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A MORALITY PLAY WITHOUT A MORAL: THE DEADLY SINS AS INTERPRETED BY BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS AND BERTOLT BRECHT

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Abstract. The article focuses on Bertolt Brecht's play *The Seven Deadly Sins* (*Die sieben Todsünden*, 1933) and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *Everybody* (2017) on the background of the tradition of medieval Morality Theater. Both plays are explicitly derived from moralities, but the playwrights approach the options of the medieval genre in very different ways and pursue different aims. For Jacobs-Jenkins, as a postmodern author, both the Brecht theatrical traditions and the adaptation techniques of modern drama are equally important. It seems fruitful to regard the principles of both authors' appeal to morality, as well as the parameters of the genre as such. The analysis of critical sources concerned with the study of medieval religious theatre, and specifically its English national variant, confirms that moralities, unlike mystery plays or miracles, are characterized by certain flexibility of the system of images and the plot construction, and necessarily possess such typical features of the genre as allegorism and didacticism. Written in the 15th century morality *Everyman*, being probably the most famous dramatic text of this genre, has won its status as a program work of medieval theatre not through strict following the canon, but as a memorable performance about the principal character's encounter with Death, relevant in any epoch. The plot and the allegories of *Everyman* demonstrate the ability to transform – or be adapted; as a result, the play's motifs can be traced both in the 16th century Humanist drama and in the 20th century modernist literature. Mostly, while adapting *Everyman*, playwrights seek for a greater psychological depth to the conflict of the play. But Brecht and Jacobs-Jenkins choose a different path, presenting the main character as "every person" without describing the personal traits in detail. The article treats both plays – *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *Everybody* – as successful dramatic experiments, hardly corresponding with the original ideas of the medieval genre of Morality Theater.

Keywords: drama; German playwrights; American playwrights; literary creative activity; literary genres; plays; literary plots; morality; English drama; Medieval tradition; didacticism; allegorism; B. Jacobs-Jenkins; B. Brecht; deadly sins

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МОРАЛИТЕ БЕЗ ПОУЧЕНИЯ: СМЕРТНЫЕ ГРЕХИ В ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ Б. ДЖЕЙКОБС-ДЖЕНКИНСА И Б. БРЕХТА

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Аннотация. В статье пьесы Б. Брехта «Семь смертных грехов» (*Die sieben Todsünden*, 1933) и Б. Джейкобс-Дженкинса «Всякий» (*Everybody*, 2017) рассматриваются на фоне традиций средневекового моралите. Обе пьесы эксплицитно включают в себя апелляцию к моралите, однако немецкий и американский драматурги используют возможности средневекового жанра по-разному и с различными целями. Для Джейкобс-Дженкинса как автора-постмодерниста значимы и традиции эпического театра Б. Брехта, и собственно приемы современной адаптации в драме. Представляется плодотворным рассмотреть принципы обращения обоих авторов к моралите, равно как и сами параметры данного жанра. Анализ источников, посвященных изучению средневекового религиозного театра и особенно английского национального его варианта, показывает, что для моралите, в отличие от мистерии или миракля, характерна определенная гибкость, связанная с системой образов и построением сюжета, но обязательны аллегоризм и дидактизм. Созданное в XV в. моралите «Всякий человек» (*Everyman*), будучи, вероятно самым известным представителем жанра, обеспечило себе программный статус не благодаря строгому следованию канону, но в качестве запоминающегося действа о встрече Человека со Смертью, актуального для любого времени. Сюжет «Всякого человека» и представленные в моралите аллегории проявили способность трансформироваться – или подвергаться адаптации; в результате мотивы пьесы можно проследить и в гуманистической драме XVI столетия, и в модернистской литературе XX в. Как правило, при обработках «Всякого человека» драматурги стремятся придать конфликту большую психологическую глубину. Но Б. Брехт и Б. Джейкобс-Дженкинс в разные годы выбирают иной путь, оставляя героя, или героиню, именно «всяким» человеком, без конкретизации характера. В статье

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обе пьесы – «Семь смертных грехов» и «Всякий» – рассматриваются как эффектный драматический эксперимент, вряд ли соответствующий тем не менее исходным установкам разработанного в рамках средневекового театра жанра моралите.

Ключевые слова: драматургия; немецкие драматурги; американские драматурги; литературное творчество; литературные жанры; пьесы; литературные сюжеты; моралите; английская драма; Средневековье; дидактизм; аллегоризм; Б. Джейкобс-Дженкинс; Б. Брехт; смертные грехи

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Introduction

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins (b. 1984) is a contemporary American playwright who has been presenting his plays to the public and theatre critics since the 2010s and received the Pulitzer Prize in 2025 for his play *Purpose*. Jacobs-Jenkins writes a great deal about the problems of contemporary society, and considers the tradition of family drama, to which he assigns his own recent play, to be important for American drama. "*Purpose* is a play about a Black political family; it's a family drama"[1]. Not all of Jacobs-Jenkins' works, however, address only current social issues, or could be classified as "original scripts," since "a lot of his works are adaptations of pieces that existed before" [Kelly 2020: 24]. In his play-adaptations, Jacobs-Jenkins draws on both little-known and highly popular source material. In his case, moreover, "adaptation" cannot simply be equated with "translation" or with a "more or less faithful transfer" [Pavis 1991: 4]. Rather, if we use Patrice Pavis's terminology, adaptation can be understood in its second dictionary meaning: unlike translation, it allows for greater freedom and substantial alterations to the meaning of the original work [Ibid.]. It should be noted that Pavis cites Bertolt Brecht's *Bearbeitungen* as examples of precisely this type of adaptation, Brecht being the author significant for Jacobs-Jenkins. However, the American playwright is a prominent figure in contemporary theatre, and his approach to reworking source texts also draws on postmodernist strategies. This article uses a comparative-historical approach of literary studies to compare dramatic works from different eras.

Jacobs-Jenkins's best-known adaptation is *An Octoroon* (2014), which for a considerable time was also his most widely known play. The playwright himself describes it as an adaptation of *The Octoroon* (1859), the eponymous melodrama by the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish playwright Dion Boucicault. A later example of Jacobs-Jenkins's engagement with earlier dramatic forms is his 2017 play *Everybody*, a contemporary adaptation of the famous morality play *Everyman*. These two plays demonstrate different approaches to the reworking of source texts. In the case of *An Octoroon*, Jacobs-Jenkins undertook extensive, almost scholarly research, which enabled him to reflect on the conventions of melodrama directly within the play itself and in subsequent interviews [Jacobs-Jenkins 2015; Kelly 2020]. Regarding *Everybody*, it makes sense to raise the question of the generic nature of Jacobs-Jenkins' "contemporary morality play". This, in turn, requires us to appeal to the traditions of the classical morality play as a genre of medieval theatre.

[1] Paulson M. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins on Winning a Pulitzer for 'Purpose' // The New York Times. 2025. May 5. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/by/michael-paulson (mode of access: 12.07.2026).

Morality Plays as Genre and Tradition: A Historical and Theoretical Overview

Despite the diversity and controversy surrounding definitions of the morality play, particularly the English morality play; certain generic features recur consistently in the ongoing scholarly debate over what might appear to be a straightforward genre of medieval theatre. Cited as obligatory parameters are, above all, the characters of the morality play themselves, "commonly known as allegorical" [Happé 1999: 42], and the didactic mode of performance: a morality play necessarily strives to "prove or demonstrate a moral point" [Ibid.: 44]. Roy Mackenzie, a scholar of the morality play, in his work *The English Moralities From the Point of View of Allegory*, first published in 1914, challenges the views that had already become established by that time and proposes his own definition, placing the emphasis on the "structure" of the play: "A Morality is a play, allegorical in structure, which has for its object the teaching of some lesson for the guidance of life, and in which the principal characters are personified abstractions or highly universalized types" [Mackenzie 1966: 9]. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* defines morality play as "a term used in English for any play presenting through allegorical personages the struggle between good and evil for man's soul… The usage in the rest of Western Europe, though referring to allegorical action, is not so precise" [Banham 1995: 760].

It is assumed that the "abstract" or, more precisely, "allegorical" figures functioning as dramatic characters in the morality play not only personify but also actively wage a struggle for the soul of Man. This is not so particularly evident in *Everyman*, written at the end of the 15th century and printed several times in the early 16th century, though often regarded as the most famous and representative example of the genre. Yet, like a number of other surviving medieval morality plays, it does not bring direct embodiments of good and evil onto the stage in order to stage a concrete confrontation between them. Good and evil, in fact, may instead be represented through good deeds, on the one hand, and temptations, on the other, or as a characteristic of human nature itself, that is, of man's inability to fulfill the Christian Commandments over the whole course of his life. According to Robert Potter, "a concept – what it means to be human – is represented on the stage… The plot is ritualized, dialectical, and inevitable: man exists, therefore he falls, nevertheless he is saved" [Potter 1975: 6, 7]. In morality plays, including *Everyman*, the plot often centers on

Man's encounter with Death ("the theme of the morality is the Coming of Death" [Happé 1999: 42]), while the appearance of personified good and evil, virtues and vices, on stage is optional. Inna Nekrasova, a Russian scholar of medieval and early modern religious drama, identifies Death, Virtue, and Faith as the allegorical figures essential to the plot of *Everyman*; she also notes the presence of "the Devil with his helpers" among the dramatis personae [Nekrasova 2024: 10].

A classic example of the morality play as allegorical and didactic drama might be the lengthy play *The Castle of Perseverance*, which, like *Everyman*, dates from the 15th century. Peter Happé examines the state of the play's surviving text and what is known about how it was staged. He also discusses how well this particular work reflects the religious views and moralizing aims of the Catholic Middle Ages: "these include the Seven Deadly Sins and the corresponding Seven Virtues, the World, the Flesh and the Devil, the Four Daughters of God. The action shows the fall and rise configuration associated with fallen into sin and being redeemed" [Happé 1999: 43]. The Castle that gives the play its title is guarded by the Virtues and besieged by the Sins, yet the central character – the one whose soul is fought over throughout his life and on the threshold of death – is the figure designated as Mankind.

For scholars of medieval drama, the broader system of imagery in morality plays, extending beyond allegorical figures, has long been a subject of debate: "every other existing English morality… contains also types, or individuals, or both" [Mackenzie 1966: 8], "they use characters which represent types or abstractions" [Happé 1999: 42]. This composite, or one might say "hybrid," system of imagery is not, in fact, a violation of the genre's conventions in the morality play, but rather a kind of advantage: it allows for fairly free variation in theme, content, and even moral conclusions, since the morality play is not bound as tightly to a fixed narrative foundation as the mystery play, the leading genre of religious drama. Barry Unsworth, author of the contemporary British novel *Morality Play* (1995), builds the plot of his work around the decision of a troupe of fourteenth-century players to perform for their audience "The Play of Thomas Wells," a story drawn from actual town life. Before our eyes, the production shifts in meaning, acquires new details, and, in effect, demonstrates the very movement of the morality play toward the genres of early modern theatre, genres no longer constrained by the conventions of allegorical representation:

"In a play with no written words much will depend on impulse and suggestion" [Unsworth 2014: 156];

"We all have played the Morality, when we call the one who strays from the path Everyman or Mankind or the King of Life. And the Virtues and the Vices battle for his soul. So we make him a Figure for all. But it is the same battle in each separate soul, in ours and in that of the woman who robbed Thomas Wells and killed him. It is a very old form of play and the one that will endure longest" [Unsworth 2014: 66].

An authentic medieval morality play and its performers would hardly have set themselves the bold goal of incorporating a psychological, let alone a detective, element into the performance, as Barry Unsworth does in his novel. Yet the authors of morality plays, most of whom remain unknown to us, could nevertheless have felt themselves fairly free in choosing and shaping a particular dramatic allegorical action: to show the life of Man and his struggle with sin from birth to his departure from this world, or only the moment of the character's encounter with Death; to heighten or lessen the degree of conventionality; to make the work as generalized and symbolic as possible, or to add elements of concrete specificity (the latter being more characteristic of the later morality plays of the 16th century), and so on. That said, the morality play was, of course, never "realistic" in the modern sense of the word.

The cast of *Everyman* includes, alongside Death, Faith, and Confession / Repentance, personified qualities such as Strength / Strengthe, Knowledge, Beauty / Beaute, and Five Wits / Fyve Wyttes. It also includes figures that are less abstract and instead represent the protagonist's earthly relationships: Kindreds, Cousin, and Fellowship, whom Everyman encounters in turn and asks for help. Finally, God, too, appears as a character in this particular play. The protagonist Everyman represents a type of character – a generalization, but not an abstraction – found in nearly all surviving morality plays: Everyman "is identical with Mankind, Man or Humanum Genus… a representative of human race" [Mackenzie 1966: 5]. W. A. Davenport points to an advantage of the designation "Everyman" over other versions of the name: it lies precisely in its capacity to address each individual member of the audience: "The strength of *Everyman* as a play is that it deals with the common case" [Davenport 1982: 3].

Importantly, attention in the best-known English morality plays, and above all in *Everyman*, is focused not on sins existing separately and in the abstract, but on the principal character, in whose very nature sinfulness is already present (not predetermined, since what is at stake is free choice). Robert Potter argues that "the deadly sins are quite probably the ancestors of the mankind figures, the representative central characters of the moralities" [Potter 1975: 28]. In *Everyman*, the action is simple to the point of transparency: it begins at the moment, always unexpected for "everyman", when Death appears before Man, and it ends with the character's actual death, his descent into the grave and into the world beyond. Yet this is a fortunate ending: salvation is possible. We never do learn any details about the protagonist's life itself, his dangerous sinful inclinations, for instance. He is truly an ordinary man, one who lives without thinking of his final hour, and who finds it hard and frightening when that hour arrives. M. Banham considers *Everyman* as "a picture of man's realization in the last moments of his life of what is necessary for salvation" [Banham 1995: 699].

The universality of *Everyman* as a morality play thus lies not in strict adherence to a rigid generic canon (even assuming such a rigid canon existed by the end of the 15th century), but rather in a certain flexibility in the interpretation and representation of man and the

world. It is difficult to insist here on the play's purely comic potential, although, as the *Cambridge Guide to Theatre* notes, "traditional criticism views the morality plays as a comic genre" [Banham 1995: 704]. The picture of the world shaped by the morality play is a distinctly medieval one, bound up above all with religion, and many scholars have noted the unity of worldview embodied across the various genres of European religious drama ("The modus of being of God; the modus of being of man" [Andreev 1989: 164]). The point is that the generic forms of medieval theatre, religious in origin, were not sharply opposed to one another but worked toward a single aim: to acquaint the audience with the events of Scripture and to instill in them a morality that had already been worked out. Particularly curious is the convergence of genres that would seem, at first glance, to have clearly defined boundaries, such as the mystery play and the morality play, on English soil in particular, where mystery plays were grouped into cycles and their productions "were specifically timed to coincide with the feast of Corpus Christi" [Gorbunov 2014: 775].

"The Corpus Christi play and the morality play may be seen as two manifestations of the same dramatic purpose. For both, life and history are a process. Both present man as a divine, fallen, redeemed creature, and do so in such a way as to suggest to the members of the audience that they are participants in the process" [Potter 1975: 8]. It is assumed that the "macro-history" of humankind, as established by the Bible and depicted in the mystery plays, and the "challenges" of individual human life and death that define the content of the morality play, convey one and the same dynamic of fall and rise, a parallel that extends even to their composition. Introducing Russian readers to a new translation of the York cycle of mystery plays, A. N. Gorbunov notes, for instance, that the Biblical history in the dramatic cycle, though traced from the Creation of the world to the Last Judgment, begins with a play about the fall, the very first fall from grace, that of Lucifer from heaven: "The grandiose epic conception of the cycle required a fitting beginning, akin to the opening of an epic… Such a beginning is found in the York cycle. It opens with plays whose plot recounts the creation of the world and of man, and the fall of the first humans… The first play of the cycle is *The Creation, and the Fall of Lucifer*… In composing it, the anonymous author followed medieval interpretations according to which the fall of the angels and with it the origin of evil, occurred even before the creation of the world. Strictly speaking, the Bible says nothing about this. For this reason, the interpreters, reflecting on the subject, drew on Old Testament apocrypha and the pronouncements of the Church Fathers" [Gorbunov 2014: 784].

The traditions of medieval religious theatre faced very different fates as humanist theatre began to gain prominence in the 16th century. The mystery play, in particular, proved largely incompatible with Renaissance theatre. It was taken up again much later, notably by the Romantics, and gained renewed interest in the 20th century, when literature began to return to its sacred origins. The morality play, by contrast, was different. Inna Nekrasova describes it as "the most intellectual genre of medieval theatre," and it continued to attract learned authors into the 16th century [Nekrasova 2024: 80]. In England, for various reasons and unlike in some other European countries, the morality play did not survive "in pure form" as a theatrical genre into Shakespeare's time. Its allegorical traditions, however, found their way into other genres, where they were incorporated to varying degrees into their structures. Robert Potter examines the traditions of the morality play and their development across the history of early modern European theatre in detail in *The English Morality Play: Origins, History, and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition* (1975). More recently, I. A. Nekrasova has explored the reception of medieval religious drama in European culture.

The "classic" status of the most famous morality play belongs to *Everyman*, which has inspired a long succession of adaptations. Its remarkable afterlife, reflected in the number and variety of authors who have returned to the play, may be connected to the clarity of its plot and the simplicity of its central character. For later writers, *Everyman* thus became a kind of invariant of the morality play. As psychological characterization gained greater importance in European theatre, adaptations of *Everyman* gave the protagonist greater complexity, provided more specific details about his circumstances, and combined allegorical imagery with greater verisimilitude. Remarkably, a play rooted in medieval morality proved capable of adapting to radical shifts in mentality. The morality play attracted renewed interest among modernists at the beginning of the 20th century and continues to inspire contemporary writers into the 21st century. In his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, Patrice Pavis identifies T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal among the playwrights who drew on the traditions of the morality play in the first half of the 20th century [Pavis 1991: 194].

The first version of the play *The Hour Glass* (1904) by W. B. Yeats "was subtitled *A Morality*… Besides sharing the premise of a situation – the sudden coming of death – *The Hour Glass* echoes *Everyman* in many informative ways" [Potter 1975: 228]. It should be noted, however, that Yeats' principal character is not "everyman" but Wise man, and in his skepticism he calls to mind another medieval scholar instead, Faust. Yet the tradition of the morality play still asserts itself even in this version (Yeats later reworked the play, deliberately removing its "imitative" relationship to the morality play). Faced with death and the swiftly running grains of sand, Wise Man turns to faith, and it is enlightenment, not his former "wisdom," that carries him into the other world. An elaborated plot likewise accompanies the character's final hours in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play *Jedermann* (1911), whose very title brings it as close as possible to *Everyman*.

It would, of course, be incorrect to compare the experiments of the leading modernist writers with the "late" morality plays of 16th-century European humanists, which only slightly diverged from the "canon." Nevertheless, one can conclude, on the whole, that drama created within the tradition of the morality play moves

away from its original schematic simplicity toward a more complex figure of "everyman," gaining greater specificity and psychological depth in its system of characters. In its representation of the world, such drama may turn toward "real life," even toward a form of historicism, or construct its own mythologized worldview, far removed from the simplified Catholicism of the original medieval play. Yet neither Bertolt Brecht nor Branden Jacobs-Jenkins follows the trajectory described above: greater individualization of the character accompanied by increasing psychological and philosophical depth of conflict.

B. Jacobs-Jenkins' *Everybody*

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' 2017 play-adaptation *Everybody* is a work in which a 21st-century author turns to *Everyman*, the medieval morality play that is "one of the earliest recorded plays in the English language" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 8]. The author designates his own play not as a morality play, but as "presented in the manner of a morality play" – a phrase that almost entirely reproduces the opening line as it appears in reprint editions of *Everyman* [Ibid.: 7; *Everyman* 1903: 1]. The adaptation employs the structure that is traditional for a classical morality play, dividing the action into short scenes with their own titles or even annotations (The Summoning, "And That's When I Woke Up…", Friendship, The Journey, etc.). The allegorical component of the play's system of characters is also declared: "Some people in this play are not going to play people" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 9].

Regarding the play's characters, what stands out despite the many striking changes in the adaptation, is Jacobs-Jenkins's reluctance to make them more specific than those in the original. On the contrary, he heightens the generality characteristic of the morality play, as already indicated by the change in the title from *Everyman* to *Everybody*. Jacobs-Jenkins had employed a similar strategy in an earlier adaptation, transforming Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* into *An Octoroon* and thereby increasing the title's indeterminacy. The title *Everybody* can be understood in the context of contemporary political correctness: the "everyman" figure is stripped not only of a name, specific age, and social status, but also of gender, unlike the protagonist of *Everyman*. Moreover, Everybody and the other "somebodies" periodically called onto the stage from the audience seem to resist individualization altogether. In some scenes performed "in the dark," even the voices heard from the stage are designated simply as A, B, C, and D.

Jacobs-Jenkins offers an intriguing staging device meant to make the conversation about death genuinely apply to everyone: actor, spectator, person alike. In the Signature Theater production, roles were deliberately not fixed to particular members of the troupe from the outset, and a lottery was announced as part of the performance: "in this play, it is specified that the actors' roles from this point forward be decided by lottery every night. This is done in an attempt to more closely thematize the randomness of death while also destabilizing your preconceived notions about identity" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 19]. On any given day of the production, the central role might be performed by a man or a woman, a white or a Black member of the cast, the oldest or the youngest member of the ensemble, and so on. But this same "randomness" extends to the parts of Death or Knowledge, Friendship or Kinship as well, and the masks once used in medieval morality plays for allegorical figures now neither hinder nor help improvisation by "just anyone" who happens to take them on.

Emphatic theatricality, rather than changes to the plot, is the artistic device Jacobs-Jenkins chooses to make the play genuinely contemporary. *Everybody* restores the comic potential that the morality play *Everyman* had left almost entirely untapped, opening instead with a thoroughly Brechtian Prologue that establishes distance between the action and the performers. Jacobs-Jenkins had already used this kind of Brechtian commentary on the events unfolding onstage in *An Octoroon*, having the characters themselves step outside their roles in ways incompatible with "verisimilitude," so that they seem to inhabit the space of Brecht's epic theatre: "But I guess I worry about the whole thing becoming too Brechtian?" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2015: 43].

In the Prologue to *Everybody*, a character called the Usher appears (replacing the Messenger of the original version) and, acting as a theatre attendant, spends a fair amount of time explaining how one ought to behave in the theatre: "all cell phones are off," one shouldn't rustle the wrapper "of a cough drop, hard candy or bonbon," and shouldn't let jingle "some sort of purse or coat filled with a lot of loose change" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 7–8]. At some point the audience may begin to feel that the host's joke has gone on too long, and that the performance is taking an unreasonably long time to start because of explanations and apologies about some "sort of medical condition". Yet it is precisely this intrusiveness on the part of the host-character that prompts the audience to recall that the coming performance is a moral play, and the Prologue's moralizing already demonstrates, quite deliberately and not without sarcasm, the didactic pathos of the work.

The playwright uses the Prologue (in this, too, resembling the earlier *An Octoroon*) to display his own scholarly groundwork on the generic nature of the morality play, and even in the field of comparative drama – in playful form, of course, but nonetheless developed and grounded in contemporary theatre studies. The Usher in the Prologue includes himself among "we, scholars," and the author, in effect, offers us his own reflections on the nature of dramatic adaptation: his play is secondary, but does an original even exist?

USHER. This is *Everybody*, which is a play. It's based on another play from the fifteenth century called *Everyman*, which is one of the earliest recorded plays in the English language. Now, for a while we – or, you know, scholars – thought that this play was sort of collectively authored by a bunch of monks who loved to put on plays for each other in Old Timey England, but we now know it was, in all likelihood, itself an adaptation of a slightly different, Dutch play called *Elckerlijk* –

or *Den Speyghel der Salicheyt van Elckerlijk* <…> And it also seems like this Dutch play <…> was itself based on a Buddhist fable – and who even knows where the Buddhists were getting their fables, so! [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 8–9].

Such a significant, if not infinite, number of interpretations of a long-standing story about a Person's encounter with Death enables a modern author, without significantly changing the logic of the plot, to talk about the meaning of life and death from the point of view of current theories and ideas, including theatrical ones. Compositionally, Jacobs-Jenkins builds his play by alternating "traditional" scenes-meetings of Everybody with allegorical figures and scenes "in the dark", where the characters, or voices hidden under the letters, turn to the theories of dreams and talk about the theatricality of the universe. Finally, the play also contains "choral" scenes, marked as "a Chorus," though these actually consist of monologues by a character, and there is no real paradox here: the chorus, as in Greek tragedy, can serve a commentating function, and one might again recall the alienating possibilities of Brechtian songs.

Jacobs-Jenkins draws extensively on contemporary theatrical technique: "voices" may be prerecorded, and in the monologue scenes Everybody can simultaneously be both speaker and listener: "it is somehow Everybody's voice coming out of Somebody's mouth: a lip-synch" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 21]. A "non-human voice" also becomes a defining characteristic of God's speech in the play. God, as both character and category, offers a field for experimentation in Jacobs-Jenkins' play more broadly. As already noted, not every classical morality play dared to bring the figure of the Creator onto the stage; in *Everyman*, this mystical superforce does appear, and God, directly from the stage, pronounces judgment on man and mankind.

God *speaketh*
I perceive here in my Majesty
How that all creatures be to me unkind,
Living without dread in worldly prosperity; <….>
Every man liveth so after his own pleasure,
And yet of their life they be nothing sure [*Everyman* 1903: 2].

In the contemporary morality play, the role of God is listed among the Dramatis personae, but no separate performer, determined by lottery, is designated for it: the part of "God" is played by the same actor as the Usher, and to switch between roles what is needed is not a mask, but once again a voice:

"God," who is unseen, speaks through the Usher. "God's" voice is non-human.
"GOD". THIS IS "GOD".
There is laughter in the audience. <….>
FOR WHY SHOULD LAUGHTER COME WHEN I REVEAL MYSELF? [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 10–11].

For 21st-century theatre, existing in a society maximally tolerant of diverse religious beliefs, the figure of God onstage is, of course, a challenge. It is precisely here that the boundary lies which reveals how far removed we are from the worldview of the 15th century. This is not a religious drama anymore, and today's audience is not one united by a shared Catholic worldview. And while the story of an encounter with death retains an enduring universalism even with its allegorical figures, a conversation about God in a play that is not on a mythological theme presents a certain problem. Jacobs-Jenkins resolves this problem by shifting the existence of "GOD" into the realm of the permissible. The word itself is only ever written in quotation marks, whether it appears in stage directions or in characters' lines. And almost every character (somebodies) asks again: So "God" is real?"; "Actually, it depends on your definition of 'real'" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 30]. The reality of the divine presence, despite the assurances of "God's" assistant named Death, likewise remains up to "everybody" to decide for themselves. And although Everybody hastens to prepare a report – "some sort of presentation": "I want to do a good job for "God"" [Ibid.: 17], "which, I think means talking about all bad things that I've done but also, I think, the good things I did" [Ibid.: 30] – moral criteria are never defined, and the play's central concerns move further and further away from the domain of morality as it goes on.

The structure of the morality play grows more complex with new elements, such as philosophical interior monologues and "internal dialogues" of the protagonist. Against this backdrop, the more familiar scenes, the encounters and conversations with Friendship or Kinship should pose no difficulty for audience comprehension, and in fact become especially entertaining, not least thanks to the use of contemporary colloquial English. Jacobs-Jenkins does not substantially reduce the number of encounters: in the original, Everyman asked for company on his journey to the afterlife from Fellowship, Kindreds, Cousin, and Goods, and, disillusioned with earthly goods and bonds, recalled Good Deeds, who had already been leading him toward Knowledge and Confession.

In *Everybody*, conversations with "friends" and "family" lead not so much to an awareness of one's solitude in the face of death, as to an awareness of humanity's existential solitude in life as a whole; earthly bonds turn out to be nothing more than a set of familiar clichés, and in fact a kind of deception:

FRIENDSHIP. Oh, man! I miss you! What is going on? You seem a little depressed! Is it still the election? Is it the weather? Is it Global Warming? Is it impending threat of Nuclear War? Or is it just politics? Is it identity politics? Or is it your job? <…> You can tell me anything. <….> I would die for you! [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 23–24].

However, in the modern version, Good Deeds and Confession, whose role was to set a person on the righteous path and look after their soul, are replaced by the appearance of a figure called Love, who is prepared to actually accompany Everybody into the grave. Quite literally at the last moment, without being asked or invited, yet another allegorical figure appears, Evil, and the character descends into the grave together with both good and evil, the outcome of their battle

left unknown. A reevaluation of values takes place in both the old and new morality play, though in Jacobs-Jenkins' version there is almost no talk of sinfulness, and no one voices any regret over humanity's fall:

> GOOD DEEDS.
> Everyman, I am sorry of your fall.
> And fain would I help you, and I were able [*Everyman* 1903: 24].

As M. P. Alekseev wrote of the medieval morality play, sinners are torn "from the embrace of 'evil'" by "repentance, sincere contrition, confession, complete submission to the 'heavenly powers'" [Alekseev 1984: 333]. In the modern play, Everybody reconsiders his life before death, assuming, of course, that Death actually came to him in reality, and not merely in a dream or only in the theatre. One review of a contemporary production wittily observed: "Something is inevitably lost in adapting the material for a modern audience that has outgrown its fear and awe of hellfire and damnation"[1]. The element of chance and uncertainty, on which Jacobs-Jenkins' play insists so heavily, is present in every person's life and, on the whole, relieves them of a sense of responsibility for their actions. It is not just that the "quality of fear" has changed. The author of *Everybody*, while giving strikingly theatrical form to problems relevant to every generation, is far from seeking to accuse anyone, and just as far from offering recommendations on how to live (and die) "correctly" in this world. As a result, the modernized morality play is stripped of what is perhaps its most constant, and arguably its principal, quality: didacticism. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins successfully subjects the medieval drama not so much to adaptation as to deconstruction; in our view, however, one cannot really speak of the postmodern version of the morality play as being genuinely self-sufficient as a genre.

Bertolt Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins*

The play *The Seven Deadly Sins* (*Die sieben Todsünden*, 1933) is an unusual work both within Brecht's theatre and within the musical theatre tradition to which it belongs. It was created jointly by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, although the prominence given to the composer and librettist varies between productions, as does the genre designation. The work is most commonly described as "the ballet with singing by Kurt Weill, texts by Bertolt Brecht." The original German title is considerably longer: "Bertolt Brecht, *Die sieben Todsünden der Kleinbürger,* Ballet chanté for singer, dancer, male quartet and orchestra, music by Kurt Weill". The first production took place in Paris, when both authors were already living in exile outside Nazi Germany. The text of this "ballet-opera" was later translated into English, among others, by W. H. Auden, under the title *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie* [Brecht's Works in English].

The Seven Deadly Sins, at least in its textual, or song-based, component, does not claim to be called a morality play. Nevertheless, Brecht's turn to traditions descending from religious medieval theatre is in itself noteworthy. Nor was this necessarily his only such engagement: scholars note that after the war, while living in Austria, the playwright was preparing a production of the *Salzburg Dance of Death (Der Salzburger Totentanz*, 1949), reworking for this purpose Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann* [Schumacher 1988: 185; Potter 1975: 244].

The "dance of death," as both a performance form and a subject matter that is largely visual, is not necessarily part of the morality play about "everyman." Nevertheless, such a possibility did exist, and in his own adaptation, Jacobs-Jenkins devotes an entire scene, no. 13, to a frightening dance: "La Dance Macabre. Skeletons dance macabre in a landscape of pure light and sound" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018: 46]. In Brecht's work, *The Dance of Death*, unlike *The Seven Deadly Sins*, was meant to become a full-fledged production of his epic theatre, reaching back through *Jedermann* directly to *Everyman*, yet aimed, in Brechtian fashion, at an ideological dispute with the current state of society. The author of *The English Morality Play* holds that the morality play is, from the outset, comparable to "contemporary ideological drama," in the sense that "its primary function is to demonstrate and therefore to verify Christian doctrine" [Potter 1975: 244]. The differences between the specific "doctrines" that a drama with a didactic aim seeks to establish as the sole correct ones are, for the genre itself, immaterial; accordingly, drawing specific parallels with Brecht also seems permissible. In Peter Happé's view, one can compare Brecht's theatre even to the manner of acting of medieval performers, who clearly understood which type of character they aimed to expose (for example, when playing Power): "in some ways such playing anticipates Brechtian alienation techniques in that the actor is separated from his role" [Happé 1999: 13].

Without venturing such far-reaching parallels between one of the greatest innovators of twentieth-century theatre and medieval drama, it would be more productive to turn directly to *The Seven Deadly Sins*. In this play, the heroine, Anna, passes through temptation by the deadly sins: Sloth, Pride, Anger, Gluttony, Lust, Covetousness, and Envy. No allegorical figures appear onstage; instead, Anna's story is told through choreography and seven song-scenes (in addition to a prologue and epilogue), one for each of the "deadly sins". The very concept of the deadly sins took shape within medieval Christianity, and one might expect that, in the morality play as a genre of didactic literature, the image of the seven deadly sins and the virtues opposing them would be actively drawn upon: in the course of "uniform dialogic scenes… personified allegories, bearers of good or evil, appeared before Man one after another" [Nekrasova 2024: 10]. In fact, as already noted, the morality play does not always articulate and depict the sins of Everyman: in order to sink into the vanity of the world, it is enough simply to consign the care of one's soul to oblivion. In *Everyman*, Good Deeds, representing the good principle within

[1] Stacio M. Off Broadway Review: 'Everybody' by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins // Variety. 2017. Feb. 21. URL: https://variety.com/2017/legit/reviews/everybody-review-play-branden-jacobs-jenkins-1201992736/ (mode of access: 15.07.2026).

a person, mentions sins only in general terms, without dividing or naming them.

GOOD DEEDS.
Here I lie cold in the ground;
Thy sins have me so sore bound,
That I cannot stir [*Everyman* 1903: 23].

However, to guide the medieval spectator toward the right path in life, early morality plays, dating from the 14th century onward, often relied on a more direct device: setting sins and virtues plainly against each other. This same device also appears in an even earlier form of medieval religious drama, the Pater Noster play. As Martin Banham writes in *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, "The Pater Noster play is first heard of in 1388… No texts survive" [Banham 1995: 699]. According to Potter [Potter 1975: 24], plays based on the Lord's Prayer continued to be performed in York until the end of the 16th century, alongside the Corpus Christi cycle of mystery plays: "in the absence of texts the question of the nature of the Pater Noster plays has provoked much speculation, particularly in its possible relations to the origins of the morality play" [Ibid.: 25]. In this case, what matters is not the dramatic component, since the plays themselves have not survived, but the moralizing one. The prayer, like the play presumably, does not enumerate either sins or virtues, but instead indicates the paths of resisting sin in the life of every Christian: "The penitent repeating the prayer could fortify his soul against all the deadly sins, for which theologians discovered cures implicit in the Lord's Prayer. These *remedia* are the prayer's seven distinct petitions (1. hallowed be thy name, 2.thy kingdom come, 3. thy will be done, 4. give us daily bread, 5. forgive us as we forgive, 6. lead us not into temptation, 7. deliver us from evil)" [Ibid.: 22] (the capitalization and italics are reproduced as they appear in the cited source – E. D.).

Anna, the heroine of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, can be perceived, if not as an Everyman figure, then as "Everywoman"; what works toward this typicality is not so much the name itself as the presence onstage of two characters: Anna I and Anna II. In terms of performance, the two actresses are responsible for the vocal and dance parts, respectively. The heroine's doubling is more difficult to understand in terms of the relationships between the characters: the two Annas are sisters, yet at the same time they are one and the same person.

Anna I:
Meine Schwester ist schön, ich bin praktisch.
Sie ist etwas verrückt, ich bin bei Verstand.
Wir sind eigentlich nicht zwei Personen.
Sondern nur eine einzige.
Wir heißen beide Anna [Brecht 1933].

Anna I, to whom the verbal, or song-based, part of the role is given, continually urges the second Anna to avoid temptation and not to fall into one sin or another. Yet in Brecht's interpretation, the "sins" of a person in contemporary society are far from as clear-cut as in the didactic scheme of Christian medieval times. The purpose for which Anna / the two Annas set out on their journey is to earn as much money as possible for their family of parents and brothers ("we'll send them all our money as we make it"). Whatever gets in the way of earning more money is precisely the "sin": don't give in to pride if, while dancing in a cabaret, you need to cater to the audience's tastes; don't fall into anger at the sight of injustice, since that will cost you money; don't yield to lust by sharing your money with a young lover – better to let a rich man pay for you instead, and so on: "Halte dich zurück, Anna, denn du weißt, wohin die Ubeherrschtheit führt" [Brecht 1933]. The two Annas appear not merely as two sides of one coin, and not so much as reason and feeling, but as light and darkness contending for a single soul. On the poster for the Moscow Helikon Opera's current production of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, a single woman is depicted in two contrasting guises, in which one can discern a nun and a temptress, as though masks were being exchanged, very much in the spirit of the masks worn by allegorical figures in the morality play [Sem' smertnykh grekhov]. In medieval performance, masks could signal a shift between white and black, between sins and virtues, between good turning to evil and back again. In Brecht's theatre, one might likewise recall the doubling / opposition of Shen Te and Shui Ta from *The Good Woman of Sezuan* (*Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, 1943).

Even more layered in terms of the theatrical traditions it draws on, both operatic and tragic, is the figure of the Family in the play: this is a chorus in which all four vocal parts, including the mother of the family, are given to male voices. The family is extremely "concerned" that their daughter (used in the singular) should be industrious and virtuous:

Anna geht es gut.
Sie verdient jetzt endlich.
Sie hat einen Kontrakt als Solotänzerin.
Danach darf sie nicht mehr essen, was
Sie will und wann sie will.
Das wird schwer sein für unsere Anna,
Denn sie ist doch so sehr verfressen.
Ach, wenn sie sich da nur an den
Kontrakt halt… [Brecht 1933].

The image of the Family is executed in the spirit of the depiction of philistinism in German literature, but it does not contradict the figure of Kindreds in the morality play either, where relatives likewise did not really seek to support the protagonist (in Jacobs-Jenkins' modern version, Kindreds are similarly replaced by Family) and looked out for themselves instead. Having sent their daughter off to earn money, and reproaching Anna for laziness and greed, the family expects nothing from her but money for "a little home down by the Mississippi" ("mit denen man ein kleines Haus baut"). Walter Benjamin, commenting on the poems of Bertolt Brecht's collection *Hauspostille* (1927), which is likewise saturated with religious symbolism, traces the origins of these "sermons" to a petit-bourgeois psychology that substitutes the highest concepts (God, the people, the homeland, the bride) without either false or genuine shame [Benjamin 2025: 83–87]. The feelings of "the people" in *The Seven Deadly Sins*

of the Petty Bourgeoisie are analogous.

The "American" chronotope of Brecht's "ballet with singing" deserves a discussion of its own. The morality play is not a genre that invites reflection on landscape: for *Everyman*, the chronotope might be described as "always" and "everywhere," or rather, at any time, in any place. Ballet, too, has its own limitations when it comes to representing landscape, though fairly stable conventions do exist for the traditional, and generally abstract, staging of a ballet performance. Brecht, for his part, is well known for frequently using "exotic" geographical markers as a device of estrangement, and the gangster-ridden Chicago of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (*Der Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*, 1954–1956) is understood to stand for Hitler's Germany. The song-libretto of *The Seven Deadly Sins* offers no scenery in its stage directions, and the action of the journey is represented visually through choreography alone, yet the setting of Anna's life, her wanderings, temptations, and sufferings, is clearly defined through the songs themselves: it is America.

The play's seven scenes correspond to seven American cities: Anna's hometown, "somewhere in Louisiana", goes unnamed, and the journey continues through Memphis, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, and San Francisco. The sins, like the heroine's places of work, end up each tied to a city of temptation. At the time of writing the piece, Brecht was already an exile from his own country, seeking a place to live and work in various cities, though still within Europe; his American emigration still lay ahead, in the 1940s. In his biographical study *Leben Brechts* (1978), Ernst Schumacher describes Brecht's difficult process of self-definition in America: the country did not embrace the German author's work, and Brecht himself was dissatisfied with his place in American society and in Hollywood filmmaking [Schumacher 1988: 160–161]. This period also produced poems about America that seem to continue the "survey of cities" begun in *The Seven Deadly Sins*. The famous poem *On Thinking about Hell* (*Nachdenkend über die Hölle,* 1941) takes up the theme of hell on earth, where "hell" is not necessarily a physically unbearable life, but rather the falseness and soullessness concealed behind luxurious facades:

"Nachdenkend, wie ich höre, über die Hölle
Fand mein Bruder Shelley, sie sei ein Ort
Gleichend ungefähr der Stadt London. Ich
Der nich nicht in London lebe, sondern in Los Angeles
Finde, nachdenkend über die Hölle, sie muß
Noch mehr Los Angeles Gleichen" [Brecht 1941].

"The anarchy of bourgeois society is an infernal one", states Walter Benjamin, following Brecht's logic [Benjamin 2025: 89]. The heroine's return to the dreamed-of "little home" clearly brings to the fore, in the play's finale, the theme of death, so central to the morality play.

Comparing the approaches of different authors to the morality play tradition, it is worth noting that the contemporary American writer, in his adaptation, seeks to move away from the "Englishness" of the medieval original, not only leaving the setting unspecified but even speaking of the story's origins as uncertain. Brecht, by contrast, chooses for his work "based on the morality play" a quite specific country and an easily identifiable time period, yet the work nonetheless opens onto a discussion and presentation of universal problems and character types. In this sense, it would be interesting to compare Brecht's version with the treatment of *Everyman* by his kindred contemporaries T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, though that should be a subject for a separate study.

Conclusion

The traditions of the medieval morality play have been revived in modern literature since the early 20th century and continue to appear productive up to the present day. They are drawn upon by writers of both prose and drama, representing various movements and cultures across different languages. Audiences are offered the latest productions of the authentic *Everyman*, notably on the London stage. As this study has shown, the morality play serves as a foundation for present-day adaptations.

The stability of the morality play as a genre, however, is less straightforward than the continuing relevance of *Everyman*. At this later stage, the "morality play" can dispense even with elements once considered essential to the genre, such as allegory and didacticism. Yet the themes of humanity and its awareness of its own "sinfulness" continue to interest major authors, while the flexibility of the morality play's structure allows the tradition to be adapted and developed in unexpected dramatic forms. The approaches taken by Bertolt Brecht and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins thus seem less a matter of continuity or contrast than expressions of their individual artistic styles and, at the same time, of the enduring vitality of *Everyman*.

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