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## EVERYMAN: KNOWLEDGE ONCE MORE

The nature of the character Knowledge has exercised interpreters of *Everyman*: various definitions of the character have been proposed. In 1947 de Vocht<sup>1</sup> argued that the actions of Knowledge and the range of meanings of "knowledge" recorded in the *OED* for the period of the play require that Knowledge be defined as "acknowledgment, recognition of the position or claims (of any one), confession (of one's mistake), the very *confessio*, which is considered as '*dimidiata expiatio*'",<sup>2</sup> a definition which Lawrence V. Ryan later adopted and rendered more succinctly as "acknowledgment of one's sin".<sup>3</sup> In complete contrast L. A. Cormican<sup>4</sup> stated in 1954 that "Knowledge is merely faith, one of the divine 'goods' lent to man, to be taken away at death."<sup>5</sup> In 1961 Helen S. Thomas,<sup>6</sup> troubled by the inadequacy of de Vocht's definition to describe all of Knowledge's actions and by his unnecessarily restrictive use of the *OED*, suggested a new, more accommodating definition: "Knowledge, as the Wisdom figure in the morality *Everyman*, must be allowed to mean *knowledge*—knowledge of the correct path to Jerusalem and knowledge of one's sins and the proper method of shrift. She also represents the good counsel which proceeds from such knowledge."<sup>7</sup> This definition, however, is clearly two definitions. More recently A. C. Cawley in the introduction to his edition of the play<sup>8</sup> presented another definition of Knowledge by saying that she "ultimately represents knowledge of God";<sup>9</sup> unfortunately his explanation of this position is brief, and merely indicates that this state is conditional upon self-knowledge, and that self-knowledge is largely a matter of contrition which can lead to penance. This extraordinary diversity of definitions is evidence of confusion in the procedure for interpreting allegory; each critic wishes

to produce a definition of Knowledge different from the basic concept of knowledge itself, and in so doing is obliged either to narrow the concept, as in "acknowledgment of one's sin", or to broaden it, as in "knowledge and good counsel", or to alter it completely, as in "faith". This problem of definition, I would suggest, is quite illusory; there is no sound reason why Knowledge should not be accepted simply as knowledge since that is the name of the character.<sup>10</sup> Once this *definition* is accepted, it is then possible to proceed to the important work of describing the various and distinct *functions* of the character in the play. It is from such a description of the functions that the allegorical action may be explicated.

Before such an explication can be made, however, two distinct patterns must be distinguished in the play, and two attendant problems must be discussed. The first pattern is the simple fiction, the plot of the play in its human terms: Everyman, an individual, is obliged to prepare for and make a journey to Jerusalem; in need of help, he is deserted by some friends, and supported by others in making this arduous journey. The second pattern is the allegory of that plot: Everyman, a representative human being, learns that his death is imminent, turns to his familiar worldly delights for consolation, only to find none; he then prepares himself for his death, finding yet again that some things he had valued are not trustworthy. The characters who participate in this main action have a dual quality; at times they appear as Everyman's friends in their particularity, and at others in their abstract roles as representative figures and aspects of Everyman's thought.

The first attendant problem, however, is that the separation is never exact. In attempting to achieve an accurate glossing of the interplay between Everyman and the other characters the interpreter repeatedly encounters difficulties. Obviously the plot of the journey is secondary to the allegory and is the means of expressing the abstract and theoretical ideas that the work embodies; but in describing the relations between the abstracts and Everyman the interpreter must endeavor to assimilate as many of the detailed actions as possible into his account, while the lively humanity of the characters complicates the otherwise simple diagrams of meaning. When Everyman, dying, is deserted by Beauty and Strength, who take no further part in the play, the action is simple, literally and allegorically. When Good Deeds introduces

Knowledge, the literal action is simple, but the allegorical action requires complex explication; to avoid explication, to retreat to a view that the action should be read at the literal level only as a means of getting Knowledge into the action would be critical irresponsibility, however attractive in its simplicity. The second attendant problem is that at any time a character may be interpreted as speaking directly to the audience, outside the limits of his previous dramatic existence. Again, such is always a possibility, but as far as possible the interpreter should aim to integrate all action into a consistent allegorical framework, and to construct a series of conceptual syntactic formulations for what is presented in spatial terms.

These problems do not appear with any great seriousness in the first part of the play, since Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin are human figures, each of whom shows the distance between profession and action at the critical moment in Everyman's life. The figure of Goods, an animation of an inanimate thing, shows in a lively vignette the danger of reliance on the things of the world. All these characters are external to Everyman, and therefore their comings and goings are easily explained. However, the remaining characters are aspects of Everyman himself, and the whole second section of the play must be examined so that an accurate description of the functions of Knowledge can be made.

When Everyman has been deserted by his false friends, he is desperate to find someone who will go with him on "that heuy iournaye" (464). In a mood of self-hate he realizes that he needs "counseyll", and concludes

I thynke that I shall neuer spede  
Tyll that I go to my Good Dede. (480-481)

In the ensuing conversation Everyman asks for advice from Good Deeds, who is already aware that he is "somoned a-counte to make / Before Myssyas, of Iherusalem kyng" (493-494); she says that she will accompany him "And you do by me" (495), a condition which relates to the recovery of her strength. Everyman promptly asks her to go with him; when she replies "I wolde full fayne, but I can not stande, veryly" (498), Everyman responds insensitively "Why, is there ony thyng on

you fall?" (499), apparently endeavoring to appear surprised at a condition which he knew of earlier—

But, alas, she is so weke  
That she can nother go nor speke (482-483)—

and for which Good Deeds places responsibility upon him directly: "Ye, syr, I may thanke you of all" (500). Good Deeds draws attention to his illegible account books, provoking Everyman to exclaim "Our Lorde Iesus helpe me!" (506); her relentless reproof reduces him to praying for her help, lest he should be "for euer dampned in dede" (510), and then for the gift of her "counseyll" (516) when she protests that she cannot help him. Her "counseyll" is the introduction of her sister Knowledge:

*Good Dedes.* That shall I do veryly.  
Thoughe that on my fete I may not go,  
I haue a syster that shall with you also,  
Called Knowledge, whiche shall with you abyde,  
To helpe you to make that dredeful rekenynge.  
*Knowledge.* Eueryman, I wyll go with the and be thy gyde,  
In thy moost nede to go by thy syde.  
*Eueryman.* In good condycyon I am now in euery thyng,  
And am holy content with this good thyng,  
Thanked be God my creature. (517-526)

On this literal level the action of the sequence is plain as Everyman, deserted by his false friends, turns to his one true friend, who, so badly abused that she is unable to go with him immediately, introduces her sister who will help him on the journey; with the assurance of company Everyman becomes happy again. But a second process is revealed if the conversation is read allegorically; the interaction of Everyman with Good Deeds and Knowledge is a graphic representation of Everyman's thoughts, and may be glossed as follows: confronted by the valuelessness of friends, family, and material wealth, Everyman realizes the prime importance of his Good Deeds (480-481), and the extent to which they are of feeble significance as a result of his neglect of virtuous living. Though he initially thinks in terms of "counseyll" (490) from them, that is, sensible thought proceeding from their contemplation, he devotes most of his energy to useless appeals for "helpe" (491,

509), that is, to the concealment from himself of unpleasant truths by indulgence in futile complaint. The rejected appeals of Everyman and the castigations of Good Deeds are a dramatization of Everyman's deepening distress as he flagellates himself in his despair; finally, after two admissions of the power of Jesus (506, 512-513), he abandons his defense against awareness of what he must do, recognizes the valuelessness of his past Good Deeds in his current condition, and turns instead to asking once more for "counseyll" (516), to using his intelligence instead of bewailing his state.

The next ten lines, however, are not so simple. Broadly considered, they show Everyman's acceptance that Knowledge will provide the answer to his problems, and will be his "gyde" in his "moost nede" (522-523); upon recognizing the existence of knowledge, or upon bringing knowledge to bear upon his problem, he is instantly encouraged. But the particular details are not easily assimilated into a consistent and inclusive interpretation; some elements of the fiction, the theatrical plot, present allegorical problems and require explication. First, the introduction of Knowledge by Good Deeds is initially puzzling, since Good Deeds does not have the capacity conceptually to lead to Knowledge. However, since the action takes place allegorically in Everyman's mind, this action may be glossed as follows: Everyman's unremitting concentration on the current worthlessness of his Good Deeds forces him to the recognition that they can be restored to value only by his use of his knowledge. Secondly, the introduction of Knowledge as sister to Good Deeds (519) suggests a theological point which is emphasized by their proving to be Everyman's most faithful friends throughout the play; both are equally necessary for salvation. In both these contexts Knowledge functions as Everyman's Christian knowledge—his practical knowledge of Christian teaching and of correct Christian conduct—specifically when she promises to be his "gyde" (522). Thirdly, the suddenness of Everyman's apprehension of a happier state requires allegorical explication; upon Knowledge's appearance he is extraordinarily confident—"In good condycyon I am now in euery thyng" (524)—and he closes on the phrase "Thanked be God my creature" (526). What is the significance of this transformation, and what is the status of the latter phrase? Is Everyman making a pious statement of gratitude as he passes from solitariness to company,

or from contemplation of things of the world to things of God, or is he expressing his consciousness that his new state of mind is a gift of God, that is, knowledge reawakened in him by God rather than a simple act of rational choice on his part? The choice is between a literal reading of the line as mere plot and character, and two distinct allegorical readings. I would suggest that the rapidity of the change and the offering of thanks indicates Everyman's recognition that "the motion to repent does come from above".<sup>11</sup> Everyman acknowledges that God has stirred up his knowledge, which has lain dormant, and he now knows what to do.

As the action proceeds, Knowledge exemplifies Good Deeds' description of her as one who "shall with you abyde, / To helpe you to make that dredeful rekenyng" (520-521). Good Deeds indicates that Knowledge will take Everyman "there / Where thou shalte hele the of thy smarte" (527-528), and Knowledge suggests that they go "togyder louyngly / To Confessyon, that clensyng ryuere" (535-536); Everyman knows that he must confess his sins. When Everyman addresses Confession he draws attention to the physical presence of Knowledge:

I come with Knowlege for my redempcyon,  
Redempte with herte and full contrycyon. (548-549)

Here "with Knowlege" opposes his present state to that before Knowledge appeared, when he ignored his Christian knowledge and consequently despaired. In reply Confession uses the phrase similarly:

Bycause with Knowlege ye come to me,  
I wyll you comferte as well as I can. (555-556)

In this context of penitence Knowledge is charged to ensure that Everyman scourge himself – "Knowlege, kepe hym in this vyage" (566) – and in his capacity as adviser Knowledge urges Everyman to perform his penance:

Eueryman, loke your penaunce that ye fulfill,  
What payne that euer it to you be;  
And Knowlege shall gyue you counseyll at wyll  
How your accounte ye shall make clerely. (577-580)

The allegorical interpretation of this psychological process is that when in an act of confession Everyman is advised to be steadfast in his

repentance and to scourge himself, he determines to persevere, knowing that in penance he will gain grace. Later, when Everyman asks Knowledge for the scourge (605), Everyman's knowledge of correct Christian behavior encourages him in his act of penance. Throughout this sequence there is no need for Knowledge to be glossed restrictively as "acknowledgment of one's sin"; admittedly the context is penitential, but the inclusiveness of knowledge as a concept renders greater specificity unnecessary. The narrow definition is positively obstructive to understanding when Knowledge rejoices at the rising of Good Deeds (623-626); it leads to a formulation of the action as "Everyman's knowledge of his sinfulness leads him to rejoice at his improved spiritual condition", which is a far less satisfactory statement than "Everyman's Christian knowledge leads him to rejoice at his improved spiritual condition." When Knowledge next provides Everyman with the "garment of sorowe" (643) which is called "Contrycyon" (645), after she has assured him that he may "Be no more sad, but euer reioyce" (636), the psychological process represented is that Everyman in a state of grace is able to know true Christian joy and to be wholly contrite. Everyman's Knowledge provides this assurance, his Christian knowledge, not his acknowledgment of sin.

With Everyman in this new state of grace begins a new section of the play. At the level of literal plot, Good Deeds and Knowledge urge Everyman to summon up four companions—Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five Wits. The allegory represents the regeneration of the physical and intellectual powers in Everyman by his resumption of spiritual responsibility, and his happiness in his new wholeness. However, the interpretation of the details of the action leads to problems. The four companions are not introduced as a group initially: Good Deeds tells Everyman that he must lead with him "Thre persones of grete myght" (658)—Beauty, Strength, and Discretion—and Knowledge instructs him to "call to mynde / Your Fyue Wyttes as for your counseylours" (662-663).<sup>12</sup> If the Five Wits are both the inner and the outer five wits,<sup>13</sup> they are the total of the intellect and the senses. De Vocht interprets Knowledge's introduction of Five Wits as follows: "she brings *Fyue Wyttes* to help Everyman: the feeling of acknowledgment has to be expressed by all the powers of the soul and body who helped man to sin";<sup>14</sup> however, now that Everyman is fully contrite,

wearing the garment of "Contrycyon", the passage makes more sense if the relation of Five Wits to Knowledge is seen as the physical and mental functions wholly devoted to Christian knowledge, the creation of a total Christian consciousness in Everyman. It is this total consciousness that is represented when Five Wits supports Knowledge in her urging Everyman to "Go to Presthode" (707); allegorically, the whole of Everyman's intellect urges to him to receive the last rites. However, the length and open didacticism of the succeeding discourse upon the power of priesthood and the virtue of the sacraments (712-727, 730-749) distracts from its conception as a representation of Everyman's thoughts except insofar as it suggests the intensity of Everyman's desire for the sacraments. Later, during Everyman's absence from the stage (750-769), both Knowledge and Five Wits lose their status as properties of Everyman temporarily, and become commentators instructing the audience concerning the problems of unworthy priests and the respect due to the priesthood.<sup>15</sup>

All the properties of Everyman that remain on stage lose their significance as aspects of his being while he is off stage, but only Knowledge and Five Wits speak. The importance of the other four companions manifests itself in the succeeding section in which after assuring Everyman of their support upon his journey they desert him one by one; allegorically this action represents Everyman's temporary reliance upon transitory things, and his disappointment as they leave him "in the natural order in which they would leave a dying man, Beauty first, then Strength, Discretion, and finally Five Wits"<sup>16</sup> (805-807, 826-830, 841-844, 847-848). However, in his despair Good Deeds draws attention to herself, and Everyman once more notes how he has trusted falsely: "I loued them better than my Good Dedes alone" (857). His question to Knowledge indicates his uncertainty about her fidelity, and therefore her ultimate value:

Knowledge, wyll ye forsake me also?

*Knowledge.* Ye, Euerymán, whan ye to Deth shall go;

But not yet, for no maner of daunger.

*Everyman.* Gramercy, Knowledge, with all my herte.

*Knowledge.* Nay, yet I wyll not from hens departe

Tyll I se where ye shall be-come. (858-863)



This passage presents Everyman taking stock of himself, realizing that his Knowledge, his practical Christian knowledge which has been his guide in his lifetime, is not likely to pass into the grave with him. However, Knowledge's statement that she intends nevertheless to remain "Tyll I se where ye shall be-come" (863), to stay beyond his death, introduces a further problem, for which a retreat into reading at the level of plot alone is an unsatisfactory solution. During Everyman's death she says nothing; Everyman and Good Deeds advise the audience on the nature of true and false friends in life, and then utter a number of appeals that close in Everyman's final prayer, which begins with an English version of the Latin with which it closes:

*In manus tuas, of myghtes moost  
For euer, Commendo spiritum meum.* (886-887)

The combination of Everyman and Good Deeds in prayer at this moment of death indicates that the total soul of Everyman is uttering the appeals. However, Knowledge remains on stage throughout, suggesting that she is a guide and a support to them. But her presence is particularly notable and problematic when she speaks after Everyman has died, for unless she merely loses her essential quality as Knowledge, stepping out of character and becoming a simple commentator, she must be credited with existence outside Everyman; Ryan's position that "acknowledgment of sin" is no longer necessary after death merely evades the positive problem of explicating the significance of her presence;<sup>17</sup> after all, she could, like all the other companions, have left the scene when she ceased to be. However, her actual statements are important:

Now hath he suffred that we all shall endure;  
The Good Dedes shall make all sure.  
Now hath he made endynge;  
Me thynketh that I here aungelles syng  
And make grete ioy and melody  
Where Eurymanes soule receyued shall be. (888-893)

If Knowledge is simply slipping out of character, aligning herself as a performer with the audience in experiencing the climax of the play as the angel receives Everyman, then there is no problem; Knowledge's confidence in the power of Good Deeds becomes just another didactic asseveration. However, this easy dismissal ignores Knowledge's earlier

assurance to Everyman that she “wyll not from hens departe / Tyll I se where ye shall be-come” (862-863). Clearly Knowledge not only possesses properties external to Everyman that enable her to exist separately from him, but she is also able to predict his fate confidently, even while she admits her human frailty: “Now hath he suffred that we all shall endure” (888). Moreover, it is conceivable that Knowledge is set off from the audience as well when she introduces the vision of Everyman’s reception into heaven; while angelic song may be heard on stage, it is nevertheless notable that Knowledge’s phrase “Me thynketh” (891)—“it seems to me”—suggests that the audience hears only the statement of the Angel, and that Knowledge hears sounds that the audience does not hear.<sup>18</sup> This curious status that Knowledge possesses is further emphasized by her omission from the last speech of the doctor when the “morall” is presented:

Ye herers, take it of worth, olde and yonge,  
 And forsake Pryde, for he deceyueth you in the ende;  
 And remembre Beaute, V. Wyttes, Strength, & Dyscrecyon,  
 They all at the last do Eureryman forsake,  
 Saue his Good Dedes there doth he take. (903-907)

Of this list of abstractions only “Pryde” has not been represented on stage, though “Pryde” includes Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods. The Doctor’s notable omission of Knowledge seems to affirm that Knowledge neither forsakes utterly nor is taken “there”, before God’s judgment seat. Instead Knowledge appears to be eternally present upon the earth, present in the minds of individual mortal men but not limited by their individual mortality. In sum, while Knowledge functions primarily as the knowledge of Christian teaching and conduct which guides Everyman in his preparations for death, she functions after his death as Christian knowledge that is always available to man; in watching over Everyman in his death and in speaking confidently of his eternal destiny, while admitting her human limitations, she displays some qualities of the institution that maintains and propagates Christian knowledge on earth—the Church.

## FOOTNOTES

1. H. de Vocht, "Everyman, A Comparative Study of Texts and Sources," *Materials for the Study of the Old English Drama*, XX (Louvain, 1947), 1-228.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
3. Lawrence V. Ryan, "Doctrine and Dramatic Structure in *Everyman*," *Speculum*, XXXII (1957), 722-735. This phrase, which is first used on, and here quoted from, p. 728, appears with various modifications in his essay; I follow him in occasionally using the alternate phrase "acknowledgment of sin".
4. L.A. Cormican, "Morality Tradition and the Interludes," in Boris Ford, ed., *The Age of Chaucer* (Harmondsworth, 1954), pp. 188-196.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
6. Helen S. Thomas, "The Meaning of the Character Knowledge in *Everyman*," *Mississippi Quarterly*, XIV (1961), 3-13.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.,
8. *Everyman*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester, 1961). All quotations from the play are from this edition, and line numbers are included in the text.
9. *Ibid.*, p. xxi.
10. Helen S. Thomas points out (pp. 5-6) that *OED* gives the following definition under "Knowledge (9)" with examples as early as 1387: "Intellectual acquaintance with, or perception of, fact or truth"; I would point out that under "Knowledge (8)" appears the following definition with examples as early as 1375: "Acquaintance with fact; perception, or certain information of, a fact or matter; state of being aware or informed; consciousness (of anything)." Either of these descriptions is adequate to the use of the word in the text, and both are possible historically. De Vocht's (pp. 59-60) and Ryan's (p. 728) argument for the rejection of a broad sense of the word "knowledge" on the basis of the use of the word "cognycyon" (538) - "intellectyon" in the Huth copy - in a sentence where it means knowledge as simple information is irrelevant to the whole discussion, since it depends for its power on making an exclusive generalization on the evidence of a single instance.
11. Ryan, p. 729; in this context Ryan aptly draws attention to *Everyman's* prior appeal, "Our Lorde Iesus helpe me!" (506), and to his later acknowledgment of his need of God's help, "yf God gyue me grace" (607). At this point my attribution of a broad meaning to "knowledge" allows it to include Ryan's specific "acknowledgment of sin".
12. While it is appropriate that Good Deeds should introduce Strength and Discretion, since they are the means by which Good Deeds are done, the relation of Beauty to Good Deeds is not obvious. I do not pretend to understand fully the meaning of the division of these attributes between Good Deeds and Knowledge.
13. See Cawley, P. xxii, who refers for explanation of the five inner and five outer senses to the *Lay Folks' Catechism* (EETS. OS. 118, London, 1901), pp. 18-19, where the five inner senses, the "inwyttys", are listed as "Wyl./Resoun./Mynd./ymaginacioun. and thogth."
14. De Vocht, p. 62
15. The extra-dramatic quality of this passage is demonstrated by the disposition of the speeches. Ryan (p. 734) justifies the granting of the speeches on the power of the sacraments and of priests (712-727, 730-749) to Five Wits on the grounds that "A sacrament is a visible [that is, sensibly evident] sign which imparts grace to our soul"; but there is no obvious reason why Knowledge should criticize bad priests.
16. Ryan, p. 731.
17. *Ibid.*, P. 732. Ryan's point that her solitary presence on the stage has the effect of "symbolically driving home her significance in the play" (as "acknowledgment of sin") does not take into account the problems which her speech (888-893) raises.
18. Cawley's comments on these lines are misleading: "The use of singing to bring the action to a happy conclusion is a convention found in other medieval plays, biblical and moral, e.g. in the *Shepherds' plays* of the Towneley Cycle and in Medwall's *Nature*. The angelic song which greets the departing soul of *Everyman* emphasizes his good and blissful ending" (p. 38). First, because Knowledge says that she hears angels singing does not mean that the audience hears them; there is no stage direction in the early texts. Secondly, the examples from the Towneley Cycle and from *Nature* are so different in their contexts that they are valueless as points of comparison with *Everyman*.