanted the literal space of our reading to pay homage to *Everyman*'s theatrical elements, leading to my decision of putting the reading in Falstaff's rather than Wilson Chapel. Firstly, this choice emphasizes the secular message of *Everyman* over the religious; though *Everyman* can be performed in religious and non-religious ways, I wanted this reading to clearly be a secular, theatrical production of the play rather than a religious performance. The heightened platforms in Falstaff's, illuminated by lights and set in a proscenium arrangement with the audience, became the stage – the difference in light and height of the platform allowed us to clearly separate onstage from offstage, turning Falstaff's into an obviously theatrical space. I also made popcorn in the Falstaff's kitchen before the show began, filling the room (and some spectator's mouths) with a popcorny aroma; I think this greatly contributed to the literal and figurative air of theatricality present in the space. Emphasizing *Everyman's* theatrical nature was very

important to me as a director, because I set out on this English Senior to prove *Everyman*'s potential for performance in its medieval allegorical and poetic form.

In order to fully honor the medieval life of *Everyman*, I wanted to ensure the actors were somewhat familiar with this era. Because of our particular short process, I cared more about sparking the actors' interest in the medieval era than relaying loads of information; I hoped this play would provide an introduction to medieval life, inciting the actors to research and reflect on the Middle Ages in their own time. In our first rehearsal, we briefly discussed what we already knew about, or associated with, the Middle Ages: we brainstormed a list of ideas including plague/the Black Death, religious prominence, scientific stagnancy, and allegory (much to my delight). Although I didn't think a full historical background on *Everyman* and the medieval era was necessary for such a short process, I did want the ensemble to be familiar with medieval imagery; so, in one of our rehearsals, I presented a slideshow displaying medieval images of death, plague, and angels, as well as demonstrations of other medieval allegorical embodiments (e.g. the Seven Deadly Sins). This proved very helpful for the actors, both in becoming familiar with allegorical embodiment and understanding its importance in medieval art and storytelling. Throughout the process and even before rehearsals began, I often referenced Davidson's medieval gesture book for gestural inspiration – I passed this book around from actor to actor during my presentation on medieval imagery, encouraging them to discover the many different kinds of gesture present in medieval times. I also used this book's imagery directly in the play, assigning actors different poses to embody in the production's final scene illustrating prayer, surprise, and admonishment.

Alongside specific examples of medieval embodiment, I wanted the reading to showcase the devised, instinctual work we embarked on throughout the process. As we were staging the reading, I asked five actors to form a gesture on the spot that embodied a *Duke*, an *Emperor*, *King*, a *Pope*, and a *Prince/ss*; these motions were performed by those same actors during Death's speech asserting that "not…pope, emperour, kinge, duke, ne princes" can put off the act of dying (l. 125-26). These small gestures garnered much laughter during our performance; whether the humor came from the gestures themselves or their modernity in juxtaposition with the ancient Middle English, I was nonetheless thrilled by our ability to bring gestural humor into our contemporary performance.

Everyman's "spectacular conclusion," in which an Angel sings in "the daye of dome," has particularly and repeatedly enticed me as a theater artist, lover of literature, and human of the earthly world (Mills 129; l. 901). When I first read *Everyman*, the Angel's appearance spurred me to realize the play's theatrical potential; I now certainly consider this moment the theatrical climax, or the highest point of action, of the play. It is certainly an intense moment: an Angel directly sings to the audience, rattling us with the truth that death shall come to all "That liveth well before the day of dome" (l. 901). For my reading of the play, I wanted to pay homage to this incredible moment of theater magic – which, as I have mentioned earlier, may have been accomplished with an actor literally descending from the ceiling of the theater – by having two embodiments of the Angel: one through song, one through costume. After Knowledge read her line stating how she hears "aungelles singe" for Everyman, an actor and myself sang a rendition of Johnny Flynn's *The Water* (a song that follows the tale of someone's journey down a river) as the ensemble collected the script's pages (which had been ripped away from the

script after being read) into a makeshift fire pit, illuminated by a flickering orange clip light. Following this moment of spectacular song and scene, another actor emerged from the bathroom, in white angel wings and with bloody tears streaming down his face, to gutturally recite the Angel's monologue. I hoped having two heavily spectacular moments occur in quick succession, after roughly forty-five minutes of stillness and Middle English recitation, would accentuate the ending's drama, surprise spectators, and reward their patient listening with visual spectacularity.

My intention for this dramatic conclusion was to emotionally evoke the beauty and life found in destruction, exactly how the various playwrights of the *Everyman* tale did in their dramatization of Death's harsh inevitability. I hoped the song alongside the "fire" would entrance the audience and emotionally awaken them, and then the frightening angelic appearance would shock the audience awake to realize the presence of death and destruction in our world today. While the song and fire imagery worked very well in emotionally stirring the audience to ponder their death – many spectators said the song made them feel "bittersweet" and emotionally moved – the Angel's appearance was more disorienting than horrifying, evoking confusion rather than shock-induced reflection. Perhaps this is because my angelic design was from a previous *Everyman* performance proposal, one that imposed an additional allegory of Mother Earth as Everyman onto the text to reference the upcoming dangers and worldly death that will result from climate change. As I explore *Everyman* in medieval and modern contexts, the Angel's final call to action continues to ring in my ears as a warning bell ringing in global destruction. However, through embarking on this Senior Project, I came to realize the poetry and allegory present in *Everyman* are deep enough in their medieval form to

spur initial explorations and create meaningful performances out of the play's predetermined and direct correspondences between character and characteristics, item and wider idea.

CONCLUSION

Allegory in its onstage employment can embody character and characteristic, literalize preconceived notions, and clearly relay significance to tell audiences clear, meaningful, and therefore impactful stories. As a director, I hope to continue exploring allegorical drama to uncover truths about our world and offer solutions to individual and general hardships. I particularly aim to continue discovering the humor, power, and emotional importance present in the medieval allegory of *Everyman*, and hope to keep finding ways to perform the play in its full Middle English glory. As opposed to using recent dramatic adaptations of *Everyman,* such as Carol Ann Duffy's *EVERYMAN* or *EVERYBODY* by Branden Jacob-Jenkins, I hope to devise new versions of *Everyman* honoring the text's ancient language (as a form of poetry and a form of academic investigation), original intentions (to provide entertainment and teach lessons), and its medieval allegory as a means of discovery through exploration.

EPILOGUE (Notes)

1. Throughout this paper, I refer to the character of Everyman using "he/him" pronouns throughout because that is his gender, demonstrated in the text as early as God commanding Death to go to "Everyman/ And shewe *him*, in my name, / A pilgrimage *he* must on *him* take" (ll. 66-68, italics mine). I therefore use these pronouns to refer to Everyman the character, but by no means do I believe Everyman must be performed by a male actor. The character's name connotes the phrase "every man" as in "the people," who are addressed in *Everyman* as a plural existence: "*they* know me not for *their* God" (ll. 25-26). Therefore it should not be doubted that any actor could play Everyman; in fact, it was very important to me that "the first Everyman not be a white man" (to quote one of my actors, who expressed this same concern to me as a fellow director and friend). I reflected this in the casting of four women and one man in my Leap Year Day Reading of *Everyman* at Skidmore College, and I plan to continue casting future productions of the play with this same casting preference.

2. The production of this paper and the project's corresponding *Everyman* reading would not be possible without Professor Greenspan, who not only advised me throughout this Senior Project but introduced me to medieval poetry and guided my education in medieval literature. Her deep and fruitful knowledge, as well as the granted access to her personal library, contributed greatly to my own understanding of the medieval era and of *Everyman*; her incredibly wise advice guided me in the right direction every time. To her I give tremendous thanks.

Appendix: Corresponding Performance Pamphlet, giving a "Play-by-Play" of the play

Everyman follows the titular character on a reckoning we all must face: the end of life and whatever follows. After receiving the unhappy news from Death, Everyman asks their earthly companions to join the journey; alas, each and every one leaves Everyman to deal with Death alone. Only the strength of Good Deeds will secure Everyman a spot in Heaven, and once Good Deeds is revived by Everyman's confession, the journey continues – this time, Everyman is accompanied by non-tangible elements such as Beauty, Five Wits (the Five Senses), and Knowledge. But even those leave at the site of Death, and finally Everyman and Good Deeds descend into the grave together.

Everyman may seem like a simple Christian parable: be a Good Person and you will be saved from damnation. But, especially in the anthropocene, concepts such as Death and Doom are far more complex than presented in this allegorical play. As you listen to the poetry of *Everyman*, we urge you to reflect your role in the collective death that will confront every man, woman, person, and child if we continue to ignore Mother Earth's pleas to combat climate change.

In this performance, *Everyman* is presented in its original Middle English to the best of our abilities, with minor cuts for time and clarity. This text is taken from the Britwell copy, Johan Skot's 1528-9 printing of the play in London, courtesy of Professor Greenspan's collection.

1. God (Amanda) calls upon Death (Lucky) to show Everyman his pilgrimage towards the grave.

2. Death finds Everyman (Erin) and explains the voyage ahead.

3. Everyman (Sophia) calls upon Fellowship (Ellie) for help; Fellowship refuses Everyman's pleas.

4. Everyman (Joe) asks Kindred (Erin) and Cousin (Meg) to join the voyage; they, too, refuse.

5. Everyman (Ellie) demands Worldly Goods/Possessions to travel with them; Worldly Goods denies Everyman accompaniment.

6. Everyman (Lucky) meets their Good Deeds (Amanda), who is weak due to Everyman's lack of kindly acts. Good Deeds directs Everyman to Knowledge (Joe), who agrees to go towards Death with Everyman.

7. Knowledge leads Everyman to Confession (Erin); once Everyman confesses their sins, Good Deeds regains strength and promises to accompany Everyman to the grave.

8. Knowledge introduces Everyman to some new friends who will join the journey towards Death: Strength (Adam), Discretion (Ellie), Five Wits (Lucky), and Beauty (Sophia).

9. Everyman, exhausted by the pilgrimage, finds a cave and decides it will be their final resting place. But the others are frightened of the grave, and one by one they leave Everyman – even Knowledge abandons Everyman in the end. Only Good Deeds keeps her promise, descending into Death by Everyman's side.

10. The angels sing as Everyman, and all of us, confront Death.

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