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Heather Kennedy McDonald
University of Northern Iowa

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"The Play's the Thing": Considering the Morality Play in *Morality Play*

Part of the journal section "Forum: Falling into Medievalism"

Heather Kennedy McDonald, "'The Play's the Thing': Considering the Morality Play in *Morality Play*"

The paucity of details about secular theater in the fourteenth century allows Barry Unsworth to imagine what a troupe of players would look like if we could examine them right at the time when "a totally new form of drama was being born" (Unsworth, "Barry Unsworth on Fourteenth Century Life and Theatre"). In his novel *Morality Play*, he imagines poor, itinerant players competing with the large guilds that put on an entire cycle of plays with the backing of unlimited funds. He conjectures that these players would be an amalgamation of different types of troupes that endeavored to earn a living during the Middle Ages: mummers and those who performed interludes and morality plays under the protection of a patron. He envisions the players caught between the performance of religious and secular plays. They attempt to perform the circumstances of the recent murder of a boy named Thomas Wells as a morality play, entitling it "The Play of Thomas Wells." The presumption is that the title of the novel refers to this play. However, when their performance is unable to stay within the parameters of the morality play genre, the play becomes secularized. Upon closer examination, "The Play of Thomas Wells" reveals itself as a play-within-a-play, so readers should treat the novel as an outer play. Clearly, Unsworth does not intend for the title *Morality Play* to refer to "The Play of Thomas Wells," but the world of the novel encasing the play within.

Nicholas, the narrator, is a priest on the lam for committing adultery with a parishioner's wife. Nicholas comes upon a group of players mourning the death of Brendan, one of their own. He spies from the bushes, but the troupe's dog finds him out. At first, the players do not like Nicholas, mainly because he did not come out from hiding to perform Last Rites on Brendan. Fortunately, because they now need another member, the players are willing to forgive the priest's behavior and allow him to join the group. These players are travelling north to Durham for a performance. They stop in a town for the night and discover that a murder has just been committed. Quite quickly convicted, the weaver's daughter has been set to hang. The players decide to perform the murder as it ostensibly happened. Through performing, the players realize that the woman is innocent, and eventually Lord de Guise is implicated.

Since Brendan did not receive Last Rites, the players need to bury Brendan on hallowed ground. They also need to fix their wagon in order to make it to Durham. Forced to earn money for these two necessities, the players at first resemble mummers in the Middle Ages: "...[M]ummers' plays . . . were probably associated with . . . festive holidays which corresponded with the seasonal changes of the countryside" (Styan 5). Our players are on their way to Durham as a Christmas gift from their patron's wife to her cousin. During their stopover, our players also "call the play": this is typical of a mumming troupe's announcement to invite the audience to a performance. While "[m]umming troupes travelled from village to village creating a truly itinerant form of theatre" (Styan 7), our players perform under the auspices of one patron, which means this type of theatre for our acting troupe is temporary.

Our players are in dire straits, so when a small audience comes to their performance of a mystery play called "The Play of Adam," Unsworth has their leader, Martin, suggest they do a new type of play. The narrative includes an existence afflicted by plague, disillusionment with the church, corrupt clergy, rank privies, drunk and disgruntled peasantry, and exploitative landowners. This suggests a dark time, and the word "medieval" today is often used to describe something that is uncivilized or undeveloped. Unsworth's creation (not re-creation) of the English Middle Ages allows readers the comfortable vision of the Middle Ages that film and television has effected. The medieval elements seem to insinuate that "The Play of Adam" is somehow underdeveloped, and the reason for the evolution of secular theater is that audience interest for religious plays waned. However, Martin (hence Unsworth) acknowledges that the performances of religious plays are becoming even more advanced, and these players are in special circumstances:

"All we own goes on the back of a cart. Now there is coming more and more the big cycles of plays that are put on by the guilds. From Scotland to Cornwall it is happening, wherever people live together in numbers. In Wakefield now, or in York, they will put on twenty plays, they will go from the Fall of Lucifer to Judgment Day and they will take a week to do it. They have all the wealth of the guild to call on How can we match them?" (60)

According to Greg Walker, "There was no progression from simple religious plays to sophisticated secular ones What changed fundamentally in this period, of course, was not the drama but the culture which produced it and which it was designed to serve" (viii-ix). This is the case with this town. For the moment, anyway, the townspeople were less interested in seeing Biblical stories reenacted than a play that was pertinent to their town.

Unsworth places competing entertainment in the town, which takes half of our troupe's audience. *Jongleurs*, a travelling band including acrobats, minstrels, and animals, make our players keenly aware that they need to do something about this competition. They move into a new kind of drama. However, they can only use the tools from their current repertoire, so the players begin by performing "The Play of Thomas Wells" as a morality play, using the costumes they have in their stock.

The mission of a morality play is to instruct the audience to avoid sin, because sin results in a falling away from God and salvation; thus, the play needs God. "God . . . often signified divine radiance by either wearing a gold mask or having his face gilded" (Twycross 67), so a player plays God by wearing a gilded mask (91). Glad to receive the person who falls from grace, the devil was presented by Martin wearing a horned mask (91), as is typical of devil faces (Twycross 68).

The sin committed (or pondered) may be specific, but it is designed to be a metaphor for all sin, for the theme of each morality play is universal. This is accomplished by creating an allegorical protagonist representing humankind. Thomas Wells becomes the representative of humankind in this play. The other characters are also allegorical, representing forces of good and evil which battle for Humankind's soul. The basis of the Morality Play genre is the concept that "man had absolute free will to choose in this world between vice and virtue and that those choices affected his fate in the next" (King 241).

In "The Play of Thomas Wells," Humankind is blamed because he strayed from the path of good. He had the free will to choose between a good force, represented by "Good Counsel," and evil, represented by "Temptation." The players have learned that Thomas Wells was carrying a purse containing money from

the sale of a cow, and the players conjecture he was bragging about his money. The accused, dressed as Avarice, tempts him to leave the road for sexual pleasure. The villagers, up to the performance of the play, had quietly accepted the girl's arrest, but as the play progresses, the audience calls out, becoming involved and completely engrossed. They begin to question aloud what they have believed, and the effect is the players' uncertainty of the guilt of the young woman. The tradition of audience participation could possibly come from one of the few surviving morality plays, *Mankind*, in which the "audience . . . become[s] involved in the action, so that the moral lesson becomes an object lesson" (King 250). This is partly the reason that the players cannot maintain the instructive purpose of their morality play. Unsworth's players assume the boy must have followed the woman when she tempted him. However, the boy's mother calls out, "My boy did not go with her . . . My Thomas was a good boy" (105). "The True Play of Thomas Wells" loses its allegorical tone when the spectators begin to see someone they know portrayed wrongly on stage. They cannot learn the lesson when they are caught up in the characterization. The players try to continue what they have rehearsed, but members of the audience question their every move.

Audience involvement is also reminiscent of the interlude, which stems from the moralities "and in some cases are indistinguishable from them" (Cuddon 423). Performances of interludes date only as far back as the late fifteenth century; however, the similar characteristics between "The True Play of Thomas Wells" and interludes should not be ignored, however anachronistic the comparison. The characteristics of the interlude genre are useful to Unsworth, who wants to create a definitive link between religious and secular plays.

Unsworth has his audience expect a type of interlude. According to Hopper, "the interludes are farcical and realistic, broadly humorous in spirit" (63). Connecting humor to "The Play of Thomas Wells" is tenuous, since this play is clearly not humorous. However, when one audience member cries, "Fool player, what brought her near enough to hear the boy boast?" (107), it is possible that the audience expects to laugh at the players, if not at the play itself.

An aspect that does seem to settle our troupe's play firmly in the interlude genre is the presence of a censoring body. The interlude was a flexible genre and could be used to "address issues of direct political and social concern to [players] and their audiences" (Walker vii). This is the case here as the players are re-creating a local crime that ends up implicating royalty. Bradbrook writes, "As early as 1533 interludes on controversial matters had been forbidden, and in 1539 a player was burned for performing in such a play" (31). Until now, the lord who lives near the village has not paid attention to the happenings at the innyard, but he must begin to feel that the players are getting too close to the truth. He ultimately wants them to quit performing the play altogether, but he requests a private performance.

This ability of the players to move from the innyard to the Lord's rooms is another of the play's similarities to the interlude. The interludes allowed for a cast as small as three (Bradbrook 27), and they required very little set. Interludes could be staged anywhere and did not cost much to perform (Bradbrook 30). Our players are even able to increase the play space when they realize they will have a larger audience for their second performance (Unsworth, *Morality Play* 141).

Audience participation is an essential aspect of "The Play of Thomas Wells," as it helps the players develop the play. However, this element draws "The Play of Thomas Wells" into the interlude genre. In reality, audience participation in historical interludes was somewhat contrived. For example, in one performance of the interlude *Ane Satyre of The Thrie Estaitis*, Sir David Lindsay has

. . . two representatives of the oppressed underclass step out of the crowd in answer to the player-king's offer to hear the grievances of his subjects. Thus the play is made to appear ambivalently poised between fiction and reality, able to respond explicitly to real social problems, but free to exploit its licence to do so under the guise of moralized "play" which was characteristic of the interludes of the period. (Walker 301-302)

Our spectator contribution is unplanned and unexpected: as mentioned above, the boy's mother forces it upon the actors. However unintentional, the audience participation makes it obvious that things are not as they seem, and the players begin to ask the spectators for their help in solving the crime. The unrehearsed audience involvement is evidence that this play is dealing with something of social concern, like historical interludes, which are "representative of a drama that was intimately rooted in the communities which produced them, their concerns and preoccupations" (Walker 302).

The element of audience participation in either genre suggests also an audience *responsibility*. When the players attempt to perform "The *True* Play of Thomas Wells" (123, emphasis mine), the spectators must help them do so. As stated above, the audience feels close to the performance because the characters are people they know. Robert J. Nelson states:

... [I]n a play, it would appear, only the actor plays. Appearances deceive. The spectator plays... through the mechanism of identification. For the identification to be made, however, the actor must be real to the spectator, the actor in his role must in some way be like the spectator. The mechanism is a function of the reality principle and is the principal mechanism of tragedy
(6)

Certainly, the audience is attempting to identify further with the players by helping them to create the murder as it really happened. In addition, when the mystery of the murder is finally solved outside the play space, we realize that "The Play of Thomas Wells" could fit approximately into the genre of "tragedy," had they been able and allowed to finish their play.

The reason they were not able to finish their play is that they did not know how it ended. If they could have solved the mystery and then performed it, it would look very much like a tragedy. According to Cuddon, "the Aristotelian explication of tragedy consisted of a hero who has a change in fortune . . ." (926). Thomas Wells is the hero of this tragedy. He is not in *great* fortune, but he presumably would be better off since he is carrying a purse with money that his mother gave him from the sale of their cow. This tragic hero is not the kind of hero found in Greek or Elizabethan tragedy, for he is not in a position of power. However, Cuddon believes that Aristotle's theories of tragedy "are misapplied and misused . . . by trying to make them fit all forms of tragedy" (929). Nevertheless, the reader finds later that Thomas's misfortune was brought on by an "error in judgment," as is theorized by Aristotle (qtd. in Cuddon 927).

When the climax of the novel occurs, we realize that a Monk has been involved in the boy's murder. Trusting the Monk is Thomas's "error in judgment" as the clergyman approaches Thomas when he is on his way home with the purse. The reader is informed that the monk has been obtaining prepubescent boys for the Lord's son, William. After William had his way with them and murdered them by breaking their necks, the monk disposed of the bodies.

It is also found at the denouement of the novel that Thomas Wells contracted the plague and has consequently infected William de Guise. This discovery adds to the tragic interpretation of the would-be play, lending an air of predetermination to his fall: "The overwhelming part about tragedy is the element of hopelessness, of inevitability" (Cuddon 928). The revelation that Thomas Wells probably was going to die anyway, and the fact that he was a young boy by himself on the road adds credence to the hopelessness of this hero's destiny. Had our players been able to perform the *true* "True Play of Thomas Wells," then it would have been played as a tragedy that would look more like tragedies of the twentieth century (Cuddon 933) rather than a morality play of the fourteenth.

Placing "The Play of Thomas Wells" in any of the previously discussed genres is disqualified, or at least undermined, by the role and expectation of the spectators. Designating it a morality play is inexact, for the audience usually does not participate in this type. In addition, the audience of "The Play of Thomas Wells" cannot treat this play as an object lesson, because the characters are portrayed inaccurately. Classifying it as an interlude is limiting. Audience participation is part of the interlude tradition, and in this play it signifies that the players are addressing issues of concern to the audience. However, when the audience participates in this particular play, it moves out of this tradition: the participation is unplanned; and again, the spectator does not learn a moral lesson. This play is not fully a tragedy, either, and that is mainly because it is not complete. During a tragedy, the audience is supposed to have a "good cry" (Cuddon 928) but then feel better because it is not they who suffer the misfortune. The trouble here, however, is that *they do*.

"The Play of Thomas Wells" begins as a morality play, but the readers' recognition that the players cannot maintain a morality's didactic mission substantiates the notion that the title indicates the novel itself should be considered a morality play. So how can we classify "The Play of Thomas Wells"? There is evidence pointing to the "play-within-a-play" tradition.

Agnes Bauer recognizes some prevalent characteristics of the play-within-a-play tradition. One attribute could reveal Unsworth's agenda:

Characters of [the outer play] are always the spectators of [the inner play], sometimes even the actors of [the inner play]. In any case, and whether this is actually shown on stage or not, characters of [the inner play] are to be considered as actors (professional or amateur) in their "real" life on [the plane of the outer play]. (16)

While of course this is true for this novel, it must be established first that an *outer play* exists. What are the elements that Unsworth contrives to convince us that his novel *Morality Play* **actually** should be approached like a play?

As narrator, Nicholas often refers to the part each character in the novel is supposed to play. For example, when each member reports on his first "fact-finding" mission, Nicholas narrates, "As newly arrived and least significant of the company I was required to say first what I had learned" (84). Nicholas is playing this part when he first unites with the troupe. Margaret's role is to be the one "without a part . . . [she] had neither public voice before the people nor private one . . ." (42). Thus, even when the troupe is not on stage,

. . . all the members of this company were playing parts even when there was no one by but themselves. Each had lines of his own and was expected to say them. Without this no debate could be conducted The parts perhaps had been chosen once, fanatical Martin, Springer the timid and affectionate, Stephen the disputatious, Straw wavering and wild, Tobias with proverbs and his voice of common sense It was my role to moralize and lard my talk with Latin and turn all to abstraction (41-42)

This sets the reader up to accept these characters as having these traits consistently and unchangingly throughout the novel. Martin may seem a more complex character, as seen when Nicholas narrates: "There were contradictions in him which puzzle me yet. Where it concerned his will he would set all else aside, and that is wickedness, whoever does it. He had no piety. And yet there was great tenderness in his nature, and loyalty to any who gave him trust" (89). Martin at times carries the trait of "wickedness," and at others "tenderness" and "loyalty"; however, these abstract traits are simply due to his fanaticism that Unsworth points to early in the novel. Martin obsessively throws himself into the task at hand, whatever it may be. When jongleurs try to take over our troupe's playing space, Martin resorts to violence to protect the troupe. Carrying Brendan's body on the wagon was slow-going and smelly. Burying him required more money than the troupe could afford, but Martin's devotion to Brendan required that they give him a proper burial. Martin was simultaneously loyal to the weaver's daughter and wicked to the troupe when he put their lives in danger to acquit her. Whatever the situation, Unsworth makes it clear from the start that each member has a part to play.

While "The Play of Thomas Wells" borrows the audience participation tradition from *Mankind*, the novel shares a significant similarity to another of the surviving medieval morality plays.

In *Wisdom*, the majority of the "dramatis personae are parts of a complex protagonist" (King 251). When Nicholas unites with the players, they become one entity. Although Nicholas is the narrator, he is not the sole protagonist. Neither is Martin, although he is considered the leader. This is why the others feel all should have an equal say: the actions of one character affect the entire troupe's fate. Unsworth sets us up from the beginning to believe each player has certain personality traits, and they consistently play that role. Each trait can be seen as a part of one "complex protagonist."

This complex protagonist, our troupe, is on a journey north. This is another element found in morality plays. In moralities, the journey is allegorical and is representative of mankind's journey on "the road of life, [where he] yield[s] to temptation, fall[s] from grace, and eventually [is] . . . redeemed" (Unsworth, "Barry Unsworth on Fourteenth Century Life and Theatre"). Our troupe arrives in the town and is in need of money to repair their wagon and bury Brendan. After performing the "Play of Adam," the troupe realizes that one reason the audience is so small is that they know how it ends.

Martin says, "The day is over for poor players who travel with the Mysteries" (61). They need to do something new, so they decide to "play the murder" (74). When they announce the play, the audiences come, and the players become greedy. The first plot point in a morality is fulfilled when the players yield to the temptation of money. The second plot point is satisfied when Lord de Guise, who presumably is put in power by the king, censors their performance. It is believed the king is divinely chosen; therefore, whomever the king puts in power would be also. The temptation of money made the players stay in town longer than they should have, and they nearly lose their lives because of it. The final milestone of the morality play is realized when the King's Justice rescues them. God truly intervenes when Nicholas is

asked to perform Last Rites on a dying knight. Nicholas is able to escape from Lord de Guise, and he goes to the Justice and together they solve the mystery, exonerating the weaver's daughter. William de Guise, the lord's son, committed the murders. The Justice wants to prosecute the lord for other crimes, but this crime's implications could ruin the house of de Guise. And so the troupe is redeemed when Nicholas, on behalf of the whole troupe, seeks Justice.

No leap of logic is needed to understand the allegorical nature of the Justice. Other characters may be seen as allegorical as well, if the traditional costumes of the morality play are observed. Moralities feature "allegorical characters that wear emblematic clothing" (Twycross, 72). Nicholas describes

. . . two riders and with them a great black beast whose head rose high as theirs and it had red eyes and above its head there moved with it a shape of red, dark red in the white of the snow, and I knew this for the flame of the Beast's breath and I knew what Beast it was and what manner of riders these were and I crossed myself and groaned aloud in my fear, seeing that the Beast had come and my soul was unprepared. (67-68)

Clearly, Nicholas believes this to be the Beast of Revelation. This seems to be a combination of allusions from the final book of the Bible: one of the beasts from Chapter 13, and the second horseman from Chapter 6, which reads: "Another horse came forth, a red one. Its rider was given power to rob the earth of peace by allowing men to slaughter one another. For this he was given a huge sword" (The New American Bible for Catholics. Rev. 6.4). This is an appropriate vision, because the horseman turns out to be a knight who has arrived in town for a jousting tournament. The Beast and the horseman are signs of Judgement Day, and the knight is unwittingly instrumental in securing our troupe's salvation. The costume of the Beast can be seen as emblematic of a knight, and a particular knight in this play.

An additional allegorical character is the monk. As the mystery is solved, we realize the Monk's character is a force of evil in this morality play. We learn the monk's real name late in the novel, until then, this monk is known simply as the "Monk." As Meg Twycross notes, "In sectarian and political moralities, the costumes may make polemic points . . ." (72), and this may be what Unsworth is doing here when he dresses Evil as a monk: it becomes apparent that Unsworth has a compassion for the underdog and quite possibly an adversarial feeling towards those with power granted by institutions.

An additional clue to the allegorical nature of the Monk also comes at the outer play's climax. Through the performance of "The Play of Thomas Wells," there comes a time when there are more questions than answers. Because of the audience's questions, the troupe becomes stumped. The climax of the novel occurs during the play-within-the-play but outside the performance area. The Monk has been killed, and the players do not know how, but they realize that this implicates the Monk in Thomas Wells' murder. As the players see the dead Monk draped over a horse, Nicholas notes that the Monk is wearing a "white shift such as penitents wear when they go in procession" (151). Later, it occurs to Nicholas that "[t]hey had put him in costume, made a player of him . . ." (155). This new garb for the Monk is connected to "[c]hanges of costume [which] are often used in morality plays as metaphors of changes of spiritual or worldly state . . . revealed at the climactic moment" (Twycross 73). The monk's new costume makes apparent that he is now atoning for his sins in the afterlife.

What morality plays "have in common most obviously is that they offer their audiences moral instruction . . ." (King 240). There are clues that Unsworth is speaking to readers when he has Nicholas editorialize

about those in power during medieval times. For example, he talks about the "role" that knights had been assigned:

. . . if they had a part to play once they have lost it now, even in battle-it is the common people who win battles, the archers and the pikemen, as these our times have abundantly shown, while the knights and their warhorses flounder in blood and are butchered together. And so they turn to sport. They deck themselves out to kill in play . . . (80-81)

Therefore, certainly Nicholas becomes aware that he is a player in a larger play, one that involves the world: "As my eyes grew heavy with sleep I wondered if there were not some larger play still, in which Kings and Emperors and Popes, though thinking they are the center of the space, are really only in the margin . . ." (197). Through these observations, the reader comprehends that Unsworth is "morally instructing" the world outside the novel.

Unsworth's lesson is illuminated because he assigns the characters in the novel one central allegorical trait, such as justice, evil, innocence. We understand that certain traits are roads to destruction, and some to salvation. The Lord de Guise, William de Guise, the Monk, and even the knight, because they own the traits recognized as those from the list of Deadly Sins, suffer punishment. The Justice delivers salvation and punishment. However, Unsworth would not only teach us to avoid the Deadly Sins. In fact, that seems to be the least important of his lessons. Our players are motivated by money, but eventually are interested in doing what is morally right, and they are saved. The reader should realize that even those who are not in *positions* of power are still powerful.

When one ponders the ramifications of treating "The Play of Thomas Wells" as a play-within-a-play, then we realize this inner play is secondary, even if it seems like it is the most important (or most interesting) element. As Bauer states:

[The inner play] is embedded in [the outer play, so] it does not achieve complete autonomy: even if the action of [the inner play] might draw their uttermost attention, spectators in real life will not be made to forget that it is [the outer play] (containing the [inner play]) and not [the inner play] that is the major spectacle-event. (16)

The mystery is the most engaging part of the story, and readers hope to discover "whodunit" through the experience of the inner play. However, the solution to the mystery contains a larger moral issue outside what happened to Thomas Wells.

"The Play of Thomas Wells" shares similarities with other plays-within-a-play. For example, the embedded play in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* functions as an entertainment for a wedding. While the spectators *and* the outer play's audience laugh at the "mechanicals" (who moonlight as actors), the play still carries some relevance to what has occurred in the outer play. The outer play is about the importance of love and what can happen when it is unrequited and unsatisfied. Hermia and Lysander have the most in common with the characters in the inner play. Hermia has been forbidden by her father to marry Lysander, so they run away so that they may be together. Pyramus and Thisby, the title characters of the inner play, are in love. They are forbidden to see each other and so are required to speak through a chink in the wall. They devise a plan to meet in secret. A lion comes and scares Thisby away. The lion has a bloodstained mouth, and it stains Thisby's scarf that she drops when running away. Pyramus

sees the scarf, which he knows to be Thisby's, and kills himself in grief. Thisby returns, and finding the dead Pyramus, kills herself. Pyramus and Thisby would not have died had they been allowed to meet in the open. This lesson would be more important had the onstage spectators not already figured it out, but this is the moral of the story nonetheless. The idea of the "moral of the story" can also be found in morality plays and is the original intent of the players when they begin to perform "The Play of Thomas Wells."

"The True Play of Thomas Wells" contains a similarity with what is arguably the most well known example of a play-within-a-play: "The Mousetrap" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A character called Ghost tells Prince Hamlet to avenge the death of King Hamlet. Ghost says that Claudius, King Hamlet's brother, committed the murder. Prince Hamlet believes that the ghost might be the devil trying to trick him. He asks some players who arrive in Elsinore to change some lines in "The Play of Gonzago" to reflect the method of killing. Hamlet will watch Claudius to see if he reacts in such a way that would indicate his guilt. As Luigi Pirandello puts it, "Hamlet will not act until the facts are clear and indisputable" (qtd. in Nelson 22). This is the same with our players. They do not want to act until they know the whole story. They do not doubt the girl's guilt at first, but as more questions arise, they wish to get the story straight. Unfortunately, they have promised their play, so they are *forced* to act. Prince Hamlet and our players both feel *compelled* to act.

Prince Hamlet famously says, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." As Pirandello states: "Conscience for the Prince of Denmark means more than guilt and innocence; it means (as it does in the French language, for example) awareness, consciousness" (qtd. in Nelson 22). To this point, there have been clues implicating Lord de Guise in Thomas Wells's death. For example, the trial of the accused was quick, the lord's steward was seen paying for the quick burial of the boy; as Tobias says of the murderer, "The feeling grows on me that he is protected" (138). The reader knows that the murderer could not be protected unless by the lord. Although our players do not know it, in this same way, they have "caught the conscience" of de Guise, as he puts a stop to their playing in the innyard. Although de Guise would also act as the "censoring body" for arguing the play's similarity to the interlude, the case is stronger for "The Play of Thomas Wells" as an "inner play" when seen juxtaposed with Shakespeare's use in *Hamlet* of the play-within-play tradition.

According to Bauer, a play-within-a-play can be defined by regarding the play-within-a-play

. . . as a structure that can be visualized geometrically as concentric circle(s) or field(s) within field(s), thus underlining the break in the dramatic continuum of all the plays involved. Simply said, a play must be embedded in another play, thus creating two different levels of fictionality. These two planes must be autonomous yet the real spectator should never be allowed to forget that there are two levels of fictionality. This duplicity is marked by the duplication of the aesthetic gaze: the real spectators watch a play in which fictional or "supposed" spectators watch a play. (32-34)

This definition, rather than disqualifying Unsworth's embedded play, serves to reinforce its status. The inner play *is* taken from something that has really happened in the outer play. That is, performing the "True Play of Thomas Wells" of course would not even be possible if it were not for what has occurred in the larger world of the novel; however, the "dramatic continuum" is broken because the players are not allowed to finish. At the climax, when the plots of the outer and inner plays seem to coalesce, we realize that the plays do not have the same mission. In fact, the plays are autonomous, because what happens in

the outer play is *not* the same as what happens in the inner play. By titling his book *Morality Play*, Unsworth is suggesting to the reader that the novel should be treated like a play itself, but also that the outer story in this novel is the real morality play.

Heather Kennedy McDonald is a Graduate Student in the English Department (Literature Emphasis) at the University of Northern Iowa

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