Document généré le 13/10/2026 18:56

Early Theatre
A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama

'Be You Never So Gaye': A Queer Everyman

Matthew W. Irvin

Volume 27, numéro 2, 2024

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1116103ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.12745/et.27.2.5845

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

McMaster University Library Press / Becker Associates

ISSN

1206-9078 (imprimé)
2293-7609 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Irvin, M. (2024). 'Be You Never So Gaye': A Queer Everyman. *Early Theatre*, *27*(2), 71–85. https://doi.org/10.12745/et.27.2.5845

Résumé de l'article

The late medieval play Everyman might seem to exclude queerness, but its religious challenge to secular temporality is the very place to find the queer body of the past. Using Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'messianic time' and queer theoretical interventions by Michel Foucault, J. Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, this paper argues that Everyman creates a time for friendship as a way of life. That time is a 'gaye' time; though the theology of the play may foreclose that time of fellowship and pleasure, the performance of the play produces a time outside the grip of theological order.

All Rights Reserved © Matthew W. Irvin, 2024

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

Early Theatre
27.2 (2024), 71–86
https://doi.org/10.12745/et.27.2.5845

'Be You Never So Gaye': A Queer *Everyman*

Matthew W. Irvin

The late medieval play Everyman *might seem to exclude queerness, but its religious challenge to secular temporality is the very place to find the queer body of the past. Using Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'messianic time' and queer theoretical interventions by Michel Foucault, J. Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, this paper argues that* Everyman *creates a time for friendship as a way of life. That time is a 'gaye' time; though the theology of the play may foreclose that time of fellowship and pleasure, the performance of the play produces a time outside the grip of theological order.*

Religious drama calls for a temporal abolition or annulment, what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls 'messianic time'.[1] Rather than 'religious' time being a past from which the secular has emerged, Agamben, following Walter Benjamin, argues that messianic time is always a calling away from the *saeculum*, a challenge to a particular kind of chrononormativity. In this paper, I want to suggest that in *Everyman* the play's religious challenge to secular temporality is the very place to find the queer body of the past, where it can be re-presented in the actors' performance.[2] That performance is a performance of fellowship that deepens but also challenges the play's own engagement with fellowship and friendship. Early in the play, Death asks Everyman to 'prove thy frendes yf thou can' (142), a line which does not appear in *Elckerlijc*, its Dutch source.[3] As John Conley has argued, the English version has 'the more emphatic treatment of friendship', and 'the doctrine of friendship in *Everyman* may be said to consist of the essential commonplaces of the medieval doctrine of friendship'. The first element of this doctrine, Conley argues, is the testing of friendship in adversity, a recommendation that includes Jewish, Christian, and classical traditions.[4] *Everyman* has a religious teleology in which adversity (here, imminent Death) narrows friendship down to only Good Deeds, which allegorizes friendship, separating it from the this-worldly, real human friendships with which the tradition deals. But by being a play, the human is present in the bodies of the performers, and they work

Matthew W. Irvin (mwirvin@sewanee.edu) is professor and chair of English and Creative Writing at the University of the South.

together in fellowship. Rather than adversity, they engage in the pleasure of collective performance, what I will refer to as the 'gaye' life of friendship.

Through the disjunction between actor and allegorical character, *Everyman* offers the potential for the *failure* of representation, a kind of animation that can resist allegorization and act as a '[disruption] to habitual modes of thought'.[5] It is this failure that knits together the potentiality, in José Esteban Muñoz's meaning,[6] of messianic and queer temporalities 'setting a non-normative figure of the law against the normative figure of the law'.[7] While I do not wish to identify religious and queer temporal challenges to chrononormativity, I want to articulate how religious content provides potential sites for queer resistances, especially the queer concept of friendship. Religion can certainly adapt itself to forms of chrononormativity and become amenable to 'worldly' time. However, at its core, religious time sets itself against the *saeculum*, and it is in the moments of conflict that queerness can, perhaps paradoxically, surface.

Positioned against Benjamin's 'homogenous, empty, time'[8] of secular modes of progress, or what Fred Moten and Stephano Harvey would call in an explicitly capitalist and neoliberal context, 'improvement',[9] messianic time does not destroy chrononormativity but renders it inoperative. Agamben articulates how this resists even ecclesiastical norms. For Agamben, messianic time is '*the time that time takes to come to an end*, or more precisely, the time we take to bring to an end, to achieve our representation of time'.[10] This kind of temporality is due to what he calls 'operational time' (which he takes from linguist Gustave Guillaume),[11] the time it takes to create in one's mind a representation of time; thus 'In every representation we make of time and in every discourse by means of which we define and represent time, another time is implied that is not entirely consumed by representation'.[12] It is a time itself which is 'chronogenetic',[13] that suspends the order of the world, and especially, for Agamben's Paul, the vocation, 'klesis': 'The messianic vocation is not a right, nor does it furnish an identity; rather it is a generic potentiality [potenza] that can be used without ever being owned … the "new creature" is none other than the use and messianic vocation of the old'.[14] This moment is where I believe this messianic temporality can cross paths with queer temporality; Muñoz's 'potentiality' is similarly opposed to both right and identity, and shares a similar relationship to law. The messianic opposition to the world, through the concept of operational time, is not of the same order as the world: 'as messianic power is realized and acts in the form of weakness, so too in this way does it have an effect on the sphere of the law and its works, not simply by negating or annihilating them, but by de-activating them, rendering them inoperative, no-longer-at-work [non-piu-in-opera]'.[15] Normativity, the law,

is rendered inoperative but not absent; the messianic vocation makes possible 'a revolutionary chance', for 'blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework'.[16] It is this 'potentiality' in which queer modes of resistance can arise.

As Joanna Tice Jen and John McMahon argue, queer and messianic temporalities 'resonate' with each other and 'serve as political and theoretical challenges to chrononormativity'.[17] They likewise argue that this resonance is not an effect of secularization; queer time is not just messianic time without God. If we follow Carolyn Dinshaw, queer time allows for 'the consideration of diverse temporal regimes operating here and now'.[18] Messianic time can open this consideration, for messianic time makes history a 'time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]'.[19] *Everyman*'s specifically religious content challenges the notion of progress and renders the calling of the actor inoperative. In the medieval/early modern play, the impossible call to be 'everyman' renders representation — that is, the law of the theatre — inoperative, and provides a 'generic possibility' in which the old representation, 'Everyman' can be used: not as the character, but as an actor, the very figure in which the character is generated.

This inoperativity and its messianic potential is ready to be transformed back into a new temporal normativity by the penitential progress of the church, but Everyman fails at this transformation, and for a particularly queer reason: he never abandons his original calling, and both treats and experiences the *ars morienda* through the same notions of 'friendship' that he treasures at the beginning of the play. Here are Dinshaw's 'diverse temporal regimes': one ecclesiastical and institutional, the other grounded in sociality and fellowship. Messianic time makes time for the world to fail, and the theatre can turn this into a queer art. To adapt Agamben, we can see in *Everyman* the process of conceiving representation being cast into the representation itself, in that one is arrested by the failure of Everyman's representation: this burgher, recognizable from the danse macabre tradition, is simply not 'every man'.[20] In the time it takes for the audience to think the representation, the representation fails, and we are left not with the actor stripped of his 'character' but his character being rendered inoperative.[21] Everyman is the character coming to an end, a challenge to the optimist futurity critiqued by Lee Edelman.[22] One can smooth out this challenge and focus entirely on the futurity of heaven and its quasi-heterosexual union, but doing so imports a model of maturation into the play, a play in which the main character consistently refuses the responsibility of adulthood.[23] The end of the play, with its salvific marriage of Everyman and Christ, is, I will argue, an accommodation to a much queerer

mode of representation. It is in the actor that there is, in J. Halberstam's terms, a 'representational instability of the body'[24] that is resigned to a 'lack of progress'.[25]

Playing Gay

In a compelling reading of *Everyman*, Julie Paulson argues that in the play, 'penance emerges as the rite that holds individuals both responsible to their community and accountable for their actions before God'; it is through the performance of penance that Everyman 'recognizes his true relationship to the world: he is truly separate from all but Good Deeds, the emblem of his responsibility to others'.[26] She argues it is only through the 'performative' quality of medieval rituals and rites (including drama) that the meaning of the allegorical concepts in the play can be understood. Paulson's reading practice recognizes (if not in explicit terms) the messianic calling (or summoning) of Everyman, where his relationship to the world, all that constituted his secular existence, is annulled, with Good Deeds being action in the world sublimated (Agamben directly invokes Hegel's *aufheben*) through the performance of a ritual. For Paulson, *Everyman*'s key ritual, which accomplishes the revivification of Good Deeds is a self-scourging:

> [*Everyman scourging himself*]
> Take this, body, for the synne of the flesshe!
> Also thou delytest to go gaye and fresshe,
> And in the waye of dampnacyon thou dyd me brynge;
> Therfore suffre nowe strokes and punysshenge.
> Now of penaunce I wyll wade the water clere
> To save me from Hell and from the fyre. (613–19)

This is the required action for Good Works' reviving, for the *success* of Everyman's movement towards salvation, recognizing his 'true relationship to the world'. But Everyman has several different kinds of relationship to the world, and it is important to consider here the work that Paulson's 'true' *performs*. In *Everyman*, there is no skepticism about God, Hell, or Heaven, nor even of judgment; its message, as relates the aptly named Messenger (added to the English play), is 'How transytory we be all daye' (6), and a warning, repeated in the scourging scene, of the dangers of 'be[ing] gaye' (12).[27]

While 'gaye' in the sixteenth century did not, of course, have the identitarian meaning that it has today, I suggest a way in which the conventionality of the narrative exclusion of the 'gaye' life in fact manifests its pleasures and identifies its own temporal 'truth'. The life of 'myrthe, solace, and playe' (277) resists the

future and persists in both form and content in *Everyman*, often in places where the play adds to or changes the terms or form of *Elckerlijc*. This life is also central to any *actual* performance of *Everyman*, which would be, itself 'playe' and would likely feature elaborate costuming.[28] While the play might represent the condemnation of the 'gaye', the representation itself is gaye at every turn. The presence of this pleasure, which literally makes present *Everyman*'s allegorical adversity, queers friendship, turning it away from its role as an instrument for the production of normative virtue, and towards non-normative pleasures. Though the theology and allegory of the play may foreclose the time of fellowship and pleasure, the performance of the play produces a time, a 'phase', outside the grip of theological normativity and teleology, a performance time in which normativity is present, but inoperative.

Of course, if we look from only the point of view of normativity, that is, in the most *straightforward* way, *Everyman* condemns such a 'gaye' life of pleasure, and especially attempts to replace what we in the present might call 'gay' — that is, sodomitical — allegorical relationships of pleasure in-the-moment with future-oriented couplings through what Katherine Little calls '*precept-oriented* morality'.[29] God's initial speech begins with an echo of Noah's flood, where 'all creatures are to me unkynde' (23), and 'Drowned in synne' (26). This speech modifies the primarily monetary concerns and lack of concern for the future that typify the wicked in *Elckerlijc*; *Everyman* has similar language to that of a poem like *Cleanness*, and its participation in a tradition in which the flood was punishment for (among other things) sodomy.[30] The primary instigation of the summoning is not merely Everyman's lack of concern ('*sorghen*' in the Dutch; 19), but also his pleasure, his mercantile activity is from the beginning associated with unnatural desire. God bemoans that human beings in general are, through their love of earthly pleasure, 'moche worse than bestes' (49) in that 'Everyman lyveth so after his owne pleasure' (40) and Death remarks that Everyman in particular has his mind on 'on flesshely lustes and his treasure' (82). Similarly, when Everyman tells Goods 'I have thee loved and had great pleasure / All my lyfe dayes on good and treasure' (427–8), Goods replies, 'my love is contrary to the love everlastynge' (430). The merchants of Matthew 13, who allegorically buy the kingdom of heaven, are opposed by the more literal Everyman, who has laid up no treasure in heaven, but speaks to Goods, 'Good, thou hast had longe my hartely love. / I gave thee that whiche shulde be the Lordes above' (457–8), 'For where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also' (Mt 6:21). His love of Goods is registered as perverse, even sodomitical, pleasure.

Thus, the *Everyman* author develops the combination of sinfulness and lack of foresight in *Elckerlijc* into a clearer notion of unnatural pleasure, and a notion of fellowship built on such pleasure.[31] Fellowship, who is relegated to a place of moral failure because of promising then refusing to go with Everyman to judgment, is ready 'yf thou wylte ete and drynke and make good chere / Or haunte to women, that lusty company'—here one can 'Trust [him] verily' (272–3, 275). This unnatural fellowship and pleasure will be opposed by the image of heterosexual marriage with which Everyman's trial concludes: 'Cume, excellent electe spouse to Jesu. / Here above thou shall go / Bycause of thy synguler vertue' (894–6). Here 'myrthe' is replaced by angelic 'great joye' (892) and the promise of eternal union: 'God brynge us all thether / That we may lyve, body and soule togyther' (918–19). *Everyman* produces a consistent opposition of sensual pleasure and the 'truth', where the 'gaye' life is specifically excluded from moral success.

But the 'gaye' life is also a 'phase'[32] in the conventional dramatizations of penance and is typically an element of allegorical performance. In works like *Mankind*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, and *Wisdom*, the central allegorical characters live a life dedicated to pleasure, only to realize its lack of satisfaction and/or its impending end in punishment. Specifically as a performance trope, the phase makes possible the staging of sin: the entrance of the vices from whose pleasure the audience is redeemed with the main character.[33] The 'gaye' life is precisely the wrong, but narratively necessary, reading of the time of the performance. Thus, when Mercy hears the names New Gyse, Nowadays and Nought (two of them already coded in terms of time), he reckons them in terms of a narrative of betrayal, counterposed to the narrative of redemption: 'Be Jhesu Cryst that me dere bowte / Ye betray many men'. But to this accusation New Gyse replies, 'Betray? Nay, nay, ser, nay, nay! / We make them both fresch and gay'.[34] The permanent temporal state of 'new gyse' for Wyll in *Wisdom* echoes this assertion: 'Sumtyme I geff, sumtyme they me, / Ande am ever fresche and gay'.[35] This construction can be found in texts like *The Castle of Perseverance* and *The Pride of Life* as well.[36] In these performance texts, the allegory of humankind is allowed to dally in this worldly space with the audience, and the end is often abrupt. It is the gay life that makes the play fun, which makes it 'tick', or work temporally.

In all of these narratives, I contend, we see one of the temporal forms apparent in *Everyman*: messianic time. The time of the performance itself is the 'operational time' in which one enjoys the performance and understands the moral meaning of the enjoyment of the performance. This temporal operation annuls the law for the time of the performance (one can enjoy the Vices in its annulled context), but also sublimates the enjoyment of freedom to faith in the (future, yet

imminent) promise of salvation.[37] No doubt this antinomian moment of freedom 'resonates' with queer liberation, but in the same way that Judaism might 'resonate' with Christianity: supersession and extermination can temporally go hand in hand. The messianic time that dominates these plays (and truly makes them enjoyable performances) contracts the experience of temporality (both the time of the performance and the *tempus mundi*). It makes it an intense phase in a narrative which promises even greater intensity. The challenge to worldly chrononormativity and its antinomianism issues in the performative ritual time of penance, which can stretch from a moment to a lifetime.[38]

Everyman's Style of Failure

Everyman participates in the messianic temporality that makes its cousins, *Mankind*, *Wisdom, The Castle of Perseverance*, and even *The Pride of Life* 'tick', that is, produce the coherent and enjoyable narrative time. However, *Everyman* lacks something quite important: the Vices.[39] While one might perhaps point to Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin as vicious characters, none of them really entice him — nor does Goods. If we want to posit Vices in the play, they would have to come *before* the action of the play, as Everyman is already seduced — but then the audience gets none of the pleasure of the seduction. That pleasure is not just a moment in the moral play, but an important phase, as discussed above; it structures the operational time of moral narrative construction. In *Everyman*, 'being gaye' is always already past; the body 'delytest to go gaye and fresshe' (in the present progressive), but this 'in the waye of dampnacyon … dyd me brynge' (in the past; 614, 615).

However, in *Everyman*'s major alteration of *Elckerlijc*, Good Deeds departs in her name from *Everyman*'s source, the Dutch *Elckerlijc*, where she is called 'Duecht' (Virtue); a group of past actions replaces a present power. Roger Ladd has argued that this change focuses the reader specifically on the mercantile aspects of the character, comparing, and opposing, 'Good Dedes' with 'Goodes', and reducing the agency of Good Deeds from the Dutch. Ladd notes that while Duecht lies 'Te bedde, vercreplet ende al ontset' (in bed, paralyzed and completely exhausted), Good Deeds is 'colde in the grounde' and 'sore bounde' (486–7).[40] Duecht is a power that has been reduced, but which is also 'present progressive'. While Paulson argues that this change manages to shift the focus directly onto charity,[41] the interpretative move that she makes effaces the weirdness of a character named 'Good Deeds' by turning her (back) into a power or activity; the comparisons showing that Good Deeds fits into the mold of charity or virtue

only emphasizes the strangeness of the choice of this allegorical name. I don't see any way to read 'Good Deeds' but as a collection or list of deeds done that were good, specifically, deeds done by Everyman *in the past*. But has he actually done any good deeds? The text is itself ambiguous: in his good deeds account-book, Everyman says, 'one letter herein I can not se' (507); Good Deeds replies that 'There is a blynde rekenyge in tyme of dystresse' (508). It is indeed blind, as we have absolutely no idea what his Good Deeds were like;[42] while Everyman assigns half his wealth as alms in his 'testament' (697), he also has to assign the other half to 'In quyet to be returned there it ought to be' (702).[43] The choice of address by the author does not designate, as in *Elckerlijc* or various *ars moriendi*, an essential virtue that is part of the human being, but points necessarily to at least one particular action.

This matters. Pointing to the separation between Everyman and his own deed could reveal significant theological content: for instance, his state of sin might have made him unable to recognize his good deeds, or, like the dreamer in *Piers Plowman*, the reification of good deeds may have led to the investigation of what it is to 'Dowel'. However, neither of these possibilities arise in the play. I'd even go so far to say that Everyman doesn't learn anything *about* his Good Deeds.[44] After confession, Everyman addresses Good Deeds in precisely the same mode: 'Good Dedes, have we clere oure rekenynge?' (652), and when she answers in the affirmative, he does not even ask to examine it! He just responds, 'Than I truste we nede not fere' (l.654). Everyman does not change in his relationship to Good Dedes: she is still an account, which he requires in order to present himself to the divine exchequer. So too, his penance does not transcend his prior form. The priest Confession is introduced as someone who 'is in good conceyte with God Almyghty' (544), where 'conceyte' has the specific meaning in late Middle English of reputation or influence. Confession is a broker, in good with God, willing to put in a word.

The pastness of both virtue and vice in *Everyman* works to intensify the contraction that messianic time produces, and the contraction of time becomes the theme of the play, even as Death's 'great hast' (90) seems to allow quite enough 'layser' (leisure; 101) for a good death.[45] In fact, the regular repetition of the shortness of time and lack of 'respyte' constantly reminds the audience of the time the play takes to play out: rather than a 'gaye phase' which produces the temporality of the traditional morality play, *Everyman* ticks because its time is the time of its ending.[46] In referring to itself as made 'in maner of a moral playe', it suggests, I propose, that it could have had such a phase, but did not.

What are the alternatives to the messianic time that sublimates the gay phase of the allegorical performance? I suggest here that one alternative is the *failure* of sublimation, a failure that emerges as the central tension of the play, and which makes this play tick. For the failure of sublimation, I don't mean simply that vice wins; such a failure is always present in the very structure of moral literature. Instead, the potential preservation of the 'gaye phase' *as* Good Deeds, the failure of Everyman to see himself as 'electe spouse to Jesu' (894), but instead suggest 'friendship as a way of life' in the moral sense that Foucault means for it.[47]

In an exchange between Good Deeds and Everyman near the conclusion of the play, the two come to something of an agreement on what I, following Conley, argue is the play's central concept: 'friendship'.

> Good Deeds Nay, Everyman, I wyll byde wyth thee.
> I wyll not forsake thee indeed;
> Thou shalte fynde me a good frende at nede.
>
> Everyman Gramercy, Good Dedes, now may I true frendes se.
> They have forsaken me everychone.
> I loved them better then my Good Dedes alone. (852–7)

Good Deeds later summarizes for Everyman that 'All erthly thynge is but vanyté: / Beauté, Strength, and Discrecyon do man forsake, / Folysshe frendes and kynnesmen that fayre spake, / All fleeth save Good Dedes, and that am I' (870–3).

There are several tensions here. First, the 'friends' of Fellowship, Kinsman, and Cousin have already been sublimated into Everyman's various 'virtues', which are also his 'frendes' (668): Discretion, Strength, Five Wits, and Beauty. And they are not Vices; Discretion and Five Wits help Everyman write his testament, and Five Wits especially is key to imparting the wisdom of the danse macabre tradition and the value of the seven sacraments (712–27), and both Five Wits and Knowledge discourse on the value of priests (730–68). Even Beauty, who bears the most superficial resemblance to a Vice, does not lie to Everyman; he will not leave him 'unto dethes houre' (688). Therefore, what exactly does it mean that Everyman can see his 'true frendes'? Conley's explanation that these represent earthly and spiritual goods, while Good Deeds represents 'lasting good',[48] explains the hierarchy, but sublimates rather than accounts for the complexities of the experience, the performance, of friendship. If one truly loves 'Good Dedes *alone*', then what happens to the love of neighbor which is the very source of Good Deeds? Here, the alteration from Duecht is important, because the temporal quality of Good Deeds comes to the fore. What if the 'frendes and kynnesmen' were not 'folysshe'? Is there no possibility of true friendship on earth? Also, if Ladd is right to

see 'Good Deeds' as a sublimation of 'Goods',[49] what does it suggest that there is no specific critique of Goods in this latter section, but that virtues of body and friends and kin are all grouped (ostensibly with Goods) not as earthly goods, but as 'erthly … vanyté'?

The contraction of time in *Everyman* produces sublimation, but it also marks the rote quality of that sublimation. This sublimation is already present in *Elckerlijc*, but *Everyman* intensifies the language of friendship and the problem of time with its substitution of Good Deeds for Duecht. What exists in tension with the directionality of singular friendship and sublime espousal is not vice, but fellowship, friendship as a way of life: the potential for messianic time simply not to be needed, because, following Halberstam and Lee Edelman, the queer failure of the narrative, from birth, to marriage, to children, to death, can be a treasured style, a life that offers another mode of ethics or subverts the normativity of ethics altogether into what the performance always presents: an ensemble and their ensemblic action.[50]

Queer-Acting

In this last section, I would like to propose that it is the acting of *Everyman* that can be understood as queer. There is a double sense in *Everyman*, one that becomes awkward to articulate in adaptation; Carol Ann Duffy's adaptation for the National Theatre, which ends up with the younger version of Everyman being 'Everyboy', tends towards camp in its attempt to avoid a literal/symbolic disjunction through artifice.[51] But this disjunction is already present in the fifteenth-century text: as Ladd has argued, 'Everyman' is identifiable as a late medieval urban citizen, likely a merchant and guildsman. He is not peasant, clergy, nor noble; his status as 'everyman' is not that he encompasses every man, but that every man could *play* him, could *perform his role*. It is, after all, a ritual: every man can come to contrition and penance.

The texts upon which *Everyman* draws describe the ritual, urge the performance of the ritual, or create rules for the ritual; they are arts, manuals, sermons, and treatises. The play *Everyman* performs the ritual in a way that marks the gap between performance and ideal performance, because the performance that we see, the performance that is before the eyes, is only artifice. Perhaps the character 'Everyman' performs the ritual, but the actor, the *body* of Everyman, only 'goes through the motions'. He does not expose the ritual, the performance, as false, but instead extends and encourages a receptiveness to that performance's fictionality, its 'theatricality'.[52] The artifice here is not opposed to meaning, but opposed

to the tyrannous temporality of plot, especially of plot as treatise. Garner suggests that *Everyman* has an 'ascetic suspicion of the physical',[53] and this is precisely the way in which the physicality of the actors becomes a 'potential narrative',[54] where an ensemble, bound by fellowship, perform the same actions. The 'gaye phase' of moral plays like *Mankind* and the *Castle of Perseverance* manages the pleasure of the performance, and subjects it to moral tyranny; the ascetic regime of *Everyman* opens up the possibility of a physical world of friendship.

What is beautiful about *Everyman* is Everyman's longing for friendship and comfort in the face of moral tyranny — that is, God, and the form of the moral treatise itself. God speaks his doom for Everyman 'here in my majestye' (22), and the atonement is less a merciful gift of grace than a way to show 'my lawe' (29) and 'my ryghtwysenes, that sharpe rod' (28). So too, the margin, even in the oldest printing, indicates not just a 'Naeprologhe' (Epilogue) but a 'Doctour' whose learning, especially Latin learning, bears the hard 'pardon' that Piers reads: *Ite maledicti in ignem eternum* (Go, wicked, into eternal fire; 915),[55] for even 'Mercy and Petye doeth hym forsake' (913). The play's action is circumscribed by domination, and even the salvific action of the church in the viaticum is undercut by priests' own enactment of Everyman's mercantile sin: 'theyr Savyour [to] bye or sell' (757) and to 'haunten womens company / With unclene lyfe, as lustes of lechery' (761–2). While *Everyman* has its occasional joke (for instance, Cousin's 'cramp in [his] to' as an excuse not to go before the judgment seat; 356), the play is not funny;[56] it articulates the desire for friendship, for friendship as a way of life. Who saves Everyman is not God, at least, not in the action of the play: it is Everyman's friends, it is the troupe of actors who neither appear above in majesty, take over the stage as an authority, nor lurk off-stage as clerical agent, but those who go with him and are his guide. What one sees on the stage is an ensemble, rich in longing, desire, and possibility. Asceticism, as it does for Foucault's longer project on the *History of Sexuality*, opens up a potential narrative of 'tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship' that queers the reduction of desire to sin.[57]

It might be hard to read the end of the play, however, as anything other than the strai(gh)tening of Everyman in transcendent marriage. The gap between queer and ideal performance seems to be effaced by the intervention of an angel, who greets Everyman:

> Cume, excellent electe spouse to Jesu.
> Here above thou shall go
> Bycause of thy synguler vertue. (894–6)

Here, it seems, 'vertue', repressed for so long in favour of Good Deeds, returns, slicing through the strange temporality of *Everyman* to cut the thread of body and soul. But even in the Dutch, the play does not mean precisely the same thing as Duecht; 'synguler vertue' translated 'goede Virtuyt' (849). This is not the same thing. And 'synguler' is such an odd word; how can *Every*man's virtue be singular? The word 'singuler' has a Middle English valence of selfish or personal (as in 'singuler profite'). One looks at the stage where Everyman has been constantly among, dependent upon, and belonging to his friends and sees a descending angel calling the collective work that has saved him, 'singuler vertue'. The heavenly marriage is confronted by a queerer potential narrative. On the one hand, the audience can look on this group and recognize that they are all internal to Everyman, features of his person, his psyche, his soul, his character. But it also suggests that singular individuality and its concomitant regimen of judgment are not all that is possible. What is queer in *Everyman* is that it never stops acting all-together.

Notes

1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503619869.

2 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968; rpt New York, 1982), 139.

3 *Everyman and its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Martin Walsh, and Tom J. Broos (Kalamazoo, 2007). All further references to this work, and to *Elckerlijc,* will indicate this edition and all quoted passages will be cited parenthetically by line numbers.

4 John Conley, 'The Doctrine of Friendship in *Everyman*', *Speculum* 44.3 (July, 1969), 374–82, 375, 382, https://doi.org/10.2307/2855500. Conley notes that one can find the necessity of testing friendship in Ecclesiasticus 6:7, Proverbs 17:17, as well as in Cicero's *De amicitia*; 374–6).

5 J. [Judith] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, 2011), 175, 177, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11sn283.

6 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, 2009), 9, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479868780.001.0001.

7 Agamben, *The Time*, 95.

8 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 2007), 253–64, 261 (Thesis XIII).

9 Stephano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (New York, 2021), 7.

10 Agamben, *The Time*, 67.
11 Ibid, 65.
12 Ibid, 67.
13 Ibid, 66.
14 Ibid, 26.
15 Ibid, 97.
16 Benjamin, 'Theses', 263 (Thesis XVII).
17 Joanna Tice Jen and John McMahon, 'Timely Politics: A Political Theory of Messianic, Evangelical, and Queer Temporalities', *Theory and Event* 20.4 (2017), 923–49, 923, https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2017.0085.
18 Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, 2012), 19, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395911.
19 Benjamin, 'Theses', 261 (Thesis XIV).
20 Roger A. Ladd argues that he is better understood as 'Every Merchant', '"My condicion is mannes soule to kill": Everyman's Mercantile Salvation,' *Comparative Drama* 41.1 (Spring 2007), 57–78, 58, https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2007.0008.
21 See the 'theatricality' of *Everyman* in Stanton B. Garner, Jr, 'Theatricality in *Mankind* and *Everyman*', *Studies in Philology* 84.3 (1987), 272–85, 272, and throughout.
22 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, 2004), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpkpp.
23 See Halberstam, *The Queer Art*, 73.
24 Ibid, 103.
25 Ibid, 96.
26 Julie Paulson, *Theater of the Word: Selfhood in the English Morality Play* (Notre Dame, 2019), 117.
27 Katherine Little, 'What is *Everyman*?' *Renaissance Drama* 46.1 (2018), 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1086/697173, argues that *Everyman* provides 'a new generic consciousness that has specifically to do with morality' (3), which directly responses to humanist uses of the sentence or maxim (5–6).
28 *The Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'gai', adj.2(c), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED18063.
29 Little, 'What is *Everyman*', 5.
30 See *Cleanness*, 265ff, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter, 1996); see also Elizabeth Kieser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in* Cleanness *and its Contexts* (New Haven, 1997), https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300157826.
31 See *Cleanness*, 271.

32 Dinshaw, *How Soon*, 4. Dinshaw discusses there the way in which queerness is often dismissed temporally as a 'phase' and the wider ramifications of that dismissal.
33 Eleanor Johnson, *Staging Contemplation: Participatory Theology in Middle English Prose, Verse, and Drama* (Chicago, 2018), https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226572208.001.0001, contends that these are 'intermediate stages' (151) and (for *Wisdom*) that 'The play drags us through the chaos and disorder of the temporal life precisely in order to make the participation in danced, sung, and spoken contemplation all the sweeter in the end' (159).
34 *Mankind*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Gerard NeCastro (Kalamazoo, 2010), 116–19, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14gpjw1.
35 *Wisdom* in *Two Moral Interludes: Wisdom and the Pride of Life*, ed. David Klausner (Kalamazoo, 2008), 646, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1z3hm9h.
36 *The Castle of Perseverance*, ed. David Klausner (Kalamazoo, 2010), 703–6, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv138435v, and *Pride of Life* in *Two Moral Interludes*, ed. Klausner, 443–6.
37 Agamben, *The Time*, 90–1.
38 For instance, in Carol Ann Duffy's adaptation of *Everyman* for the National Theatre, most of the action of the play takes place between Everyman's fall from a balcony and death from impact; Carol Ann Duffy, *Everyman: A New Adaptation* (London, 2015), https://doi.org/10.5040/9780571335442.
39 This has long been noticed by critics; see, for example, Ladd, '"My condicion', Thomas F. Van Laan, 'Everyman: A Structural Analysis', *PMLA* 78 (1963), 465–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/460724, and Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play: Origins, History, and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition* (Boston, 1975), 38, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430049.
40 Ladd, 'My condicion', 65.
41 Paulson, *Theater of the Word*, 132–4.
42 Duffy's adaptation is again useful; she creates a scene in which Everyman returns to the past to meet his younger self ('Everyboy') precisely to present the audience with the good deed. This understandable novelty in the adaptation serves to highlight the lack of attention to the existential question of the past in *Everyman*. Duffy, *Everyman: A New Adaptation*, 44–6.
43 Here, 'quyet' is a legal term: this is his *redde quod debes*.
44 This is radically different from Duffy's adaptation, where self-knowledge structures its messianic time.
45 See Donald F. Duclow, '*Everyman* and the *Ars Moriendi*: Fifteenth-Century Ceremonies of Dying', *Fifteenth Century Studies* 6 (1983), 93–113.
46 Garner, Jr, 'Theatricality', designates *Everyman* as 'a play about endings' (281).

47 Michel Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. John Johnson, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1997). Foucault, in discussing *Le Gay Pied* and its youthful writers and readers, works to separate questions of identity and desire from an ethics of homosexuality: 'Another thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of "Who am I?" or "What is the secret of my desire?" Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, "What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied and modulated?" The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships … The development towards which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship' (135–6).

48 Conley, 'The Doctrine of Friendship', 380.

49 Ladd, 'My condicion', 65.

50 See Stephano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York, 2013), 73, 136.

51 Duffy, *Everyman: A New Adaptation*, 44–6.

52 Garner Jr, 'Theatricality', 274.

53 Ibid, 282. Garner marks careful and thoughtful separations between the actor and character.

54 See Muñoz, *Cruising*, and Aaron Stone, '*Passing*'s Desires for Form: Black Respectability, Queer Narrative, and Wayward Experimentalism', *Modernism/Modernity*, forthcoming.

55 William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (Berkeley, 1988), VII.111.

56 Ladd, 'My condicion', 57, though see Ron Tanner, 'Humor in *Everyman* and the English Morality Play', *Philological Quarterly* 70 (1991), 149–61. Tanner's analysis would, I think, bring *Everyman* closer to camp.

57 Foucault, 'Friendship', 136. Foucault's claim that homosexuality understood as 'immediate pleasure' is exactly what closes off the possibilities named here; that is a type of 'sinful' pleasure, the 'fylþe in fleschlych dedez' (*Cleanness*, 265) that accords with asceticism even if rejecting asceticism as a practice.