

“THE INTERLUDE OF YOUTH”

A MORALITY PLAY FROM SIXTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

[An adaptation¹¹]

This play needs to be read or performed in relation to the unit Mystery and Morality Plays, which gives an account of the nature and role of such plays in the Middle Ages.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Interlude of Youth is considered by many scholars to be the earliest and best of the ‘Youth’ morality plays, that is, plays that had as their main theme the behaviour of young people, both good and bad.

The play dramatises the way a young man tries to work out what sort of life he wants to lead.

In the play, the character ‘Youth’ is tempted by evil (‘Riotous Living’, referred to here as ‘Riot’) and is counselled and encouraged by the virtues, ‘Charity’ and ‘Humility’, to live a moral life, thus ensuring that when he dies he will go to heaven.

To help with a modern staging of the play, it is useful to note the emphases in the original performances so that students today can get a better idea of how they were first presented and of the likely audience response and participation.

When the play was originally performed, it was done vigorously and enthusiastically. The players added some of their own spontaneous comments if they felt this would enhance the action of the play and give it more local appeal.

Similarly, if the play is to be staged today, audience participation should be encouraged, but it needs to be stressed that, like their medieval counterparts, when Youth turns away from his sinful companions, the audience should be attentive and quiet.

The meaning of Riot is probably best translated as riotous living, which meant, drunken brawling, gambling, spending beyond one’s means, and chasing women (mostly of ill repute).

Charity can be translated best as compassion and love.

Charity

Youth

Riot

Pride

Lechery

Humility

THE PLAYERS

Enter Charity:

May Jesus who died on the Cross
Save you all from harm.

I have come from God above
To teach His laws for your benefit
And I am named, Charity.
No person on earth can be saved
Without my help,
For if they refuse Charity
Though they may have other virtues
Without Charity it will not be.

I am the gate of Heaven
And no one can enter without
Charity in their heart.
Of all the virtues Charity is King.
When God came on earth
I was planted in His heart
And from His heart I did
Flow to all priests and holy people.

Enter Youth:

Get out of the way, guys! Give me some space!
I'm in really great shape!
You won't find any better than me
Anywhere!
My name is Youth.
Who on earth can be better than me?
I love life and life loves me.
My hair is shiny and thick
My body as supple as a colt
My fingers are long and well shaped
My chest as big as a beer barrel
My legs are strong
And I can dance and hop and rage all night
I am heir to my father's land.
What more would I want?

Charity:

Are you so determined to lead
A life of sin and let
Virtue go?

Youth:

Yeah man, absolutely.
Nowadays no one respects
Anyone unless they live life to the full!!
(Wink, wink to the audience)

Charity:

(in horror)
You need to ask for God's mercy!
(pause)
Why did you praise your body?

Youth:

What business is it of yours?
Why should I not praise it?
You won't stop me!

Charity:

Think carefully of what you are doing now.
You may have wealth and youth
But if you squander both
In age you will be like
A withered old tree
Fit only to be burned
As you will burn
In Hell.

Youth:

You fool! Do you think so?
Get out of here
Before I take to you with my dagger!
So, you think I'll end up in Hell?
Rather there than with the likes of you.

Charity:

Wait a second, please take my advice!
Ask forgiveness for your evil ways
And you will inherit the bliss
Of Heaven,
Where you will see a most glorious sight
Angels singing with saints
Before the face of God in all His splendour.

Youth:

(scornfully)

Oh yeah! Up in the sky?
I'll need a bloody escalator to climb so high.
And what if I should slip
And break my neck?
Oh no, that's not for me.

Charity:
(sternly)
Remember, foolish youth
That the mercy of God passeth all things.

Youth:
(getting angry)
Hey you, I pray you hold your tongue
And stop talking to me of goodness
It bores me so.

Charity:
(pleadingly)
Think what God suffered for thee,
He was nailed to a cross.
A knight speared even His side
In his Heart appeared a gaping wound
All this was done for you and me.

Youth:
So, what's that to me?
You want me to waste my youth?
In prayer and sorrow?
Get out of here or I'll run you through
With my dagger!

Charity:
Oh sir, please hear what I tell you!
Listen to my advice
That you might sit in Heaven
With God and His company.

Youth:
Will you stop with all this talk of God
Or I'll be forced to belt you up.

Charity:
Sir, I can see I've made no progress with you
I will go and see my brother Humility.

I hope you listen to him
For your own sake!

Youth:
Yes, sir, go away! go away.
I'm glad to see the last of you
You whining old bat.

Charity:
(to the audience)
Farewell my masters all!
I will return and tell you
How I have progressed!

Youth:
You try to come back here
And I will send you away in the Devil's name.
(pause)
I wish my brother Riot were here
To cheer me up and help
Beat Charity and his brother.

Enter Riot:
Oh hell! Who called me?
(pause)
I am Riot, bursting with energy
My heart is as light as the wind,
And all I can think of is having fun.
What am I doing here?
To give some good advice to Master Youth?

Youth:
Welcome Riot! in the devil's name!
Who brought you here?

Riot:
My legs brought me here!
I thought you called me to
Find out how I'd made out.

Youth:
Well – I thought you'd been hanged.
I was told you struck a man on the ear
And his wallet just happened to jump
Into your pocket

And you had been locked up.

Riot:

As a matter of fact
I was locked up for a short while
But I know how to work the system
And as you see I am released.

Youth:

How did you manage that?

Riot:

Not an easy thing my lad:
I was taken out to Death Row
In Newgate to be hanged
And what do you reckon?
As the noose came about my neck
The rope broke and I fell to ground,
Ran away safe, and
On my way I came across a wealthy
Young lad with twenty gold pieces in his pocket
I knocked him out, took his gold –
Oh god! I've never had such a great day!

So let us go to the bar
And drink our taste in wines
I'll foot the bill
You won't have to pay a penny
And you can kiss any girl
Whenever you want.

Youth:

Riot, thanks a lot!
Let's get out of this place
Before Charity comes
And spoils our fun.

Riot:

Let him come!
I'll give him such a hard time
He'll regret it for many a day.

Youth:

Riot, my friend
You understand me well.

I'd like you to know
That I have inherited
All my father's wealth
And I believe you to be
The one to advise me.
I need a servant
To wait on me.

Riot:

Say no more, I'll find you some one quickly.
Some men call him Master Pride.
He'll be a good servant to you,
I swear by God three times.
I will fetch him to you
Now.

(Exit Riot and re-enter with Pride)

Riot:

Lo, Master Youth, here he is!
A handsome wise fellow
To help you out
In anything you want.

Youth:

Welcome to me, guys!

Pride:

Hey man, I am happy to do anything for you
And I bet that if you will be
Ruled by me
I will raise you to the highest ranks of society.

Youth:

Tell me! Tell me!

Pride:

First: think that you are
Better than everybody else!
Rip off the poor – they're nothing!
Wear the most expensive and fashionable clothes.
Good looking women will say
"What a man!"
And people who are broke will fall over themselves
to know you.

Youth:

Thanks for your advice
I'll follow the
Teaching of Riot and you.
What else should I do?

Pride:

You should consider having a wife!

Riot:

A wife? God help you!
He'll have his share of flesh but
He'll have no wife to tie him down.

(To Pride)

You have a sister who's good-looking and easy,
She'd make any man a good mistress.
Go get her
And we'll go to the bar together.

Youth:

Yes, yes, go and get her.
She sounds terrific.

(Exit Pride)

Riot:

Let me tell you,
She is blonde and beautiful.
Men call her Lady Lechery.

Youth:

I can't wait to see her!

(Enter Pride and Lechery)

Youth:

Come over here, sweetheart
You are as welcome to me as the heart in my body.

Lechery:

I thank you. I am here when you want me.

Youth:

Guys, let's go to the bar.

Pride:

Yes, let us go for God's sake,
I'm ready to rage!

Lechery:

I will be happy to come with you,
And when you are ready
My heart is yours, my body and all.

Youth:

You bet, sweetheart
I am totally yours.

(Enter Charity)

Charity:

Wait a second, boy.
I want to speak with you.

Pride:

No, no, we shall not listen.
What gives you the right to speak
To me?
I'm smart and well-dressed
And need none of your advice.

Riot:

Go away
Or I shall tie you up
And leave you here to rot.

Charity:

Guys, stop it
And let's talk of good stuff.

Youth:

He's getting scared
And thinks that by flattering us
We might listen!
Don't be such an idiot.

Charity:

I am not scared of what
You can do to me.

Riot:

Oh no! You old dog! You think so.
Hold him Pride and I'll go and get
Some chains to put around his legs.

Charity:

Jesus and His mother Mary
Will shield us from evil.
Send you grace to make amends
Before you die.

Enter Riot:

Look sirs at what I bring!
What a lovely sound these chains make.
How say you Master Charity,
Does this attire please you?

Charity:

It pleases me well
For Jesus said
"Blessed are they who are persecuted
For righteousness' sake
For theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."

Pride:

We shall see how you like being
Chained up.
Sit down sir and we shall
Decorate you!

Youth:

What do you know!
These chains suit you.

Riot:

Leave him.
Let's not waste any more time.
There's drinking and dancing and
Merry-making to be done.

(Exit Pride, Youth, Riot and Lechery)

Enter Humility:

Christ that was crucified and crowned with thorns
And was born of a virgin.

Help my brother Charity!

Charity:

Dear brother Humility
You are a welcome sight.
Why have you delayed so long in coming?

Humility:

I was praying at evensong.
How did this happen?

Charity:

Help untie me and I shall
Tell you of this sad situation.

(Humility and Charity exit)

(Enter Youth, Riot and Pride)

Youth:

(rather drunk)
Aback fellows – take a good look at me.
I have been promoted to a high station in society.
I am as good as a king.
I am better than you all!

Humility:

You are welcome to this place.
(pause)
We think sir, you are wasting your life.
So we are going to try to get some sense into
Your brain.

Youth:

Are you indeed!
And I'll punch you in the ear.
Do you think I am an idiot?
Get away from me.

Charity:

Repent of your sins
Before you die and are lost.

Riot:

Be careful, he wants to turn you
Into a saint. What a bore life

Would be then.

Youth:
(to *Pride*)

Don't worry – I'm only going
To take your advice.

Pride:
Then you will do well in this World.

Humility:
Sir, it is pitiful to see some one
So blind that he forsakes goodness
For evil.

Youth:
Why? I'm not upset about it
When I look like I'm losing my soul
You can throw stones at me.

Charity:
Give up your sinful friends
You will be better off with us.

Riot:
He will get along fine with us.
So be silent and get out
Before we beat you senseless.

Youth:
Sirs, I want to have fun for as
Long as I can.

Riot:
Yes, I agree.
There is no guarantee in life.
So it's better to do what you want to
Than give up merry-making and follow
These boring fools.

Charity:
This kind of life will bring you to ruin.
Give it up before it is too late.

Youth:
While I have life in my body
I will follow the advice of Riot and Pride
And Lechery.

Riot:
Sir, then shall you do well.
I'll teach you to play every
Card game known,
To spend all your money
To drink fine ales
And much, much more.

Youth:
I thank thee Riot.
Your advice sounds good to me.

Charity:
Don't believe him Youth!
You will lose everything
That God has so dearly
Bought for you.

Youth:
I don't know what God has bought
For me.
Truly I don't know whether He dresses in
Black or white.
He's never in any place I know.
He didn't buy my hat, or my cap
He hasn't even bought me a pint of beer.
(pause)
But I'll buy Him one the next time we meet!

Charity:
Sir, what He did was free you.
He bought you with His blood.

Youth:
Impossible, I've always been free
What are you talking about?

Charity:
Sir, I shall tell you.
When Adam was exiled from

Paradise,
All souls were lost to the devil in Hell
Till the Father in His great mercy
Sent the second person in the Trinity
To save us.
This He did with His blood.

(pause)

(Youth thinks a while, starts to look serious and concerned).

Youth:

How should I save my soul from Hell?
Tell me and I shall follow your advice.

Riot:

Youth, don't do it.
You'll have to give up all your pleasures!
Think what you're throwing away!

Humility:

Kneel down and ask God's mercy
For what you have done.

(Pause. Youth looks at Riot, and shakes his head slowly).

Youth:

Here I forsake all sin
And ask God to accept me
A Poor sinner.

(Exit Pride, Riot and Lechery, in disgust)

Humility:

Here are beads for your devotion.

Your prayer will keep you
From temptation.
And when you see others
Doing wrong,
Give them good advice
And teach them to be good.

Charity:

Sir, you shall inherit the joys of Heaven
Where you shall know happiness for life
Eternal.

Youth:

To which God brings all
Good people. Amen.

Humility:

Thus we have brought our matter
To an end
Before all here present
Let all be content.

Charity:

We thank this audience
For their kind attention.

Humility:

Jesus who sits in Heaven on high
Save all in this fair company
Men and women that have been here.
Amen, amen for Charity.

THE END