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Dualism in *The Castle of Perseverance*

Asako Miyagawa

A general idea that spiritual things should be higher than material things was dominant in the Middle Ages, as the former were thought to be closer to God than the latter. Accordingly, most of the religious poems and plays were composed ultimately in order to celebrate spiritual things. Even in the most enjoyable works of entertainment, *The Wakefield Pageants*, for example, the final subject of the plays was to worship God.

However, at the same time, the apparently opposing conception that even lower things had some absolute value occupied an important part of medieval thought. D.S.Brewer admits; "It is characteristic...that the pleasures of the senses should be regarded as good in themselves, and part of the divine plan for the universe, even though sin had distorted men's attitude to and desire for such pleasures."¹⁾

This shows us that medieval thought includes contrasting elements together in itself. Then, although it is clear that the main purpose of the so-called Morality Plays was to venerate God, seek the spiritual happiness and deny the pleasure of the sense, there must be some possibilities of examining in them, such complicated elements...dual conceptions mentioned above.

The Castle of Perseverance is a history of the hero, Humanum Genus, from birth to death. He experiences various kinds of life, a repetition of joy and suffering. His life starts with the enjoyment of youth and life:

I vow to God, and so I may
Make mery a ful gret throwe.
I may levyn many a day,
I am but yonge, as I trowe,
For to do that I schulde.
Myth I ryde be sompe and syke
And be ryche and lord-lyke

Certys thanne schulde I be fryke
And a mery man on molde. (11.421-430)²⁾

He fears nothing and life looks bright and pleasant to him. As an innocent and young man, he starts his life happily. First, as he himself is excessively attached to worldly life, he joyfully decides to seek it.

Now syn thou hast be-hetyn me so,
I wyl go wyth the and a-say.
I ne lette for frende ner fo,
But wyth the Werld I wyl go play,
Certys a lytyl throwe.
In this World is al my trust
To lyvyn in lykyng and in lust.
Have he and I onys cust,
We schal not part, I trowe. (11.394-400)

This is his first step to worldly joy and he knows well how he desires such worldly pleasures. He sings with joy:

Pryde, be Jhesu, thou seyst wel.
Who-so suffyr is ovyrlid al day.
Whyl I reste on my rennyng whel
I schal not suffre, if that I may.
Myche myrthe at mete and mel
I love ryth wel, and ryche a-ray.
Trewly I thynke, in every sel,
On grounde to by graythyd gay
And of my-selfe to take good gard.
Mykyl myrthe thou wylt me make,
Lordlyche to leve, be londe and lake.
Myn hert holy to the I take
In-to thyne owyn a-ward. (11.1076-1088)

This should be related to the universal tendency of medieval thought of those days. J.Huizinga thought in this respect; "The formal and dogmatic conception of poverty as extolled by Saint Francis of Assisi, and as observed by the mendicant orders, was no longer in harmony with the

social sentiment which was just arising. People were beginning to regard poverty as a social evil instead of an apostolic virtue.”³⁾

This social tendency must be considered in any investigation into the actual conditions of the heroes in the Morality Plays. In reality, not a few people lived in a way of “an almost inconceivable mixture of devotion and debauchery.”⁴⁾ And some were insane lovers of luxury and pleasure. As a matter of fact, a trend like this is to be entirely differentiated from the religious lives of the friars of the Franciscan Order, for example, of 13th century. Some of Christ’s words to his apostles, being kept as basic belief among them, were “to take nothing for your journey, neither staves nor scrip, neither shoes nor money.”⁵⁾ Therefore, the fact that people in 14th and 15th centuries thought material things valuable must be understood to be indispensable for the analysis of the heroes in the Morality Plays, which were the most popular entertainments among people in general. And the fact that the conception of Saint Augustine that the world, as the work of God, was essentially good⁶⁾ dominated the society of the Middle Ages should be also considered as a background.

While, the hero cannot forget the existence of something fearful. It always exists in his mind and threatens him. It is the fear of death. He knows obviously that it has occupied a part of his mind incessantly. The fear of death always accompanies the joy of life as a shadow follows the object that casts it. At the most enjoyable moment of worldly life, he is reminded of the fear of death. He knows he will die and lie under the cold ground sooner or later however much he may enjoy the present time.

Ya, whanne thi flesche is fayre fed,
 Thanne schal I, lovely Lecherye,
 Be bobbyd wyth the in bed.
 Here-of serve mete and drynkys trye.
 In love thi lyf schal be led;
 Be a lechour tyl th[o]u dye.
 Thi nedys schal be the bettyr sped
 If (thou) gyf the to fleshly folye
 Tyl deth the down drepe. (11.1183-1191)

He experiences the extreme of fear of death in the extreme of worldly

pleasure. The medieval mind, like him, was often torn by the dualism of opposing elements. Moreover, we are reminded of the fact that, with later fifteenth century, more and more, the physical side of death drove men's imagination into the world of horror. Philippa Tristram acknowledges concerning the view of death of the Middle Ages:

The darkly detailed images of sentient physical corruption which proliferate in the last century of that supposed 'Age of Faith' are indeed much more shocking to the euphemism of current attitudes to death than outspokenness in sexual matters is now likely to be. Because the medieval spectrum of beliefs about life and death was so much wider than ours, it reached to greater extremes: the strenuous vision, on the one hand, of eternal beatitude, led, on the other, to the desolation of wanhope, the despair of those many who could no longer, with confidence, affirm their expectation of immortality.⁷⁾

In the play, Mundus says to the hero:

Owe, Mankynd, hathe Dethe wyth the spoke?
 A-geyns hym helpyth no wage.
 I wolde thou were in the erthe be loke
 And a-nothyr hadde thyne erytage.
 Oure bonde of love schal sone be broke;
 In cold clay schal be thy cage;
 Now schal the Werld on the be wroke
 For thou hast don so gret outrage.
 Thi good thou schalt for-goo.
 Werldlys good thou hast for-gon
 And wyth tottys thou schalt be torn. (11.2892-2902)

Thus, adding to the harsh idea that all men, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, were equal in death, the image of the dreadful corporeal putrefaction after death threatened them. As T.S.R.Boase describes about the way in which people in the Middle Ages thought concerning death, they believed that "instead of wives, they should have toads, instead of a great retinue and throng of followers, their body should have a throng of

worms..., instead of gluttony and drunkenness, hunger and thirst without end.”⁸⁾ Examples of beautiful and young ladies who, captured by sudden death are eaten by worms are quoted often as typical descriptions of the medieval thought about death. Probably, such a way of apprehending death of the Middle Ages in the material meaning is beyond our imagination. The image can be summed up in one word of “macabre”⁹⁾, and this is precisely the conception of death which arose during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. This image is entirely earthly and essentially corporeal and the horror of putrefaction after death inspired by masked skeletons of ‘Dance of Death’ might have influenced the Morality Plays.¹⁰⁾

Although fear of death belongs to the spiritual world as far as it is the product of imagination, the figures of death drawn in the minds of the people in the Middle Ages were quite concrete and material. People were strongly conscious of the material side of death as much as they were of their earthly desires for clothing, food and so on. The hero thus first comprehends death in the way in which he comprehended life in the material and realistic meaning.

However, in the Morality Plays, the most characteristic point is that what the heroes really fear is the idea of punishment which should be given by God. By nature, the sermons of those days were homiletic and the idea of punishment might be considered as the product of such sermons.¹¹⁾ People knew well if they were judged as sinners by God, they had to suffer from everlasting physical tortures in Hell.

Then, what does sin mean for the hero? Although everything was considered to be good for St. Augustine and his successors, he, St. Augustine located the cause of sin in the free will of man.¹²⁾ If man abuses the gift of God by his own free will and forgets God, he must be punished as a sinner. What man must not do in order to avoid committing sins is concretely shown in the image of the Seven Deadly Sins, and it is acknowledged clearly that the hero has committed these sins.

The idea that Lazarus, after his resurrection, lived in continual misery and horror at the thought that he should have again to pass through the gate of death explains the deep fear of death felt in the Middle Ages. As Boase tells, beyond the pangs of dissolution lay threats of greater torment

and the overshadowing dread of the Last Judgement, that day of whose coming no man knew, when the blessed would be received into Paradise and the wicked pass to everlasting damnation.¹³⁾

Here, death brings crucial meanings to the hero. It definitely dominates all of this world. The hero knows how worldly life is worthless under tyrannical domination of death. All the possessions which he has got in this world come to nothing.

Drery is my deth-drawth;
 A-geyns me may no man stonde.
 I durke and down brynge to nowth
 Lordys and ladys in every londe.
 Whom-so I have a lessun tawth,
 Onethys sythen schal he mowe stonde.
 In my careful clothys he schal be cawth
 Ryche, pore, fre and bonde.
 Whanne I come thei goo no more.
 Where-so I wende in any lede,
 Every man of me hat drede.
 Lette I wyl for no mede
 To smyte sadde and sore. (11.2814-2826)

Simultaneously, the hero realizes that nothing can change or postpone the day of Judgement and this is the only truth. He realizes that the only way left for him is to accept the fact, repent and ask God for Mercy. And this shows that this is the real time for him to enter new spiritual world. He knows that to forsake everything of this world enables him to enter the spiritual world, and he now understands that all the earthly joys that he has believed valuable are meaningless at the time of death. Naturally, the hero first refuses to accept the new circumstances; the process cannot be simple. But as dramatic struggles occur repeatedly in his minds, the hero finally progresses to accept the truth of God.

The hero first regarded the punishment of God as physical tortures in Hell and it shows that he understood it in the material meaning. However, the conception that the true meaning of judgement does not exist in this material world, but in the individual spiritual world is made clear by

degrees. And it is understood that to love Christ, who was crucified for the love of mankind, and repent, is the only way for his salvation. This repentance should be an entire spiritual action differed from his past experience of seeking earthly joy. He begins to realize that he should repent and do good deeds for love of God.

The people of the Middle Ages could not endure to define death just as nothing. Besides, they strongly wanted to get spiritual peace after death as they believed there was a world after death. And they wanted eternity in death. Contrasting the worthless and transitory life of this world with the eternity of God, they knew that they finally must choose to take this eternity, not temporality but timelessness. And the idea that Christ redeemed the Fall of mankind by his sacrifice on the cross gave them a great consolation. Only Christ, they believed, metamorphosed the negative meaning of death into positive one. For them, to celebrate his Resurrection is to rejoice in the promised resurrection of all mankind. And, as Tristram analyzes, 'it is only in that eternal perspective, where sequence becomes meaningless, that Life can triumph over Death as surely as, in the world of time, the dead must succeed to the living.'¹⁴

In Part Four, the hero is advised by Bonus Angel, Paciencia and Abstinencia to enter the Castle of Perseverance and 'fle the synnyse sevene'¹⁵ in order to obtain 'bowre of blys'¹⁶, and this should be fulfilled by his own will because he is considered to have been endowed with 'a fre wyllle'.¹⁷

Humilitas says:

Mercy may mende al thi mone.
 Cum in here at thynne owyn wyllle
 We schul the fende fro thi fon
 If thou kepe the in this castel styllle. (11.1700-1703)

But Veritas asks:

Lord, whov schuld Mankynd be savyd
 Syn he dyed in dedly synne
 And all thi comaundementys be depravyd
 And of fals covetyse he wolde nevere blynne? (11.3289-3292)

And he continues:

I pray the, Lord, as I have space,
 Late Mankynd have dew dystresse
 In helle fere to be brent.
 In peyne loke he be styлле,
 Lord, if it be thi wylle,
 Or ell I have no skylle
 Be thi trew jugement. (11.3335-3341)

Opposing *Justicia* and *Veritas*, *Misericordia* asks God to give his mercy to the hero:

For hys love that deyed on tre,
 Late save mankynd fro al perlye.
 And schelde hym fro myschaunsse.
 If ye tweyne putte hym to dystresse
 It schuld make gret hevynesse
 Be-twene us tweyne, Mercy and Pes,
 And that were gret grevaunce.
 Ryt wysnes and Trewthe, do be my red,
 And Mercy, go we to yonde hey place.
 We schal enforme the hey Godhed
 And pray hym to deme this case.
 Ye schal tell hym youre entent
 Of Trewthe and of Ryt wysnesse,
 And we schal pray that hys jugement
 May pase be us, Mercy and Pes. (11.3235-3249)

Here, Christ's love to mankind appears on the stage as a contrasting element to justice. And after a tense development of the conflict of this dualism, the hero finally receives a pronouncement of divine mercy from God himself. God, making clear that those who abused worldly things must go to Hell and that those who did good should rest in the house of bliss, and showing that there are no other ways except these two to all dying people, finally gives Mercy to the hero:

My mercy, Mankind, geve I the.
 Cum syt at my ryth honde.
 Ful wel have I lovyd the,

Unkynd thow I the fonde.
As a spark of fyre in the se
My mercy is synne-quenchand. (11.3644-3649)

Thus, Misericordia wins the final victory over Justice in God and eternal peace has been brought to the hero. Under these circumstances, material and worldly joy which the hero always loved so much proves to be nothing and moreover, physical pain which he ever feared when death coming has been subdued by love of God. In this way, both joy and fear in the material meaning has transformed his attitude into great joy of spirit.

Now, his original fear that life comes to an end in the negative meaning is transformed into a new joyfulness in which death leads him to a new positive life. Thus, in the presentation of death in the Middle Ages, we find dualistic conceptions; one is negative and the other positive. That is, while people feared death as dreadful, meaningless and hopeless, they could also find it hopeful, meaningful and eternal.

As I mentioned before, in this play, the history of the hero is pictured from birth to death as it is. And now we find that it is not a simple history but a history of severe conflicts between opposing elements. As they all are fundamental to our human mind, the conflicts develop dramatically and meaningfully in the play. The hero can finally get serenity of mind only as a result of this history of conflicts.

Here, it is clear that the rhythm of the conflicts by these dualistic elements is a basis for the hero's conduct and this dualism is one of the important elements of the structure of this drama. It produces a dramatic balance; the two opposing elements are reciprocally acting on and co-operating with each other. Humanum Genus sees a shadow of death beyond the bright joy of the world, and sees the bright joy of the world beyond the shadow of death. It can not be denied that the mind of the people of those days was pulled between extremes, but it was kept in a balanced condition after all. As these opposing elements are both indispensable to the hero, the dramatic balance of this play results from their equal strength tugged from both sides. As a matter of fact, although the final purpose of such a kind of so-called religious plays was to describe and honour God, we cannot help admitting that the most parts of this

drama are occupied by the descriptions of the torn mind of the hero. This tells that the description of this dualism itself is as important as the final purpose of the drama.

Robert Potter says in his *The English Morality Plays* that the deadly sins have the representative function of showing human nature in its fallen states and that the deadly sins are quite probably the ancestors of the mankind figures, the representative characters of the moralities.¹⁸⁾ However, in this essay, we find the deadly sins cannot produce the mankind figures by themselves, but by their strugglings against opposing elements, they are able to do it. And we can picture the whole images of human being of the Middle Ages only through these processes, but not through single side of evil.

Further, A.C.Cawley defines that the earliest Moralities show conflicts between good and evil, the fall of man, and his redemption through Christ. And in *The Castle of Perseverance*, he argues, the conflict of good and evil forces for man's soul has an important part to play.¹⁹⁾ In this point, I would like to say again that the whole history of the hero gives us principal features of this play.

When the hero first came out on the stage, he was young full of strength and innocence. And now, after his long history of joy and suffering in this world, he finally obtains the serenity of eternity. Through the various kinds of experiences like youth and old age, joy and fear, life and death, punishment and mercy, now he knows that these opposing elements are not only contrasting each other, but coexisting in each other and essential to the development of life.

Notes

- 1) Ed. by D.S.Brewer, *The Parlement of Foulys* (Manchester Univ. Press., 1972), p.28,
- 2) Ed. by Peter Happe, *The Castle of Perseverance in Four Morality Plays* (Penguin Books, 1979)
- 3) J.Huizinga and translated by F.Hopman. *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Penguin Books, Reprinted in 1979, First published in 1924), pp.173-174.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p.175

- 5) Fr. Hugh McKay, Saint Francis of Assisi, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* (Everyman's Library, 1973), pp.3-4.
- 6) Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought. St. Augustine to Ockham* (The Merlin Press, 1959), p.44. 1959), p.44.
- 7) Philippa Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature* (Elek Books, Latimer Trend & Co., 1976), p.152. 76), p.152.
- 8) T.S.R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages* (Thames & Hudson, 1972), pp.44-45.
- 9) J. Huizinga, *The Waning of The Middle Ages*, p.139.
- 10) T.S.R.Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages*, p.104.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p.44.
- 12) Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought*, p.44.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p.19.
- 14) *Op.Cit.*, p.186.
- 15) *Op.Cit.*, 1.1722
- 16) *Ibid.*, 1.1423
- 17) *Ibid.*, 1.2579
- 18) Robert Potter, *The English Morality Plays* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p.28.
- 19) Ed. by A.C.Cawley, *Everyman* (Manchester Univ. Press., Re-Printed in 1978, First published in 1963) pp.xiv-xv.