Stage Presentation of Allegorical Characters in J. Skelton's Play *Magnyfycence*

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Abstract

The article deals with the peculiarities of constructing allegorical characters in John Skelton's play *Magnyfycence* (c.1519-1520). Though the allegories of the Vices in this interlude are based on an abstract idea, they are endowed with individual features of real prototypes – certain gentlemen at the court of Henry VIII – rather than with typical traits of generalized allegorical images. The English playwright's treatment of allegories obviously proceeds from the general idea of the play. It is emphasized that the essence of the early Tudor allegorical plays can only be rediscovered through their theatrical performance.

The Early Tudor interlude is considered a fairly important link in the process of the evolution of English Renaissance drama. It is characterised by an amalgamated genre structure that encompassed a number of elements typical of the medieval theatre. As such, in the interludes of the first half of the sixteenth century characters were often created according to the principles of allegorical imagery.

In studies of medieval theatre it is usually emphasized that allegory attained its highest point of artistic realization in medieval morality plays that produced a whole set of allegorical characters, well known to the morality audience. The moment an allegorical character appeared on the stage dressed in a certain way and fitted out with certain objects that revealed its inner essence, it evoked a whole range of associations with the viewers. Sloth, for instance, was usually presented as an untidily dressed, unkempt lazybones in sagging breeches,

with a pillow under his arm to have a rest whenever he wanted. It is noteworthy that character decoding in allegorical theatre was a part of the viewers' aesthetic enjoyment when watching a play. The character's costume and demeanour can consequently be considered a non-verbal means of stage stereotyping. The character's visual dimension was an essential pre-condition for the creation of a dramatic allegory, with every element of its outward appearance making its contribution into conveying an allegorical meaning.

John Skelton's interlude *Magnyfycence*,[1] written presumably in 1519-20, exercises this allegorical type of character presentation to the full extent. Just like in medieval morality drama, in this play negative allegorical figures (Fansy, Folly, Counterfeit Countenaunce, Crafty Conveyaunce, Clokyd Colusyon, Courtly Abusyon) and positive ones (Wealthful Felicity, Measure, Perseveraunce and others) are juxtaposed. The two forces – those of good and of evil – are fighting for the affection of Magnificence – an adolescent prince who is to choose his life priorities. The majority of negative characters in J. Skelton's play are united by the same idea – that of deceit or falsehood. The rogues plot various tricks and intrigues, gang up, set traps for Magnificence – all in all, they do their best to win the young and naïve sovereign's trust and then deceive him by bringing the prince to ruin. In this paper I will focus upon some of the means of creating allegorical characters in John Skelton's play *Magnyfycence.* I will also ponder over the peculiarities of allegorical imagery in early Tudor drama, by taking into account the nature of allegory in sixteenth-century plays, which were particularly apt to reflect social and political events in the country and to take up the political challenges of the day.

It has become a stumbling block in early Tudor drama studies to work out the date at which the interlude *Magnyfycence* was written and performed for the first time at one of London's great halls.[2] Critics usually claim that Skelton's play was really a topical one. They, therefore, feel tempted to draw parallels

between the contents of this piece of drama and those political events that took place in England during King Henry VIII's reign. Some researchers say that the play may be a keen satire on the political activity of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, an influential statesman of the Machiavellian type that had an unprecedented impact on the King for quite a long period of time (Wilson 13). Others associate the plot of the play with the extravagant but pointless expenses characteristic of Henry VIII's international politics in 1514-1516. In these years the King of England appropriated vast resources to help maintain the military forces of Rome and the Army of the Swiss Cantons that were supposed to fight France on behalf of England.[3]

The contemporary British researcher Greg Walker, in his profound work dedicated to the peculiarities of the development of theatrical practices at the court of Henry VIII, denies both opinions. As this scholar points out, our idea of Wolsey's personality has little in common with the image of those rogues representing the evil forces in the play by J. Skelton. The supposed prototype does not bear much resemblance with the fictitious minions that appear to be passionate Francophiles – their clothes, manners, and speech all being French-styled.

As far as the satire on Henry's political activity is concerned, it is highly unlikely that John Skelton might want to run the risk of spoiling his relations with the monarch by criticizing his policy. Skelton used to be Henry's tutor till 1502 and he obviously had warm feelings for Henry as an adult. Besides, soon after Henry ascended the throne the poet-laureate was granted the post of rector of Diss in Norfolk, so he had to quit the court and his duties of court entertainer that he enjoyed so much. With his interlude he obviously wanted to attract the King's attention and possibly restore his position as court poet. The play, written with such a purpose in mind, was to demonstrate devotion and loyalty for both the King and his policy.

Since there is no denying the fact that the interlude does bear some considerable political implications, G. Walker substantiates another version of which real-life events make up the basis of the play's plot scheme. According to this scholar, the negative characters of the interlude *Magnyfycence* are modelled after the members of the Privy Council which was with much scandal dismissed on a charge of embezzlement in May 1519.[4] The Council's functions were transmitted to another institution, its treasury was reorganized and the councillors themselves were expelled. It is worth mentioning that, while holding this prestigious position at Henry's court, the members of the Council were at the same time English emissaries at the court of the ruler of France (Francis I). Their French attire, etiquette, and habits, together with their arrogance and contempt for other courtiers in England, and their dispraise for English ladies and gentlemen (as the chronicler Edward Hall puts it) (Walker 67) aroused a storm of indignation among Henry's subjects. There was enormous resonance concerning the issue of mean advisors usurping the authority in the country. As a result Henry had to change his attitude towards the Privy Council and its activity. This decision made him the centre of the political scandal known as "the expulsion of the minions of 1519". It had its positive effect too as it demonstrated the King's readiness to correct his own faults and stay faithful to the interests of his people and his country. A similar conclusion is drawn from J. Skelton's interlude *Magnyfycence*, which can be interpreted as a kind of political training[5] given to a young sovereign in order to teach him how to run his own household and thus the state in general.

The main idea of the play can be expressed in the following way: in all his activities (especially those of state significance) a man should be ruled by measure. Immediately after Measure is driven away from Magnyfycence's place and Liberty becomes free of any restrictions or control, the protagonist's life turns into ruin. In the final episodes of the play Magnyfycence is saved by Good

Hope, Redresse, that is summoned to correct the things that are "out of joynte" (Skelton 404, line 2412), Sad Cyrcumspeccyon and Perseverance.

It may be of interest to mention that during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I – that is, in the epoch of highest development in the English Renaissance – English humanists thought magnificence to be the major personal virtue (Jones 189-190). Following Aristotle, they meant under magnificence not just the ability to introduce oneself, or luxurious and glamorous apparel and exquisite etiquette. Elizabethans mainly associated magnificence with spiritual magnanimity, great-heartedness, that is, the best qualities man can be endowed with by nature.

Obviously, this idea of Magnificence as an ethic and moral category got into the focus of active discussions already at the court of Henry VIII, in the intellectual community of English humanists under the leadership of Thomas More. It is, therefore, not accidental that an associate link exists between the King of England and the figure of the prince in J. Skelton's play – that of Magnyfycence. This metaphoric correspondence charges the interlude with considerable didactic and philosophical meaning.

The interlude *Magnyfycence* is also a vivid example of the stage realization of a number of early Tudor theatre techniques. The play illustrates the thesis about the specific playing strategies provided by the particular spatial organization of the great Tudor hall that was the setting of many interludes in those days. The characters' status or position at Magnyfycence's house is emphasized through their location in the hall – farther from or closer to the "high table" at the upper end of the hall, that is the master's sector. For instance, when Measure falls in the Prince's disfavour, he dares not approach Magnyfycence or talk to him. Clokyd Colusyon offers his help as a reconciling intermediary between Measure and Magnyfycence but actually vilifies Measure even more, accusing the latter of bribery.

Cloked Colusyon

[To Measure] Stande styll here, and ye shall se

That for your sake I wyll fall on my kne (Skelton 388, lines 1627-28)[6]

[…]

[To Magnyfycence] Yet, syr, reserved your better advysement,

It were better he spake with you or he wente,

That he knowe not but that I have supplyed

All I can his matter for to spede.

Magnyfycence

Nowe by your trouthe, gave he you not a brybe?

Cloked Colusyon

Yes, with his hand I made hym to subscrybe

A byll of recorde for an annuall rent (Skelton 388-389, lines 1659-1665).

Besides that, the peculiar performance parameters enabled simultaneous acting at different sides of the Hall. In some scenes of the interlude (e.g. when Magnyfycence reads the forged letter – line 325 and further) there are two acting areas, with characters behaving as if they did not see each other or as if one group of actors were unconscious of the other's presence. At the time, the hall was lit with torches at night and one torch gave just enough light to see a small group of actors within its radius. Since the hall was big enough, at least two playing centres could be organized in it. As the authors of the monograph *History of Drama in English*, edited by T. W. Craik, point out, the actors in *Magnyfycence* would go on playing their roles even when they were outside the performance nucleus (Craik 89).

Just like in other interludes written for the Tudor Hall, in *Magnyfycence* players' entrances are announced some seconds before the actors join in with the playing. This is also connected with the spatial organization of the great hall. Ordinary spectators grouped around the screen doors at the low end and had to

back out of the way to let a new character come into the hall. Thus, an active involvement of the audience with the playing area as well as the reflection of a current social and political event in the play is made manifest in J. Skelton's *Magnyfycence*.

The Tudor auditorium treated theatrical presentation as the most powerful means of mass communication. Its role could probably be paralleled with the impact of mass media and the Internet in today's world, though it was mainly located within the confines of one community. Every more or less significant event from the political, economical or cultural spheres of social life came to the playwrights' attention. The audience in the Tudor hall mirrored the English community of that period, with the whole variety of interests and aspirations of the main social groups presented there. Theatrical ventures reflected widely on political and ideological tendencies of the epoch, making topical use of current events and thus drawing links between dramatic presentation and the everyday world. Many of the Tudor interludes can be used as bright illustrations of the strong political involvement of English household drama of the period. Tudor hall performance was an effective means of information exchange in both horizontal and vertical formats, with the highest as well as the lowest levels of the social hierarchy involved in the communication process provided by drama. The high topicality of household staging and its leading role in organizing the communication process in society will be inherited by the later Elizabethan drama.

The use of allegorical characters for the conveyance of topical messages seems to be of great interest in the process of analysing Skelton's interlude. This use of allegory as a means of character stage presentation by authors of early Tudor moralities and interludes (like John Bale,[7] John Rastell, Henry Medwall, Nicolas Udall and others) was not merely occasional. It is not incidental either that negative characters were the most vivid allegorical figures in plays. This

tradition goes back to medieval theatre practices, morality plays in particular, in which the central conflict occurred in the sphere of the ethic and moral beliefs of man. The character named Mankind, Everyone, Humanity, Youth, etc., came out as the protagonist in the play, with the virtues and vices of human nature fighting vigorously for his soul. Every morality viewer was to associate himself with the protagonist during the play and, just like him, was to feel attracted to the vices – Sloth, Sensual Appetite, Pride, Vanity and other tempting and seducing allegories of morality plays. Without this fascination with the vices it would be difficult to induce the viewer to follow the major character of the play on his way to moral fall and the destruction of personality and, in such a way, to attain the principal – didactic – objective of the morality. This was meant to demonstrate what awaited a man who could not resist sins or vices in his life. In the final scenes of a morality play the character's repentance gives him the hope that his soul may be saved, so he applies for help to the virtues that seemed so boring and tedious to him at the beginning.

All negative characters in the interlude *Magnyfycence* are light-hearted, self-confident dandies (to use an anachronism) wearing fashionable clothes and quite sure of their irresistible charm. This is true of Counterfeit Countenuance in particular, whose name means "false, pretended look". As this hypocrite declares, "The world is full of my folly" (Skelton 361, line 411). This allegorical figure enters the play with a long monologue in which he says that everyone pretends to be somebody else, which is why our life consists of counterfeits: counterfeit preaching, counterfeit conscience, counterfeit sadness, counterfeit holiness, counterfeit reason, counterfeit wisdom etc.

> Counterfet prechynge, and byleve the contrary;
> Counterfet conscyence, pevysse pope holy;
> Counterfet sadness, with delynge full madly;

Counterfet holynes is called ypocrysy;

Counterfet reason is not worth a flye;

Conterfet wysdome and workes of foly;

Counterfet Countenaunce every man dothe occupy (Skelton 362, lines 466-472).

The other rogues are Crafty Conveyaunce, the personification of mean lie, a villain, good at distorting information for his own benefit, and Clokyd Colusyon (Cloaked Collusion) – an intriguer and conspirer, a courtier in gaily garment beneath the priest's cloak, the disguise he wears throughout the play ("What is this that he wereth? A cope?") (Skelton 365, line 601). This character uses French words and expressions quite freely in his speech, e.g.: "De que pays estevous?" (Skelton 368, line 748) or "Say vous Chaunter 'Venter tredawce'" (Skelton 368, line 750). Both Crafty Countenaunce and Clokyd Colusyon seem to be no less arrogant and haughty than their companion Counterfeit Countenance.

Another specific allegorical figure in the interlude is Courtly Abusyon – the embodiment of courtly abuses. Only Fansy and Folly in this company of rogues appear to be more or less typical characters, familiar to the early Tudor play viewer whatever social stratum he might belong to or however aware of the state policy he might be. Fansy, whose essence is caprice or wilfulness, wears the fool's costume though he tries to conceal it under a courtier's gorgeous apparel, disguising himself as Largess. However, as is mentioned in the footnotes, the role was to be played by a dwarf or a boy (Skelton 351). Thus the character's outward appearance contradicted his ambitious self-naming and left no doubt as to his true nature.

Folly makes no attempt to conceal his true self or his costume of a professional fool. The bauble he holds in his arms also contributes to his image of a jester. In this way, the playwright makes use of the negative characters'

costumes to reveal their inner self and point out to their playing tricks on Magnyfycence.

Due to his insidious counsellors' advice Magnyfycence finds himself on the verge of despair, going bankrupt both in the moral and financial sense. As bright evidence of his viciousness, there is a long monologue which the prince utters after Felycyte, Lyberty and Fansy leave him alone:

> […]
>
> For I am prynce perlesse provyd of port   *proved to be peerless, state*
>
> Bathyd with blysse, embracyd with comforte.   *surrounded by*
>
> Syrus, that solemn syar was of Babylon   *grand lord*
>
> That Israel releysyd of theyr captyvyte,
>
> For al his pompe, for all his ryalltrone,
>
> He may not be comparyd unto me   (Skelton 385, lines 1469-1512).

Magnyfycence compares himself with the great men of the past epochs and the heroes of antique myths as well. In his arrogant wilfulness he rates himself higher than Alexander the Great or Julius Cesar, hailing that neither Hercules nor Theseus could compete with him: "My name is Magnyfycence, man most of myght" (Skelton 385, line 1491). This speech appears to be a means of character stereotyping at the moment of his life when he stayed without Measure. In his monologue the Prince sounds similar to Herod, Pilate and other tyrants from mystery cycles.[8]

In this way, J. Skelton's play seems to present a typical medieval plot about the worldly temptations of a governor that is God's deputy on Earth. At the moment of Magnyfycence's fall (not just in the figurative sense of the word), when he is beaten down and robbed of his property and fine clothing, Adversity and Poverty appear in front of him. Poverty offers a hard rag for Magnyfycence to lie on and suggests that the prince should get accustomed to hunger and cold

as well as to wrapping himself in a blanket instead of wearing rich array.[9] Magnyfycence gets his clothes back in the final scenes of the play no sooner than he goes through the purge and redeems his errors.[10]

At the same time one cannot but notice the crucial difference in the nature of the allegory as it makes itself evident in the traditional characters of the medieval morality play and those allegorical vices (at least four of them) in J. Skelton's interlude. In the first case, the means of creating stage allegories, such as clothes and demeanour, manners and language, contribute to the character's stereotyping, making him the bearer of some essential quality through which he is made familiar for the play viewers and easily recognized by them. It is a universalized type. On the other hand, the figures of rogues in the interlude *Magnyfycence* are endowed with personal features that were characteristic of some real prototypes at the court of the king of England.[11] Thus these allegorical figures are quite individualized and can be deciphered to the full extent only by those viewers who are well aware of the political context at the Henrician court.

The allegories of Fansy and Folly turn out to be a kind of matrix for constructing the other four negative characters. In each of the four cases this allegorical content acquires some individual features and so refers not to a generalized bearer of this quality but to a certain individual. In this way, Counterfeit Countenaunce, Crafty Conveyaunce, Clokyd Colusyon and Courtly Abusyon in the interlude combine the allegorical stereotype with the individual traits of Henry VIII's courtiers.[12] Considering the negative allegorical figures it is worth mentioning that it would be much easier to distinguish the four rogues while watching the interlude than while reading Skelton's text. And this does not happen only because drama is essentially a visual medium or because dramatic characters are given a potent visual dimension only when reinforced by the physical actions of the players. As a matter of fact, the negative characters in *Magnyfycence* no longer say anything about their historical prototypes to us.

As far as the allegorical principle of character representation in medieval morality plays is concerned, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), by C. S. Lewis, remains the most frequently quoted work in this research area. Showing the difference between allegory and symbol, the scholar points out that the first one is founded on giving material shape to immaterial substances – like passions or thoughts –, while symbolic essence is acquired as a result of the opposite operation, that is, of providing the material with some immaterial content. At the same time C. S. Lewis defines symbolism "as a mode of thought, and allegory as a mode of expression" (48).

While developing the concept of this prominent scholar, many of his followers have tried to specify the essence of the medieval allegory. The contemporary American researcher N. Crohn Schmitt, for instance, accentuates the idea that the medieval person did not differentiate clearly between the material and non-material. The phenomena he could not see or touch seemed to him to be no less real than those that surrounded him in his empirical life (Schmitt 306-307). This observation leads N. Crohn Schmitt to the conclusion that, in a medieval viewer's mind, morality allegories associated with reality to a much greater extent than we can nowadays imagine it (Schmitt 313). This point of view seems rather convincing, as the abstract substance is evidently manifested through its concrete accidents in the material world. In a similar manner, the idea of falsehood and pretence in J. Skelton's interlude *Magnyfycence* is revealed in the characters of the rogues. As it has been mentioned above, these constructs get filled with vital energy not just as a result of some abstract idea being embodied in the image of a human being but, more than that, in acquiring individual features of real prototypes. And stage devices are of essential significance in bringing these characters to life. No reading or interpretation can replace the dramatic presentation of a piece of drama. The

only way of conceiving the essence of allegorical theatre or of rediscovering its charm and meaningfulness lies in its performance.

In the context of the creative search of early Tudor dramatists, John Skelton's intention of moulding negative allegories on the basis of some moral or philosophical category while, at the same time, taking into account the personal traits of its individual bearers seems rather innovative. This device evidently conforms to the purpose of the play. *Magnyfycence* focuses on the problems of the social and political life of the country rather than on the questions of the moral and ethical choice of an individual. These problems are revealed in terms of a specific household that turns out to be an analogue of the royal court in the play. Consequently, the action in John Skelton's interlude is based on playing out various protocol aspects of the public audience at the sovereign's place, with the morality principle of scenes that alternate virtues and vices left behind. As for the characters of rogues, who are the prince's transient companions in the play, they demonstrate the capacity of the medieval dramatic allegory to mutate in the process of acquiring individual characteristics and distinctly personal traits.

Notes

[1] All quotations of John Skelton's play are from Skelton 351-407.

[2] As Paula Neuss suggests, the play might have been first performed at Northumberland's household or at one of the London guild-halls, such as the livery company the Merchant Taylors' (qtd. in Westfall 120).

[3] For further historical detail, see Walker 62-63.

[4] According to Greg Walker, the members of the Privy Chamber were Edward Neville, Arthur Pole, Nicholas Carew, Francis Bryan, Henry Norris and William Coffin (66).

[5] As far as the genre of *Magnyfycence* is concerned a number of definitions are applied to the play. Charles Whitworth refers it to the sub-genre of political moralities (58). Louis Wright calls *Magnyfycence* a political satire (7). Peter Happé notes that *Magnyfycence* stands at the beginning of such literary and theatrical genres as the political interlude (72).

[6] In *Magnyfycence* rhyme royal (ababbcc) is reserved mainly for the Virtues and for Magnificence. For Vice's remarks lighter forms of verse are used, like the 4-stressed couplet or the dancing 2-stressed line. (For more information about the play's poetic language and skeltonics in general see Wilson 13-14; Happé 72-79). Skelton himself characterised his verse in the following way:

For though my ryme be ragged

Tattered and jagged,

Rudely rayne-beaten,

Rusty and mothe-eaten,

Yf Ye take well therwith

It hath in it some pyth. (qtd. in Drabble910)

[7] Katherine Steele Brokaw considers "allegorical-turned-historical figures" in John Bale's history play *King Johan* (334).

[8] This is mentioned in the footnotes by the editor of the play. See Skelton 385.

[9] Ye[a], syr, nowe must ye lerne to lye harde,

That was wonte to lye on fetherbeddes of downe.

Nowe must your fete lye hyer than your crowne.

Where you were wonte to have cawdels for your hede,   *warm drinks*

Now must you monchemamockes and lumpes of brede.   *munch on scraps*

And where you had chaunges of ryche array,

Nowe lap you in a coverlet, full fayne what you may. (Skelton 396, lines 2003-2017)

[10] Nowe shall ye be renewyd with solace:

Take nowe upon you this abylyment,   *garment*

And to that I say gyve good advysement.   *attention* (Skelton 404, lines 2402-2404).

[11] Skelton's allegorical method can also be observed in other works by the early Tudor playwright. See, for instance, The *Bouge of Courte* (1498) where such allegories as Favell, Disdayne, Suspycyon, Ryotte and others come out as the characters of the poem. The means of creating allegorical characters in dramatic and non-dramatic genre forms by the same author can be a topic of an interesting comparative study.

[12] Whether or not this was Skelton's intention, it seems almost impossible to clearly relate every Vice character with some real individual belonging to the royal court. Peter Happé defines the allegorical method applied here by Skelton as "the strategy of deliberate indirectness" (79) or "indirect allegorical approach" (90). The scholar claims that this method allows the playwright "to keep the view 'general' rather than particular" with the effect of "raising principles rather than being simply a localized satire" (80).

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