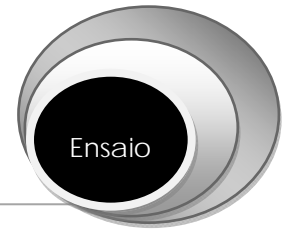


The Value of Science in John Rastell's play *Four Elements* (c.1518)



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Thomas More's contemporary and close companion, John Rastell (?1475-1536) was born in Coventry, famous for the medieval mystery processions that were an important part of local festivities and special events. It was obviously there, at his native place, that Rastell first felt a liking for drama that he developed later on, during his life in the English capital. The playwright's London period was the time when all his versatile talents burgeoned, making him one of the most outstanding English humanists of that epoch. He made a figure in the social and cultural life of the country. However, his engagement with persons endowed with power made his participation in their political enterprises quite risky.

John Rastell became a relative of More's by marrying his sister Elizabeth. One of Rastell's sons, William, proceeded with his father's printing business during 1530-1534, while John inherited from his parent an ardent inclination for far sea voyages.

Loyalty to the ideas of the Reformation did not save John Rastell from the king's disfavour. He died in prison in June 1536, where he was sent to for disobeying the royal decision about the dispute concerning Rastell's ownership of the lands that had been granted to him for his service in the 1510s.

J. Rastell was a man of diverse interests. His achievements in different fields of professional activity prove that he was a gifted person, apt to learn. Following in his father's footsteps John Rastell studied law at the Inns of Court in London and became a renowned lawyer. In the years 1506-1509 he took the position of coroner in Coventry and headed the Court of Statute Merchants, just like his father did several years before him.

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Around 1510, J. Rastell's printing business launched a publishing house, and a shop opened in one of the premises not far from St Paul's Cathedral in London. *The Life of Pico della Mirandola* by Thomas More was the first book published by Rastell's company. His next projects were even more ambitious. They include the first English Dictionary of Law terms, a Books of Statutes, a Record of the Court Proceedings that involved the interests of the royal family, a number of text-books in Law, used by several generations of English students, and many others.

It was at J. Rastell's publishing house that the works of the English early Tudor playwrights John Skelton, Henry Medwall and John Heywood were published for the first time. In this way, the plays passed the borderline from "ephemeral" oral existence to the form of the printed text (Axton 3), which made them accessible for a wider reading audience. J. Rastell's choice of dramatic works for publication was neither accidental nor spontaneous. Inspired by the faith in the instructive power of the printed word Rastell preferred those texts that correlated with his ideals and conveyed his civil position.¹ The English humanist found his mission in placing into the foundation of the social order the principles of rationalism and justice. And spreading ideas throughout the community was to help in achieving this goal.

John Rastell himself had to learn different sciences to do various jobs during his eventful life. While in the service of Henry VIII's privy councillor Sir Edward Bellknap, he was responsible for the transportation of English artillery and other heavy equipment in the war with France in the years 1512-1514. Several years later Rastell got greatly interested in overseas voyage. It cost him much time and effort to become professionally trained in sailing. According to John Rastell's biographers,² in 1517 as the master of the chartered ship "Barbara" he started a risky trade expedition to the New World. The whole enterprise, however, proved to be a failure, which is why it did not last long and the ship did not get farther than Ireland. Still it was not totally worthless. Rastell made use of the knowledge he acquired during the preparation process in his work on the interlude *Four Elements* (Axton 6).

During his multi-faceted professional life J. Rastell had a chance to develop his engineering skills as well. The royal court charged him with managing some construction projects, like roof building and decoration works on the ceilings of great banquet halls (Axton 7). Rastell's passion for the theatre might have helped him in 1522 to get an order from the London city treasury according to which he was to erect a pageant close to St Paul's on the occasion of the two monarchs' (the Emperor Charles V and the King Henry VIII) visit to the Cathedral. As Rastell's contemporaries observe, the pageant decorations representing Eden with trees, flowers and herbs, silver streams and forested mountains, stars and angels, looked a true masterpiece of mechanics (Axton 7). It wasn't the only case of J. Rastell's participation in royal theatre presentations. In the summer of 1527 he carried out the staging of the pageant *The Father of Heaven* to entertain the French ambassadors. The decorations for this pageant were erected not on the traditional moving platform but within doors of a small banquet hall. Its ceiling was painted with stars and constellations, looking like an astrological map, while the floor represented the Earth surrounded with seas (Axton 8). The dialogue of *Love and Riches* was composed by Rastell on the same occasion.

Rastell's experience and skills in engineering probably came in useful when his own house was being built in Finsbury Fields in London (the works began in 1524). It is noteworthy that besides all other things the house was equipped with a stage for home performances, which appears to be in accordance with Rastell's lifelong passion for the theatre. This love for dramatic presentations was probably shared by all the household members. It is known that Mrs Rastell and the maids used to sew costumes for the indoor plays. Those costumes were famous enough among Melpomene servants and even used to be hired by other household theatres in London. The loss of the costumes due to Henry Walton's inadvertency led to a law suit brought by Rastell against him (Axton 7). This serious attitude towards a cherished hobby contributed to maintaining the high reputation of this wardrobe;

garments and other stage properties located at J. Rastell's place helped out many early Tudor performers (Wilson 23).

The 1520s turned out to be a truly prolific period in J. Rastell's publishing business. For historians of English drama, the collection of three plays (*Four Elements*, *Calisto and Melebea*, *Gentleness and Nobility*) published by John Rastell is of special interest. The first play in the volume is believed to be one of J. Rastell's works while the authorship of the other two pieces is more ambiguous. Besides drama, the second decade of the sixteenth century was also marked by the republication of Dictionaries and Collections of Law documents as well as the publication of such books as *A Hundred Merry Tales*, *Book of a Hundred Riddles*, *Twelve Merry Jestes of widow Edyth*, the lost play *Christmas or Good Order*, the treatise *The Boke of Purgatory*, the large illustrated edition of the history of entertainment entitled *The Pastime of People*, and others.

As was mentioned above, the play *The Nature of the Four Elements* is traditionally attributed to John Rastell himself. Some scholars assume that J. Rastell might also be the author of the interlude *Gentleness and Nobility*, which was included in the same volume. To prove this assumption F. S. Boas refers to the obvious similarity of ideas and the form of their presentation in Rastell's *The Boke of Purgatory* and *The Pastime of People*, on the one hand, and the play *Gentleness and Nobility*, on the other hand. Boas observes that these ideas were highly progressive for Rastell's time, such as, for instance, the belief that judges and other law officials that occupied positions of extraordinary responsibility were to fulfil their functions only for a short term of several years, after which they were to be deposed. This idea appears both in the play and in *The Pastime of People*. As for *The Boke of Purgatory*, it too has some ideas in common with the play. F. S. Boas, for instance, refers to the thought that a man should be ruled in life by his natural rationality and not by the prescriptions of the Bible (Boas 7-8).

The play entitled *A New Interlude and a Merry of the Nature of the Four Elements*, of which only one half is preserved, is considered to have been written in 1518 (Axton 7). The play actually presents the exhortation for a man to study that Rastell not only actively propagated all his life, doing every possible thing to spread knowledge among his contemporaries, but which he himself made the basic principle of his professional activity. The allegorical characters that conduct the idea of the significance of learning in *Four Elements* are Nature, Studious Desire and Experience. They are opposed to Sensual Appetite and Ignorance, with Humanity as the play's central character. So, as one sees, the dramatic structure of Rastell's *Four Elements* is typical for the morality play, i.e. it represents two opposite forces – usually the embodiment of good and evil – that struggle for their influence upon the character that personifies mankind.

It is only to be expected that Natura Naturata is made the central virtue figure in Rastell's play, thus taking the place of the moral virtues that played this role in medieval drama. As a teacher of Humanyte, Natura Naturata charges her subordinates – Studious Desire and Experience – with the task of instructing the student. Thus he is delivered lessons in Physics and Geography; he gets an idea of the Earth's rotundity, of the distance from England to Jerusalem, of life across the ocean and so on, until the opponents of learning interfere into the planned course of events. Negative allegoric characters are an indispensable part of any medieval morality play. They provide the performance with action, eventfulness, making it essentially dramatic, while the play of positive characters is usually limited to their verbal presentations. In such a way the conflict, necessary for the development of the dramatic situation, is brought in by the forces of vice.

Besides that, the plot pattern of *Four Elements* is archetypical enough, too, and it was certainly well known to early Tudor audiences. The play starts with Nature and other virtue figures admonishing Humanity and advising him on the path of good; then temptation follows with evil and we consequently see

Humanity's moral breakdown, which is followed by the central character's acknowledgement of his guilt and his repentance at the end.

In this way, the main dramatic device that guarantees the conflict development in the morality play is the alternation of episodes with positive and negative characters. This very structure can be observed in J. Rastell's play. In *Four Elements* one sees the alternation of serious material rendered by Nature (in a lecture in Physics), Studious Desire (in a lecture in Geography), and Experience (a talk about travelling to distant lands, a discussion about the shape of the Earth), with entertaining scenes in which Humanity enjoys the merry revellers' company. In these episodes the allegorical figures of Sensual Appetite and Ignorance are joined by the Taverner. As to Humanity, he succumbs to such temptations as delicious food and drinks, women, dancing, singing and recreation in a merry company.

At the same time, despite all the traditional features of the morality mentioned above, J. Rastell's play obviously belongs to the drama of the transitional type. Its message as well as the way the major characters are treated make *Four Elements* stand out from the traditional genre framework. These poetical elements of the play need further detailed investigation.

As to the play's message, it is indeed humanistic in its essence. The playwright's belief in the necessity of education, the topicality of the propensity to learn, the importance of disseminating knowledge about the world are conveyed by the characters that represent good in *Four Elements*. For instance, in the first lecture that is delivered by Nature it is stated that the thirst for learning must be characteristic of man, as he is endowed with intelligence and thus takes the dominant position in the natural hierarchy (Rastell ll.211-12).³ In this very lecture Nature tells Humanity about four elements that are primordial: "These elements of them selfe so single be / Unto dyvers formys can not be devydyd, / Yet they commix togyder dayly ye see, / Wherof dyvers kyndes of thyngys be ingenderyd..." (ll.176-79). That is why, in Nature's opinion, the first thing that Humanity must learn is the

qualities of water, air, fire and earth. After that, Nature passes to the explanation of such natural phenomena as clouds, mist, hail, snow, rain, etc (ll.225-80). The first lecture being over, Nature's place is taken by Studious Desire, who dwells upon the shape of the Earth, arguing that it is round. The lecturer's arguments do not seem to be convincing enough for Humanity, which is why Studious Desire invites Experience to talk to the student and discuss this disputable question with him.

In this way, from the very beginning of the play it is made clear that the two main fields of knowledge that will be under discussion in *Four Elements* are natural philosophy and cosmology. This can probably be explained by the general interest in these sciences that was typical of a Renaissance man. Besides, the playwright's biographical context might also have determined his choice of the play's subject matter. As was mentioned above, in 1517 Rastell was getting prepared to carry out a sea voyage to America that proved to be a failure. His resentment at the accomplices who deceived his expectations and set up the crew against both the head of the expedition and the venture itself is conveyed in the monologue of Experience. This character informs Humanity of a distant and vast land that can be found after sailing across the ocean. A lot of his countrymen have already travelled there but not all of them were successful. Then Experience recalls a recent inglorious expedition, making the venturers responsible for the abandonment of the voyage: "But they that were the ventures / Have cause to curse their maryners, / Fals of promys and dissemblers, / That falsy them betrayed, / Whiche wolde take no paine to saile farther / Than their owne lyst and pleasure / Wherefore that vyage and dyvers other / Such kaytyffes have destroyed" (ll.758-65).

Rastell makes use of Experience's remarks to relay his knowledge of natural philosophy and cosmology. Besides the already mentioned discussion on the shape of the Earth, the playwright tackles such questions as America's natural resources, aborigines' lifestyle, continents and regions of the Earth that have not yet been studied enough, etc. As it is, talking about residents of the North American

continent Experience mentions their paganism and emphasizes the Christians' educational mission in the newly discovered land: "And what a great meritoryouse dede / It were to have the people instructed / To lyve more yertuously... But yet, in stede of God almyght, / They honour the sone for his great light, / For that doth them great pleasure" (ll.779-81, 788-90).

The same passage reveals Rastell's patriotic attitude. The playwright proclaims voyages to distant lands to be "an honorable thyng" because they contribute to the extension of the English dominion in the world and thus bring profit to the king and the country ("And also what an honorable thyng, / Bothe to the realme and to the kynge, / To have had his domynyon extendynge / There into so farre a grounde..." (ll.772-75)). For Rastell, King Henry VII seems to be that ideal monarch who was aware of the importance for the state and the great significance of overseas voyage. The playwright argues that those statesmen who deny the advantages of exploring new lands will have to give up their privileges to the French or other nations that have already succeeded in establishing profitable trade links with the American continent (ll.812-14).

In this way, according to J. Rastell, an educated man, one equipped with all kinds of knowledge, can serve his country in a better way than an unlearned person. In this context it is worth mentioning that at the very beginning of *Four Elements* the English humanist defines clearly enough the objective of learning: it must bring benefit to the commonwealth. He praises the learning aimed at exploring the world and the physical reality that surrounds us, educating compatriots and inhabitants of other lands so that they could have an idea of their rights and duties, reforming society to the advantage of every one of its members. J. Rastell deprecates learning for personal enrichment, saying that in this case a rich man's conscience would be evil. Only a man who, on becoming educated, works for his neighbour's good deserves respect from the community and God's grace bestowed to him: "A great wytted man may sone be enrychyd, / That laboryth and studyeth for ryches only, /

But how shall his conscyens than be discharged? / For all clerks afferme that that man presysely, / Whiche studyeth for his owne welth pryncypally, / Of God shall deserve but lytyll rewarde" (ll.78-83).

It is not only the play's ideology that makes it different from the traditional morality sample. The way the author of *Four Elements* interprets the drama's characters is also quite unusual in the early Tudor dramatic context. While clerical drama of the Middle Ages mainly relied upon virtues and vices as the opposite forces that struggled for man's soul, in J. Rastell's play one of the antagonistic sides is represented by allegorical figures of man's mental qualities which can be acquired by him in the process of learning and work. Such a character as Studious Desire is to be given special attention in this regard. This instructor of Humanity stimulates his student's interest in studies by suggesting disputable topics for discussion (like the shape of the Earth (l.381)) or by inviting Experience to share his ideas and observations with Humanity, for instance in order to exemplify the thesis regarding the infinite variety of habits and modes of life on the planet (ll.672-80). Experience, in his turn, mentions the necessity of a systematic and professional approach to the exploration of the world. To be a successful researcher one is to use special devices and instruments (a map, a globe, a telescope, etc) in his work. Incidentally, as R. Axton assumes, the main stage property of Rastell's play might have been a huge terrestrial globe (6).

Though Sensual Appetite seems to be a rather typical character of morality drama (see, for example, H. Medwall's play *Nature* in which the allegorical figure of Sensuality leads the company of Vices), in *Four Elements* it is antagonistic to an acquirable intellectual capacity, that of Studious Desire. At the same time it keeps company with Ignorance, which is opposed to Experience. So, in his interlude, Rastell opposes Sensuality not to Reason as such (just as H. Medwall does in the play mentioned above), but to a definite mode of rational activity, i.e. to learning. In this way, one observes the particularization of the contents attributed to the main

positive character in Medwall's drama. J. Rastell emphasizes the importance of learning since for him it is only reasonable that a man should study. It is every rational man's need, according to the playwright, to understand simple natural things, those physical phenomena that he sees in his everyday life. Only then can a person get educated in lofty matters: he gets to know God and other "hye creaturis celestyall", "thyngys invysyble and vvysyble" (ll.114-16). This imperative of John Rastell's can obviously be perceived as an appeal to his contemporaries that they promote the development of secular sciences – the ones that are not focused on interpreting the Holy Scripture, the study of which was really at the foreground of education in medieval Europe.

The playwright's recognition of the significant role of translation as well as his emphasis on the importance of using the vernacular in the process of learning also seem to be quite in tune with the humanistic ideas of the new epoch. It is the Messenger who, in the introductory part of the interlude *Four Elements*, proclaims the English language at the present stage of its development to be appropriate and sufficient enough "to expound any hard sentence evydent" in it (l.26). So, he induces scientists to use the native language in their research. Besides, there are inquiring wits and noble men "of meane estate" (l.30) who can read no other language but English, and for whom the best works of foreign authors (Greeks and Romans first of all) are to be translated into their mother tongue: "Than yf connyng late bokys wee translate / Into englyshe, wel correct and approbate, / All subtell sciens in englyshe might be lernyd / As well as other people in their owne tonges dyd" (ll.32-5).

The negative characters of Rastell's play deserve closer attention. It is noteworthy how Humanity makes the acquaintance of Sensual Appetite right after the lecture in Geography. Sensual Appetite enters the action so rapidly that he knocks down Studious Desire, who is about to leave. In this way, the allegoric figure's appearance is in itself a manifestation of its antagonism to the values

propagated by Nature and her company. Sensual Appetite verbalizes immediately his attitude towards serious matters like praying or studying: "For I se well it is but a foly / For to have a sad mynd" (ll.420-21). He declares his hatred to Studious Desire who has "a shrewde smell", as he puts it (l.439). At the same time he seems to be dead sure of the extreme need for him in every person's life.

When Sensual Appetite invites Humanity to have a rest at a good tavern and Humanity accepts the offer, feeling much weary after his classes, the Taverner enters the scene with the words "Beware, syrs, now let me have room" (l.556). This mode of the character's appearance means that Rastell's interlude was probably written to be performed in a banquet hall during some festivity. In these cases, interludes were played in the middle of the hall, with the viewers surrounding the space of the dramatic action and actors sometimes having to cry out such warning cues to make the audience step aside and give them way.⁴

The figure of the Taverner as a representative of the commons appears to be quite relevant as part of the interlude's entertainment. It is well known that characters of this kind played major roles in the popular literature of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance. The Taverner from J. Rastell's interlude *Four Elements*, similarly to characters from numerous jests and farces, mocks women, thus resonating with the topic of misogyny that was very popular in medieval and Renaissance town literature. For instance, when answering Sensual Appetite's pseudoscientific observation on poultry being light for digestion because it flies, the Taverner says that he knows lighter meat than that. It is a woman's tongue since nothing it says has any weight or sense (ll.600-01).⁵ It is noteworthy that the Taverner's attitude to his clients depends upon the sum of money they are going to spend at his tavern. In this way, the playwright satirizes taverners' ill-breeding and rudeness with ordinary people and their plebeian kowtowing with the rich at the same time.

The third negative character, Ignorance, is very much like Sensual Appetite in his contempt for science and exaggeration of his power (greater than that of the kings of England or France (ll.1148-49)). Just like Sensual Appetite, this allegorical character believes that learning is sad and boring while man's life should be merry and joyful (ll.1223-28). And he does his best to provide the dramatic plot with merry insertions. Is this perforating juxtaposition of serious and entertaining episodes in *Four Elements* symmetrical, or does one of the two modes prevail in the play? While looking for the reply to this question we may come closer to stating the ideology and generic strategy of J. Rastell's play.

As L. B. Wright observes regarding the genre of *Four Elements*, it is one of "the most curious" specimens of the interlude representing a dramatized lesson in science, while in many interludes of that epoch the entertaining impetus dominates over the didactic component (6). So, the scholar emphasizes the power of lecturing in Rastell's play. *Four Elements* is usually referred to as "scientific instruction" by Tudor drama researchers and the play is often used to illustrate the thematic diversity of the Tudor interlude. But there are scholars who consider this approach to Tudor plays, based upon a thematic criterion, to be rather sophomoric (see Craik 37).

It is noteworthy that the playwright's introduction to the play includes permission to disregard "the sad matter" in *Four Elements* and thus to shorten the performance to almost half its length, from an hour and a half to three quarters of an hour in length. "The sad matter" to be removed, according to J. Rastell, may possibly consist of the Messenger's part and some of Nature's and of Experience's parts. A reader may be quite confused by this suggestion of Rastell's, since in this case the play would be deprived of its contents, the conveyance of which was definitely the humanist's priority.

As to the "merry matter" of the play, it is stipulated to be considerable enough by the playwright's choice of the generic form of the interlude. In Rastell's

days it was a general trend to compose interludes with their informal style of presentation, easy way of communicating with the audience, inclination to improvisation, emphasized entertainment value, etc. The author's mouthpiece, the Messenger, says at the very beginning of the play: "Wherfore to my purpose, thus I conclude / Why shold not than the auctour of this interlude / Utter his owne fantasy and conseyte also, / As well as dyvers other nowadays do?" (ll.46-9). Thus the generic form of the interlude, inheriting as it did the medieval morality principle of alternating didactic and entertaining episodes, allowed the playwright to demonstrate his wit, sense of humour, and linguistic ingenuity. And, although J. Rastell warns his reader that he should not expect too much eloquence or rhetorical skill from an inexperienced author, all this sounds like a display of modesty on his part, in what amounts to a rather popular topos in Tudor literature.

At the same time Rastell explains that the subject of his "phylosophycall work" does not combine well enough with the entertaining elements of the play. But, since some people are not prone to perceiving serious things rendered in the proper way, in his drama he blends serious and merry elements to bring his idea to them in a better manner. R. Axton considers the technique of alternating didactic and entertaining episodes used by Rastell to be unfair enough towards the drama's spectators. From the scholar's point of view, the inequity lies in the fact that studies are associated with "sadness" in *Four Elements* and, consequently, that they are opposed to "myrth and sport", which belong to the sphere of vice or sin (Axton 14). The playwright's strategy is aimed at making the play's central character (and its audience as well) feel guilty of devoting his time to leisure, and not to study. R. Axton correlates this ethical approach of Rastell's with the spirit of the epoch, when the Reformation movement was still being formed.⁶ As the scholar observes, the moral principles that laid the foundation of Reformation ethics eventually affected the English national character (Axton 15).

Thus, the problems and the characters of Rastell's interlude attest to the drama's humanistic tendency which is at the same time marked by the intellectual and spiritual challenges of the early New Age. The author of the interlude *Four Elements* is convinced of the great role of science and secular education in the process of personality formation, and this conviction is rooted in his apologetics of the humanistic movement. Humanists like John Rastell believed that man could improve his natural qualities and talents as well as the social order as it was by means of studies. The play also reflects the ethical principles of the forthcoming Reformation, especially in regard to leisure and mirth as opposed to learning.

As a conclusion, one might say that the theme of John Rastell's interlude *Four Elements* is consonant enough with the ideas to which the outstanding English humanist, lawyer, statesman, and editor adhered during his prolific professional career. In his play John Rastell emphasizes the great importance of science and learning as true priorities of a modern society.

¹ Rastell's faith in the great power of the printed word turned out to be decisive for the preservation of the early Tudor playwrights' works. Out of the eighteen plays that were published in England up to 1534, at least twelve appeared in printed form at John and then William Rastell's publishing house (Wilson 23).

² The first research of John Rastell's life and works was included in A. W. Reed's *Early Tudor Drama* (1926). In further decades this subject matter was tackled by such scholars as F. S. Boas, R. Axton and others.

³ All quotations from the text of Rastell's interlude are from: Rastell, John. *Four Elements. A New Interlude and a Merry, of the Nature of the Four Elements*. Electronic source:

<http://www.ota.ox.ac.uk/scripts/download.php?approval=94119e44f20f1594ebd8>, with an indication of line numbers.

⁴ Also see remarks pronounced by Humanity and Ignorance in the final part of the text, right before Sensual Appetite starts dancing (l.1332, 1335).

⁵ Usually in early Tudor morality plays and interludes the speech of characters referring to evil forces is full of wordplay and verbal humour. This is also true of Rastell's play (see, for example, Sensual

Appetite's remarks, such as: "the devyll pull of his skyn" (l.447), "I pray God the devyl take you!" (l.534), "Goggys naylys, I have payed som of them, I tro" (l.1157), etc., or those of the Taverner's: "Ye, that I can well purvey, / As good as ever you put to your nose, / For there is a feyre wenche callyd Rose / Dystylleth a quarte every day" (ll.952-55)).

⁶ At the end of his lifetime John Rastell was one of Thomas Cromwell's companions, advocating the programme of a civil law reformation as well as the reformation of the Supreme Court and the Church in England.

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