Death Takes to the Stage

The Mystery Cycles and Early Morality Plays

In dealing with the summons of death onstage, it is always tempting to begin with *Everyman* (ca. 1490–1500). Certainly, this play is not only the greatest Morality Play of its time, but a drama of the human soul for all time, one that has often been performed successfully in the twentieth century and has been awarded the modern accolade of being recorded.\(^1\) But it is not the first play in which Death has had a leading role, nor does it have the last word on how the role is to be played.

To trace the dramatic steps that led to *Everyman* and beyond is difficult at best. Many old plays have been irretrievably lost, while others are almost impossible to date, since their oral transmission so obviously preceded the earliest known manuscripts, and since even the extant manuscripts show signs of composition by diverse hands at diverse times. It is common, for example, to think of the Mystery cycles as having come first and the Morality Plays later—but one of the earliest Morality Plays (*The Pride of Life*, ca. 1390) precedes the estimated date of some of the Wakefield and N-Town Mysteries. Furthermore, modern research has called into question the old doctrine that the Mysteries descended in a direct line from the liturgical *Quem quaeritis* alone, and the Morality Plays directly from sermons;\(^2\) we have also to take into account the influence of folk drama, vestiges of classical...
drama, and fancy-dress pageants of all varieties, including, as we have seen, pageants of the Dance of Death.

Given the dangers, then, of trying to trace the figure of Death chronologically through plays whose chronology is uncertain, we may do better to deal with it by type of play, assuming for the sake of discussion that where there are no dates available, we are dealing at large with the vast canvas of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

As a personage, Death appears only once in the four surviving Mystery cycles: the Mors who comes for Herod in the N-Town Death of Herod. But in others of the Mysteries, we find many of the themes that are associated with Death elsewhere: consolation and the Dreary Death in the Lazarus plays, and repentance and the Dance of Death in the Last Judgments.

The Judgment plays themselves are obviously allied with pictorial representations of this second of the Four Last Things: a central figure of Christ and the saved and damned souls herded to opposite sides of the stage by angels and devils, respectively. Indeed the York Judgment varies little from such a static display; the two saved and two damned souls are barely differentiated from each other and have no individual character traits. Christ monopolizes most of the dialogue, accusing the damned of not having performed the corporal works of mercy, in a set piece drawn from the Sermon on the Mount. The Chester Judgment seems to be more closely allied with the Legends and Dances. Here, the saved and damned are made into types of earthly rulers: pope, emperor, king, and queen (some apparently later hand has added a damned justice and a damned merchant). It is significant that neither group claims to have lived a sinless life, and that, in fact, all the souls enumerate their sins, each according to the temptations of his or her estate: avarice, lechery, injustice, cheating the poor, and so on. But all the saved souls have apparently repented and done penance before their deaths and have suffered in Purgatory before being found fit for Heaven:

*Imperator Salvatus:*

> In pugatorye my soule hath binne
> a thousand yeares in woe and teene. . . .
Death Takes to the Stage

Though that I to synne were bayne and bowne
and coveted riches and renowne,
yett at the last contrtytion
Hath made mee on of thyne.4

But the saved do not yet presume; they admit freely that there may be more sins clinging to them than they are aware of, and so they continue to ask Christ for mercy.

The damned souls, on the other hand, have already despaired. Having made no effort to repent in life, all they can do now is lament their fate, wish that they had never been born, and even, in one particularly petulant outburst from the Merchant, try to throw the blame for their wickedness onto God:

Why made thou me, lord, of nought? Whye?
To worch in world so wickedlye
and nowe burne in the dyvellses bellye?
Alas, that ever I was borne!

The most obvious contrast between the saved and damned, then, is not the degree of sin but the willingness to use free will for repentance—a lesson taught very strongly in the Ars moriendi.5 And because differentiated individuals have enunciated the doctrine, the audience is more likely to absorb the different possibilities of response to deathbed repentance, just as in the Dances of Death.

The Wakefield and N-Town Judgments (or, as the play is called at N-Town, Doomsday) carry individualization of response even further. At N-Town, the visual presentation of the souls is more dramatic, as the souls apparently fit their actions to their words; the saved announce, “On kne we crepe, we gon, we glyde / to wurchepp oure lorde that mercyfull is,” and the damned cry, “A mercy, mercy, we rubbe, we rave”—all obviously moving about the stage in appropriate postures of reverence or frenzy.6 When all are positioned on the stage, the devils address the damned individually as types of the seven deadly sins, each soul apparently having a specific sin lettered visibly on his or her head:
And that on their forehed wyttynes I take
For ther is wretyn with letteris blake
Opynly all there synne.

(76-78)

Since the souls are not mighty figures like Pope, Emperor, King, and Queen, the misdeeds of which they are accused can be closer to the audience’s own, as in the cases of wrath and lust:

In wrath thi neybore to backbyte
them for to angere was thi delyte
thou were evyr redy them to endyte
On the seke man rewyst thou nought.

(101-04)

Sybile slutte, thou salte sewe,
All your lyff was leccherous lay,
to all your neyborys ye wore a shrewe;
all your plesauns was leccherous play.

(118-21)

From what follows—a plea by the damned for mercy—it appears that there was originally a speech on repentance, perhaps from the devils, perhaps from Christ; but the remainder of the manuscript is missing. Still, the fragment that we do have indicates that the N-Town Doomsday may have been written at a time when the static Legends had given way to the more personalized Legends and the Dances, which demanded a more individualized response to the warning of Death than was possible with simple emblems of kings and popes.

The Wakefield Judgment, perhaps the most literary of the four plays, is also the most evocative of the death literature of the day. Here the damned are not necessarily singled out as types of sins but are, rather, described by Tutivillus and the demons in a boisterous catalogue of sinners that often sounds like Langland’s description of the field full of folk in Piers Plowman. To give examples of these descriptions here is fruitless; much of their effect depends on accumulation of detail that goes on for pages at a time, sometimes in long satires on particular social types, sometimes in stanzas that jumble a dozen types together. The net
effect is not only the kind of social satire that was becoming prevalent in contemporary poetry and the Dances themselves, but a more audience-directed warning; here, the devils seem to say, are the creatures who will be damned, and if the shoe fits wear it.

But the Wakefield Judgment is no simple satire or ars vivendi. As Tutivillus and his demons berate the damned, we begin to hear themes from the early versions of the Ars moriendi, particularly in the demons’ hellish parodies of the ubi sunt:

Where is the gold and the good that ye gedred togedir?
The mery menee that yode hider and thedir?
Gay gyrdyls, iaggid hode, prankyd gownes, whedir?
haue ye wit or ye wode, ye broght not hider
Bot sorowe. . . .

For all that ye spard and dyd extorcyon,
For youre childer ye card, youre heyre and youre son,
Now is all in oure ward, your yeeres ar ron. . . .

This is the ubi sunt with a difference—not a lament for the passing of beautiful things, but an acknowledgment of the futility of worldly goods at the moment of death. The same theme appears in the Dances of Death, the treatises on dying, and the Morality plays that lead to and include Everyman. The audience may, therefore, very well start and draw backward when the demons finally herd the souls away; their summons to the damned sounds suspiciously like Death’s to the Dancers:

. . . com now with fendys
To youre angre;
your dedys you dam;
Com, go we now sam,
It is commen youre gam,
Com, tarry no langer.

(607-12)

The Judgments, of course, deal with the aftermath of death, the time of no second chances, even though they are meant as warnings about death. Closer to the actual Summons in life are two of the Lazarus plays: those at N-Town and Wakefield.
The N-Town Lazarus is especially concerned with consolation of both the living and the dying, and is a very human drama that goes beyond the simple biblical narrative of the other plays. Martha and Magdalen are not merely bystanders or foils for a miracle in this play; they are true mourners who are all too humanly subject to irritation in the midst of their grief. When the four Consolers become too garrulous and sanctimonious for Magdalen, who has, after all, just lost a dear brother, she is quite capable of telling them, none too subtly, to go away and leave her alone:

I thanke yow frendys for your good chere;
ymyn hed doth ake as it shulde brest;
I pray yow therfore while ye ben here
A lytil whyle that I may rest.

(281-84)

The Consolers, in fact, at first seem to do everything wrong, according to the Artes and Doctrynalls. They are persistently cheerful, persistently hopeful, and persistently insensitive to the emotional needs of the dying man and his family. When they first enter, although they have been told that Lazarus is near death, they insist on trying to “jolly” him back to health, even implying that if he does not get well it is his own fault. Lazarus is thus put in the position of defending his right to die, a defense that the Consolers will not accept:

4 Consolator: Ye shall haue hele and leue in qwart
If ye wol take to yow good chere.
Lazarus: Whan deth on me hath shet his dart
I shal haue hele and ly on bere.
1 Consolator: Be of good comfort and thynke not so;
put out of herte that idyl thought;
Youre owyn mys-demynge may werke yow wo
and cause yow sonere to deth be brought.

(61-68)

And the Consolers continue in this vein, refusing to accept the inevitable or help Lazarus accept it, until Lazarus, perhaps to gain some respite from their exhausting joviality, does what his sister
will do later—sends them away on an errand. There follows a touching little death scene. Martha pitifully tries to interest Lazarus in small bodily comforts (“What wele you ete? what wele ye drynk?” [102]), but he is beyond eating and drinking and, now rid of his troublesome Consolers, peacefully commends his soul to God and dies on the last words of the *vado mori*:

My wynde is stoppyd, gon is my breth,  
And deth is come to make myn ende;  
to god in hevyn my sowle I qweth;  
Farewell, systeryn, for hens I wende.

(105-08)

The sisters now try to console each other in a paroxysm of grief, the immediate response to the death of a loved one. Magdalen, more given to emotional excess than Martha, wishes that someone might kill them, too, so that they could rejoin their brother; but the Consolers, not understanding the sisters’ need for catharsis at this moment of bereavement, take their cue from Martha’s rhetorical question (“A, hoo shal conforte our carefulness?” [116]) and offer the wrong kind of comfort, as usual:

Be of good conforte and thank god of al  
For deth is dew to every man;  
What tyme that deth on us shal fal  
non ethely wyght the oure telle can.

(129-32)

They are rebuked, gently enough, by Martha:

We all shul dye, that is sertan,  
but yit the blood of kynde nature  
When deth the brother awey hath tan  
must nedys murne that sepulture.

(133-36)

Undaunted, the Consolers briskly go about the business of preparing Lazarus’s body for interment, meanwhile driving Magdalen to the verge of hysteria by refusing to let her mourn: “Thus for to grugge ageyns godys myght / Ayens hygh god ye do offens” (175-76). Poor Magdalen hardly stands a chance against the
officious Consolers; when Martha goes out to meet Jesus, they eagerly stay behind to “comforte” her sister, significantly giving their comfort in the very words of the *vado mori* that Lazarus had used:

Mary Mawdelyn be of good herte  
And wel be-thynke yow in your mynde  
Eche creature hens must depart;  
ther is no man but hens must wende.

(273–76)

It is at this point that Magdalen pleads a headache and sends them away.

The Consolers, of course, are absolutely correct in everything they say, but they have said it at the wrong time and to the wrong person. This is the advice that they should have given to Lazarus on his deathbed; it is the preparation for the dying, not the solace for the living.

It may be argued that the Consolers are deliberately acting obtusely in order to force their auditors to contradict them with a more acceptable response. Indeed, this is the argument that has sometimes been advanced to prove that the Dreamer in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* is a psychologically perceptive consoler; by pretending ignorance of the Knight’s bereavement and wonder at his grief, the Dreamer forces the Knight to console himself.9 But this argument about the Dreamer has been called into question,10 and we may well question it in respect to the Consolers of the N-Town Lazarus.

The first thing to note about the Consolers is that they do not console. Lazarus has to send them away before he can compose himself for death; Martha gently reproves them for their insensitivity; Magdalen pleads a headache and wishes that someone would cut her throat (143); and in general the Consolers, like those in the Book of Job, seem to do more harm than good. It is only Jesus, once he arrives, who both understands the sisters’ need to mourn and helps them to the true consolation; and in this regard, it is significant that the Consolers do not understand even Jesus’ tears, asking why such a mighty prophet should weep
(376–77). Even after the miracle, they continue to misunderstand, thinking that Jesus has promised not a heavenly consolation but eternal life on earth: “oure deth ye may A-slake and kepe us stytte on lyve” (448).

It is the “helpful” group of Consolers, then, rather than the nearly hysterical Magdalen, who presents the horrible example of misplaced consolation. In contrast, Jesus shows the way to true consolation: acceptance of God’s will, yes—but with the humane allowance for a time of mourning before looking forward to reunion with the loved one in Heaven. It is only after the catharsis of tears that Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead; and only after the same catharsis that Martha and Madgalen are ready both to receive and to give consolation themselves.

The Wakefield Lazarus does not deal with consolation but proceeds almost immediately to the miracle. Lazarus, in this play, serves as a figure of Dreary Death proclaiming his memento mori in the manner of the Legend or the Death-figures of Herod and the Moralities:

\[
\text{youre dede is Wormes coke,} \\
\text{youre myrroure here ye loke,} \\
\text{and let me be your boke,} \\
\text{youre sampill take by me;} \\
\text{fro dede you cleke in cloke,} \\
\text{[seize in claw]} \\
\text{sich shall ye all be.}
\]

(119–24)

And for ninety-two grisly lines, he tells both the onstage and the offstage audience what will happen to them. Despite all their gay clothing, he says, they will rot away in the grave, where worms and toads will devour their flesh. Their great hall will be a narrow grave, and their clothing a winding sheet. Stinking like “dog in dike” they will lie, while their executors rob their wives and children of all the wealth that they have acquired in life, and, after a while, even their wives and children will forget them. Do not, therefore, put your trust in the earthly life, Lazarus warns his audience, but heap up riches for Heaven: the good deeds that alone will accompany you to the grave and thence to salvation.
I have been in Hell, he adds, and have seen what the damned must suffer. Take warning, then, amend your lives, and put your trust in God.

Lazarus’s speech is an impressive one, very close in substance to the warnings on tombstones and in the Legends. The use of varying stanzaic patterns in the speech also suggests that it may have been augmented over the years as the storehouse of death literature increased. And outside of the last three stanzas, in which Lazarus describes his own sufferings in Hell, the whole speech might have been delivered by the Death who comes for Herod, Humanum Genus, and Everyman.

In the N-Town Death of Herod, Death enters much like the Vice of the Moralities; unseen by his victim, he addresses the audience and informs them of who he is and how he will destroy the man who now seems so happy and secure:

Ow I herde a page make preysyng of price,
all prynces he passeth he wenyth of powste. .
I am deth goddys masangere;
All myghty god hath sent me here
Yon lordeyn to Sle with-owtyn dwere
for his wykkyd werkynge.

(168-69, 177-80)

Like Dame Death of Death and Liffe, he wields power not just over humanity but over all living things:

All thynge that is on grownd I welde at my wylle:
both man and beste and byrdys wylde and tame
Whan that I come them to, with deth I do them kylle,
Erbes, gres, and tres stronge, tak them all in same,
Ya, the grete myghty Okys with my dent I spylle.

(182-86)

And, he cautions the audience, once he has struck, there are no more chances: “For aftere my strook man hath no space / to make amendys for his trespass” (191-92).

Now Mors invites the audience to watch with him for a while as Herod gives free rein to his prideful boasting, and then to see
Herod struck down without warning. The scene is very effective: Herod and his soldiers laugh and drink; Herod brags that he is now the unchallenged ruler of the world, “for now my fo [Jesus] is dede” (219); the soldiers remember with glee how they killed all the children; Herod calls to his minstrels to “blowe up a mery fytt” (232)—and suddenly the music turns to discord, as Mors strikes Herod down and a devil leaps up, crying: “All oure! all oure! this catel is myn!” (233). And when all has quieted down, Mors steps forward and stands before the audience, not just a Dreary Death but a figure from the Legend:

\[
\text{Thow I be nakyd and pore of array} \\
\text{and wurmys knawe me al a-bowte,} \\
\text{yit loke ye drede m e nyth and day,} \\
\text{For whan deth comyth, ye stande indowte.} \\
\text{Evyn like to me, as I yow say,} \\
\text{shull all ye be here in his rowte.} \\
\]

\((272-77)\)

That Death should be both actor and acted upon seems strange, until we remember that in the early Legends and Dances it was the dead who proclaimed the warning. This Mors, then, is apparently a transitional figure composed of many of the conventions of the time and designed to pull out all the stops in order to shock. As God’s messenger, he brings a punitive death for pride and wickedness; as an element of nature, he mows down all living things; and as a worm-eaten corpse, he is a mirror of the self as it will be. But the one truly unusual thing about him—for the time—is the fact that he allows no breathing space.

It is difficult to explain this anomaly. Even if we assume a late composition date for the \textit{Death of Herod} (the earliest manuscript appears to be of the mid-fifteenth century), the hidden death does not become really widespread for another sixty or seventy years. The most probable explanation is simply that the audience wanted a happy ending for the play. The sudden death, it will be remembered, was considered the most horrible way to die, solely \textit{because} the soul has no opportunity to confront death and
gain a breathing space for repentance. Therefore, an audience having seen Herod's mass murder of the innocents would most likely consider sudden death a just punishment, the worst possible thing that could be done to such an evil man. The emergence, then, of the worm-eaten corpse from the omnipotent slayer might have been the only way to force the audience into seeing Mors as their own death as well as Herod's, to turn them from jubilation to the requisite dread.

One of the interesting ironies in the Death of Herod is the juxtaposition of Mors's claims to omnipotence with those of Herod; the audience knows that one figure speaks truly and the other falsely, and that the pride of the human King will fall before the stroke of Death. This type of irony is developed to its fullest extent in The Pride of Life, an early Morality that makes the prideful creature not just a wicked king but a symbol of life itself—in fact, the King of Life. And far from being ignorant of a Death who waits behind his chair, the King of Life is so confident of his power that, like the revelers in the Pardoner's Tale, he challenges Death to a duel.

Unfortunately, although the Prologue gives a summary of the fight between Life and Death, the fight itself is missing from the surviving manuscript facsimile. What remains is the King's boasting, and his refusal to listen to the Queen and Bishop when they warn him that he must die. The King, who is almost lovable in his childish pomposity, is supported in his folly by Strength and Health, two braggart soldiers who form his retinue, and by Mirth, his court jester and messenger. And although I have chided Huizinga for his use of the word childish when referring to a society, I am tempted to continue using it about the King of Life, if only because his Queen and Bishop seem to share my temptation. The King, although he is boastful like Herod, and flies into tantrums like that evil king, has none of Herod's malice; he is rather a silly human creature, easily wounded in his vanity, easily goaded into foolish extravagances, and just as easily pleased with trifles. When he and his knights brag about what they will do to Death, they sound not like soldiers but like boys playing at soldiers:
Death Takes to the Stage

Rex: Streinth and Hele, qwhat say ye,
    My kinde korlin knightis?
Schal Deth be lord over me
    And reve me of mightis?

1 Miles: Mi lord, so brouke I my bronde,
    God that me forbode
    that Deth schould do thee wronge
    Qwhile I am in thi thede.
I wol withstonde him with strife
    And make his sides blede,
    And tel him that thou art King of Life
    And lorde of londe and lede.

2 Miles: May I him onis mete
    With this longe launce,
    In felde other in strete,
    I wol him yive mischaunce.¹²

The Queen, indeed, treats these foolish creatures like children. She is very patient with her husband, explaining to him in careful, logical steps that since he had a beginning, he must have an end; that "Holy writ and prophecye" say so (244); and that his own observation should tell him that no man lives forever. The king immediately flies into a tantrum:

Rex: Woldistow that I were dede
    That thou might have a new?
    Hore, the devil gird off thi hede
    Bot that worde schal thee rewe.

(195-98)

Although such an outburst might have grave repercussions in a later play such as Edward II, Othello, or Lear, here the Queen patiently ignores the insult (and illogic) and continues to try to talk sense to the King. But he will not listen; he soothes himself with the thought that all this is only a "women tale" meant to spoil his fun and "mak myn hert sore" (215). The Queen insists that she is only trying to help him see his duty to his kingdom and the church so that he will act more responsibly—but this
is the wrong thing to tell a headstrong child; the King takes it as a slur on his manhood and decides to challenge Death to a duel:

Rex: Qwhat prechistou of Dethis might
And of his maisterye?
He ne durst onis with me fight
For his bothe eye.

(239-42)

Throughout this part of the play, the King of Life is more silly than wicked. He listens to flatterers, insults the Queen and Bishop who are trying to help him, and makes absurd boasts that he cannot live up to. But in spite of the insupportable things that he says to his wife and the Bishop, he never harms them in any way, and it is obvious that the Queen loves him in spite of his petulant outbursts; when she sends for the Bishop, she says only that her husband has fallen into error, not that he is evil, and indeed her message may be loosely translated as “Come and talk some sense into his silly head.”

Because the King of Life is such a mixture of good and bad, of cruelty and kindness, of vanity and insecurity, the audience is led to identify with him even while it is censuring him, and to fear for him in what is so obviously a foolhardy excursion to his own doom. His pitiful stature is even more marked by his unconscious echoes of lines normally associated with Death: he calls for “Mirth my messager” (263) as God calls for Death; his knights brandish their spears like the Death in the Legends and Dances; and he announces himself to the audience in words like those of Mors in the N-Town Herod:

King ic am, kinde of kingis ikorre, [chosen]
   Al the worlde wide to welde at my wil;
Nas ther never no man of woman iborre
   Oyein me withstonde that I nold him spille.

(121-24)

What Death replies to the King of Life we do not know. But according to the Prologue, after laying waste Life’s kingdom, Death confronts Life himself and “delith him depe dethis wounde” (91).
There follows a scene with which we are now familiar, the separation of body and soul, and the soul's rescue by the prayers of the Virgin Mary:

Qwhe ne the body is down ibrought  
The soule sorow awakith;  
The bodyis pride is dere abought,  
The soule the fendis takith.

And throgh priere of Oure Lady mylde  
The soule and body schul dispyte;  
Sche wol prey her son so mylde,  
Al godenisse sche wol qwyte.

The cors that nere knewe of care,  
No more than stone in weye,  
Schal wit of sorow and sor care  
And thrawe betwene ham tweye. [suffer]

The soule theron schal be weye  
That the fendis have ikaghte;  
And Our Lady schal therfor preye  
So that with her he schal be lafte.

From this we may gather that there was originally a breathing space at the moment of death, during which the King of Life's body and soul engaged in the traditional Debate, and Life gained self-knowledge, repented of his pride, and threw himself on the mercy of God, here represented (as in The Dyenge Creature) by the intercession of the Blessed Virgin.13

The final figure to look at before we turn our attention to Everyman is Humanum Genus of the Castle of Perseverance (ca. 1400-25). By the time Death enters in this very long play, the audience has seen Humanum Genus grow from infancy to old age, beleaguered by the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. He has been first tempted to join the Seven Deadly Sins, has then been recovered by the Virtues, and finally won back to Sin by Covetous, the World's most persuasive henchman. Now, as an
old man, Humanum Genus is totally devoted to Covetous, the only sin of which he is still capable. Unlike Herod and the King of Life, he does not claim that he will never die—but he says that there will be time enough to think about death later, and meanwhile he will try to grow richer and richer. In his case, Death enters not when the hero is claiming to be immortal but when he seems prepared to damn his own soul to Hell:

*Humanum Genus:* On Covetise is all my lay,
And shall till Death me overthrow.

"More and more," this is my stevene. [dream]
If I might always dwellen in prosperity,
Lord God, then well were me!
I would, the medys, forsake Thee,
And never to comen in heaven.14

As in *Herod* and *Pride of Life,* then, Death enters as an agent of retribution just as the victim has reached his worldly peak and spiritual nadir. But lest the audience feel exempt from the summons, Death turns and announces himself with the traditional warning:

Ye shall me dread, everyone;
When I come, ye shall groan;
My name in land is left alone:
I hatte "Drery Deth."

(2801-04)

Interestingly enough, one of Death’s rueful comments seems to date the play sometime after the worst onslaughts of plague, or at least between epidemics:

In the great pestilence
Then was I well know.
But now almost am I foryte;
Men, of Death, hold no tale.
In Covetous their good they get;
The great fishes eat the small.15
After the usual sermon on the inevitability of dying, Death crosses to Humanum Genus and strikes him with a lance. But Humanum Genus does not die immediately; although he is not as sympathetic as the King of Life, neither is he as hateful as Herod, and so he must be allowed time to repent. He first calls on the World to save him, but World casts him off and begins giving his riches away to Garcio, a young man who obligingly tells Humanum Genus to hurry up and die; Humanum Genus already stinks anyway, he points out, and it is now someone else's turn to use his riches. Utterly wretched, Humanum Genus realizes that he has stored up the wrong goods for the wrong kingdom. "God keep me from despair!" he cries (3005), and although he knows he deserves Hell, with his last breath he throws himself upon the mercy of God:

Now my life I have bore.
Mine heart breaketh sore.
A word may I speak no more.
I put me in God's mercy.  [Mankind dies.]  
(3019-22)

That last word, mercy, becomes the key word in the remainder of the play. Humanum Genus's soul pleads it in his own defense, and Mercy herself—one of the Four Daughters of God—continues to remind Justice and Truth of God's promise to redeem anyone who has called on her. Justice and Truth reply, reasonably enough, that God has also promised to judge people by their works, and that this man's works have been almost uniformly bad. With Peace, they carry the debate before God, who finally decides in favor of Mercy and calls Humanum Genus out of Hell to sit at His right hand. But as the play ends, God warns the audience not to presume on His mercy; all will be judged on how they perform the corporal works of mercy on earth. This is the same warning, of course, that is given in the Judgment plays.

The repentance of Humanum Genus, then, is a chancy one. It succeeds because it is heartfelt and based on self-knowledge,
but it almost fails because it comes at the very last moment. A question is also raised, during the Debate of the Four Daughters of God, as to whether Humanum Genus has made a perfect act of contrition; that is, has he really felt sorrow for his sins, or is he only afraid of Hell? We remember that this is the line of demarcation between the saved and the damned in the N-Town and Chester Judgments: both call for mercy, but the saved base their plea on contrition, the damned on fear without it.

This question of last-minute contrition was to become more and more important in years to come. Protestant and Catholic would debate it; Doctor Faustus was to reject it; and the great human figures of Measure for Measure to explore it in all its heavenly and earthly forms. But for the late medieval mind, it was the classic anagnorisis, the nosce teipsum demanded by the Artes moriendi, and, as such, the gateway to redemption. Once a person has said in his heart, “Now I see,” he has performed the first step of penance, the acknowledgment of guilt—and guilt itself implies the working of free will to choose between good and evil. Because contrition in this sense is dependent upon realization and choice, Death in the Mysteries and early Moralities became not merely a punitive measure but an educational process. Lazarus learns the lesson in spite of his comfortless comforters; the poor silly King of Life learns it is his debate between body and soul; and Humanum Genus learns it when the World deserts him and leaves him face to face with Death and himself. But it is in Everyman, the greatest of the Morality plays, that the educational process of Death is most fully elaborated and the first stirrings of Renaissance drama begin.