MYSTERY AND PERFORMANCE IN BARRY UNSWORTH'S *MORALITY PLAY*[1]

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According to Raymond Chandler, the formula of the detective story has always been fluid, unfixed, too varied for easy classifications. Its form has "never really been licked, and those who have prophesised its decline and fall have been wrong for that very reason.... The academicians have never got their dead hands on it" (in Felman 1983: 23). Edgar Allan Poe set the basis of this formula, which has been endlessly reworked in a literary genre of astonishing stability and continuing popularity. Despite Chandler's assertion, most critical works on detective fiction seem to have no difficulty whatsoever in describing the main points of the formula and the subgenres it has produced —the classical whodunnit, the hard-boiled detective story, the spy story, the gangster saga, etc. Likewise, the reader interested in tracing the origins of the genre is invariably referred to the 1840s and Poe's Dupin stories, which first articulated the formula of the classical detective tale. The genre did not become popular, though, till the end of the nineteenth century. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories marked the beginning of the heyday of detective fiction, to which some Victorian novelists of the 1850s and 1860s —notably Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens— also contributed. The genre developed from all these precedents and the end of World War I brought with it Agatha Christie's first masterpieces, which were followed by the works of Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham and Michel Innes, to name a few. The list could go on and on to include examples of postmodern detective fiction, like Peter Ackroyd's

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Hawksmoor (1985) or Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy: City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986), and *The Locked Room* (1986), whose treatment of the classical formula would no doubt account for the fluidity that Raymond Chandler attributes to the genre, despite its intrinsic fixity.

Adding works at this (late twentieth-century) end of the spectrum seems to be less problematic than going back beyond Poe, unquestionably presented as the first step to be climbed by anyone intent on going into the literary world of the whodunnit. Thus, to mention just one example, Martin Priestman (1998: 1) begins his study on crime fiction by pointing out that "the detection-based "whodunnit" firmly separated itself once and for all from the rest of literature in 1841 with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"". I do not intend to problematise Poe's role as the pioneer of the genre, all the more so given that his name appears as early as the third sentence of this article. However, the recurrence of Poe's name at the very start of most scholarly works on the subject may be regarded as one of the reasons why alternative approaches are particularly welcome. That is the case with John G. Cawelti's study, which inscribes detective fiction into the larger framework of formula literature. Popular story types such as the western, the detective story, or the melodrama are dealt with by Cawelti as embodiments of archetypal story forms in terms of specific cultural materials.[2] Accordingly, when confronted with a detective story, one may choose to analyse the elements that make up the formula and relate it to the particular context in which the work was produced, but one may equally approach it in relation to larger, more general literary archetypes, accepted as such as far as Western culture is concerned. These two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive, but, while the former would lead us to take as a point of departure the specific ingredients of the formula as established by Poe and Conan Doyle, the latter would allow us to go beyond these masters of detection and into the larger realm of adventure and mystery. This second approach would explain why many critics of detective fiction go back to *Oedipus Rex* as one of the earliest examples of the genre's fundamental principle —the investigation and discovery of hidden secrets— which in turn relates it to the practices of psychoanalysis (Felman 1983). Alternatively, other scholars deal with detective story patterns in the light of those of classical comedy, with its conflict between two sets of characters and its happy ending made possible through the intervention of a detective as comic hero, a problem solver in the tradition of the tricky slave, the benevolent elf, or Jung's archetypal Wonderful Boy (Grella 1976). In the same line, other approaches call attention to detective fiction as a modern version of the medieval morality play, in the sense of "the evildoer being discovered and punished, good triumphing over evil in the end —the Protestant ethos— which helps to explain why the genre was not so popular in police states" (Melling 1996: 9). In fact, the element of morality in detective fiction has often been stressed

—Erik Routley even entitles his book *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story* (1972)— as representative of the Puritan ethos.

The relationship between the detective story and the morality play seemed particularly interesting to me when I first came across it in a critical study, in part because just then I happened to be reading Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play* (1995), a novel that can be considered as a kind of hybrid of the two genres. The action of this novel takes place in the late fourteenth century, a time of war, plague, famine and deep religious feeling. The story is narrated by Nicholas Barber, an irreverent twenty-something cleric who has left his diocese without his Bishop's leave. After singing in taverns, gambling away his holy relics and going to bed with a married woman, he decides to hide in the woods for some time, at least till the Bishop and the wronged husband lose hope of ever finding him. It is then that he comes across a troupe of travelling players grieving over the death of one of their number. After some argument, Nicholas is accepted into the troupe and hastily apprenticed in medieval stagecraft. The sense of time and place evoked by the narrative is as powerful as the suspense that arises from the mysterious death of Thomas Wells, a twelve-year-old boy found murdered in a small village where the troupe stops to arrange a Christian burial for Brendan, the dead player. Weary and penniless, they decide to rent a barn and put on a play there in order to get some money for the rest of their journey to Durham, where they are due to stage a Christmas performance. Yet the take at the gate for their *Play of Adam* is so small that failure, cold and hunger make them daring enough to attempt something new: they will play events "done in the world" and "done only once", events whose meaning God has not given as there are "no words written for them" (p. 63). They will play the murder of young Thomas Wells, and they will do so following the conventions of what they are most familiar with: the morality play. The boy's body was found by the roadside and a young woman is already awaiting execution. They only have to gather the details of the murder and make them fit into the larger framework of the moralities. Yet the more they try to act out their story of crime and detection, the more they become aware of discrepancies, things that contradict the official version of events.

The play, which they call *The Play of Thomas Wells*, becomes the excuse for and the means to investigating the boy's death, each performance bringing the players closer to the true murderer. It also creates a second diegetic level in the narrative as the performances —three in all— are carefully described by Nicholas Barber and inserted into a story that begins when the narrator becomes a member of the troupe. As he puts it, it is a death (Brendan's) that begins it all and another death (Thomas Wells') that leads them on (p. 1). The story told by Nicholas Barber is, then, the story of an investigation that develops throughout a series of performances based on the story of the crime. According to Tzvetan Todorov

(1977), it is precisely this duality that lies at the basis of all detective fiction: the murder constitutes a concealed "first story" which has taken place prior to most narrated action, but which compels the latter as a "second story" that focuses the reader's attention on a slow process of uncovering. The end of the second story —the story of the investigation— is also the moment when the hitherto concealed first story —the story of the crime— comes to be told in its entirety. The players' performances highlight this duality while simultaneously emphasising the process as much as the result. This is the defining feature of one of the subgenres of detective fiction: the procedural tale, where "excitement and suspense are primarily generated by our involvement with the process by which the crime or crimes are dealt with" (Cawelti 1977: 126). Instead of having an Auguste Dupin, a Sherlock Holmes or an Hercules Poirot, whose thought processes are largely hidden from the reader in tantalizing and mystifying hints, we have a troupe of players who literally perform for us what they know and so let us in on all their deductions. As their investigation advances, their play changes and their situation becomes more and more dangerous since they lack the immunity that would protect any of the above-mentioned detectives. Suspense arises not only from the unknown identity of the murderer but also from the very process of the inquiry, to which the reader has direct access in the form of a morality play.

In the light of what has been said so far, performance appears to be a key element in Barry Unsworth's novel. Firstly, it emphasises the link between detective fiction and the medieval morality play. Secondly, it highlights the duality that defines the detective story, which reveals, according to Peter Hühn (1987: 452), a further duality when works like this are approached from a narratological point of view. Thus, the usual constellation of story and discourse can be said to occur twice over: the story of the crime is mediated in the discourse of the investigation, and the story of the investigation is, in turn, mediated in the narrator's discourse. This discourse is explicitly presented as a chronicle written by a Watson-type figure. Following the convention, Nicholas writes the players' story, leaving "the judgement to those who *read* my words" (p. 25, emphasis added). Making him a priest thus serves several purposes: he is the only one who can master words and, in addition, both his religious beliefs and the fact that playing is explicitly forbidden to members of the clergy prevent him from feeling completely integrated in the troupe. He is now an active participant, now a mere spectator, simultaneously inside and outside the action. This distance, which is but a version of the gap between Watson and Holmes, makes him the ideal intermediary between the reader and the events recounted in the novel, the same as Watson in the Holmes stories. And it is the particular narrative produced by this young cleric that gives performance one more significant role: that of destabilising the ground on which both morality plays and classical detective stories were built. Thus, Nicholas'

account of the events, the way in which he tells the story, can eventually be said to question the belief that the universe has a centre —be it God (Logos) or human reason— which can explain all and solve all puzzles, as well as the reliance on a coherent reality (the World) and a unified human subject (the Self). Unsworth's novel, then, could be related to what Michael Holquist calls "the metaphysical detective story", represented mainly by Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur* and Borges' "Death and the Compass" as examples of fictional works in the detective genre that are not so much concerned with "a neat ending" that can ultimately "fill the void of the world" with definite answers to questions which can therefore be forgotten, but that, on the contrary, try explicitly to "dramatize that void" (Holquist 1971: 153-155). Significantly enough, the narrator, who often has strong forebodings about the future consequences of his colleagues' actions, points out to them that "[i]f we make our own meanings, God will oblige us to answer our own questions, He will leave us *in the void* without the comfort of His Word" (p. 65, emphasis added).

In its way, the medieval morality play filled the void of the world with a monolithic certainty that immediate experience is part of a suspenseful but ultimately comforting well-made cosmic plot. This certainty had its source in the belief that an acute and all-encompassing "eye" can explain and solve all puzzles, or even that puzzles are only such in our eyes, but not in God's. With the passing of time, sacred plots went through a process of secularization: God's Book of Nature gave way to Newton's Universe, and the Maker's eye found a literary surrogate in the detective (a private *eye,* sometimes) who, like the scientist or the psychoanalyst, used the inductive method to go from facts to an explanation of the crime, the mystery, the deviation. The neat plots of detective fiction thus reassured the reader that logic combined with imagination could still deliver men from evil and restore them to the understanding and order that the crime had disrupted. As Peter Brooks (1984: 7) points out, we still live in the age of plots now, reading Harlequin romances and watching television serials, but even though we cannot "do without plots, we nonetheless feel uneasy about them, and feel obliged to show up their arbitrariness, to parody their mechanisms while admitting our dependance on them". It is this evolution from certainty to uneasiness that lies at the core of *Morality Play.*

The age of the moralities was one in which religion was an integral part of life. The audience brought to these performances the same attitude as they would to a sermon, and they were taught by religion to regard the plays' ending as a really conclusive one, the end of life and of time itself, followed by the bliss of eternity. Plots were based on medieval doctrine, a doctrine which, as L. A. Cormican puts it, encouraged, and even needed, a readiness to face the fact of evil in man. Yet there was neither bleakness nor pessimism, as what really mattered "was not the amount of evil that prevailed temporarily, but the power of divine mercy to lead

man, even through evil, to a happy eternity where alone results are lasting" (Cormican 1976: 188). To reach eternity, though, man had to walk the road of life, where he was bound to meet enemies and helpmates —Vices that hindered his way to God, and Virtues that helped him overcome temptations and difficulties. All characters were then allegorical figures that gathered around an equally allegorical representation of man as Homo Viator, a version of Everyman or Mankind.

The action of Unsworth's *Morality Play* also presents the characters on the road: they are travelling players but, as Nicholas remarks on seeing them, not of the wandering sort since the master of the troupe has the emblem of a lord (their patron) sewn to his cap. They have a destination: the castle of their lady's cousin in Durham, where they have been sent to perform as a Christmas gift, a destination which appears as a kind of Heaven on earth to them. There they will be given food, wages and a roof. They will forget the freezing cold of December, the hunger and the fear of the Plague, and all their hardships on the way will be rewarded. They are a group of seven people when Nicholas first sees them, but they constitute, nonetheless, one more version of Everyman: man and woman, young and old, healthy and sick, pliable and obstinate, often "speaking with one voice like a chorus, but yet in turn, so it resembled a scale in music" (p. 8). After Brendan's death, the troupe is made up of Springer, an ingenuous but sparkling child; Tobias, a moderate man with the kind of wisdom that only old age can bring; Stephen, quarrelsome and stubborn; Straw, docile and light-hearted; Margaret, the only woman, a former whore now coupled with Stephen and who helps with the props and costumes but is not allowed to play; and last, but not least, Martin, the master-player, clever and devoted to his work with a passion that sometimes seems to take him dangerously close to madness. On their first appearance, they are all crouched around Brendan's dying body. Hidden among the trees, Nicholas, who comes upon them "as do the Virtues and Vices that contend in a Morality" (p. 11), has to admit that "it was as if they played his [Brendan's] death for me and this was a strange thing, as they did not know I watched, and I did not know what they were" (p. 1). This sets the tone for the rest of the story, as Nicholas' narrative more often that not invites the reader to see the first diegetic level as a play which includes in turn another play (that on the boy's murder), both devised as moralities and gathered together between the covers of a novel entitled *Morality Play*.

Medieval actors performed mystery cycles and morality plays, biblical stories and spiritual allegories the meanings of which were sanctioned in Holy Writ. No wonder, then, that Martin's idea of performing the murder of young Thomas Wells should raise disturbing moral and conceptual issues. The players recoil from the project at first, reflecting on the fact that there is no authority for it since it is not in the Bible. Besides, the murder has no universal significance: it is something that

happened once and still belongs to the village and the people involved in crime, not to men and the world. They would have to interpret it, in both senses of the term: in order to *perform* the murder, they would have to *explain* it, to give everything its right meaning. But men can only *use* God's meanings, making meanings is heresy (pp. 63-64). Despite all arguments against, they feel the allurement of Martin's proposal. They are tempted, though, not so much by the prospect of huge profits but, rather, by the freedom to play "anything in the world", a freedom that, as Nicholas remarks, brings power. In offering the world to them that day, Martin "played Lucifer [...] in that cramped space of the barn" (p. 65) and tempted them just as Everyman is tempted on his journey. Nicholas' words highlight the intriguing duplicity that exists in Martin's character, which the reader is made to feel throughout the whole novel. The narrator admires him for his loyalty, cleverness and dexterity, but he also finds something dark, even wicked, in his nature (p. 78). He is both alluring and mysterious, but not more so than the classical detective, who also has something of the criminal in him (cf. Poe's "The Purloined Letter", Borges' "Death and the Compass", Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, etc.). This duplicity explains why the characters are appalled and yet attracted by the master-player's proposal. Eventually, they fail to resist Martin (Lucifer)'s temptation and, in agreement with the logic of the moralities, they have to face their particular version of hell.

The situation in which the players find themselves, once they decide to play the murder, is the typical situation at the start of every detective story. According to John G. Cawelti (1977: 80-81), the mystery may centre upon the identity and motive of the criminal or, when the criminal and his/her purposes are known, the problem may be to determine the means used to commit the crime or evidence of its authorship. The murderer of Thomas Wells is already in prison so, at this stage at least, the players' endeavours are aimed at explaining the way in which the murder took place and how the evidence led to the culprit. They walk around the town separately in order to gather further information, which they then share with one another. Thus, they discover that Thomas Wells and his parents had gone to the nearby village of Arlington in order to sell a cow. Once this is done, Thomas' father starts drinking and his mother gives Thomas a purse with the money from the cow and bids him to go home, but he never reaches his destination. He is last seen on the road by a man gathering wood. A young woman is also seen, this time by the Lord's confessor —a Benedictine monk often referred to as simply "the Monk"— near the place where the boy was found, strangled and with no money on him. The Lord's confessor goes to the house where the girl lives with her widowed father, the Weaver—as in a morality play, the names of all generic characters are capitalised— and finds the purse there. In less than two days, she is tried, convicted and sent to prison, where she is still waiting to be hanged.

The road where Thomas is found represents again the road of life. The death that threatens the soul in the moralities is also now the death of the body. As the girl lures Thomas off the road, he follows her off the straight and narrow path: he falls into temptation, and so, he meets his death. A few questions arise as a result of the players' reconstruction of the story: why did he follow her? Surely she didn't kill him on the road, in broad daylight, where she could be easily seen. And how did a weak girl manage to strangle a healthy boy? Unwilling to waste time on further speculation, since they have to rehearse at least once before the performance, they decide to play the story as they have it. They use the speeches they know from the moralities and so vices and virtues fight for the soul of the girl, who eventually follows Avaritia and kills the boy to get the money. They also rely heavily on improvisation, as the speeches learnt by heart cannot always be made to fit the story of the crime. It is this improvisation that leads the performance to an ending that is not an ending at all, in the sense that it does not solve the doubts they initially had and, on top of that, it gives way to more and more puzzling questions: what was the Lord's confessor doing outside the castle grounds? How did he recognise a serf, a plain looking girl who would surely be wearing a hood or a scarf in such cold weather? Why would she keep the purse in her house, with so many fields around that would surely provide safer hiding places? The play ends with all these questions open, as no one in the troupe or the audience can provide an answer. Only the girl, who is still alive, can.

It is Martin who finds a way to bribe the jailer and together with Nicholas gains access to the girl's cell. They soon realise that she is deaf and dumb but Martin, struck with love at first sight, manages to understand her and make himself understood. Once again, Nicholas sees and describes the scene as a play, this time a dumb show in which Martin uses established (player's) gestures whose meaning Nicholas explains to the reader. Little by little, we end up by sharing the narrator's puzzlement, either as a spectator of reality seen as performance or as a player confused between "the playing of the thing and the living of it" (p. 86). Performance thus fuses rather than separates the novel's two diegetic levels. Whether literal (*The Play of Thomas Wells*) or figurative (the novel's characters as acting within a larger play), performance is ultimately used to question the view that reality is coherent and that there is a definable human essence.[3]

As the girl turns out to be a scapegoat and the clues to be not real clues but red herrings, the players' particular investigation takes a new turn. The objective now is to discover not only the way in which the murder was committed but, primarily, the (no longer known) identity of the murderer and the reasons for the crime. Their first performance was not "the True Play of Thomas Wells" (p. 127), but a faked story. As Peter Hühn (1987: 454) puts it, the criminal is not only the author of the crime, but also the author of a false story that skilfully rewrites the real story

of the crime. Thus the first performance follows the criminal's script, but, as usual, he cannot avoid leaving traces that disrupt coherence and create mystery, a fact which accounts for the play's open ending. Following Hühn's argument, this mystery transforms the world of the novel into a conglomeration of potential signs, a "text" in which the mystery should be read. It is the detective's task to set the limits of this text by separating the relevant from the non-relevant signs/clues, which he does in a way that presents his procedures as a version of the "hermeneutic circle": he devises interpretive patterns to integrate signs and he uses new signs to modify and adjust these patterns accordingly (Hühn 1987: 455). The troupe's successive performances of the play are but a measure of their attempts to close the circle of their hermeneutic activity. As Nicholas remarks, they use what they learn to change the play but they also learn through the playing (p. 170), and so they seem to be going round and round a never-ending circle in which new pieces of information lead to new versions of the play, which in turn lead to new pieces of information. Their duty is to reach Durham by Christmas Eve, they have money, but they cannot leave the town because by the end of their first performance they are already trapped in their roles, trapped in the play.

The players' feeling that "the play and the life outside it were not clearly distinguished" (p. 127) transforms their doubts about the plot of the play into a deeper and more disquieting suspicion. The troupe's practical problems with the story and performance of the murder thus lead them to a growing disappointment in taken-for-granted certainties. Their increasing fear, especially the narrator's, is but an objective correlative for their dread.[4] That is why Nicholas feels strangely compelled to join the audience when they shout against the members of the troupe, now playing without masks, for not giving them the truth about the murder. "I shared their rage" (p. 137), Nicholas says, but his is not a rage against the actors, but against something deeper or higher which he can neither define nor understand.

In the light of the new turn taken by the story, the players' initial belief that the play did not follow any authority appears then to be partial. Their first performance did not rely on the Bible but was still based on another authority, in the sense that it could be regarded as a re-enactment of the official account of the murder. If this official version of the murder is a misleading rewriting of the story of the crime, the criminal must be whoever devised the false story and tried to impose a premature closure on the events. The second performance presents the six characters of the play (Margaret is excluded from the acting) in search of an author. All threads lead to the Lord's confessor, the Benedictine monk who accused the girl and found the purse in her house. But, if he is the author, that author turns out to be dead. The sudden appearance of a group of soldiers with the monk's dead body carried on horseback interrupts the second performance, which lacks, once again, a conclusive ending. Despite its slightly modified title —*The True Play of*

Thomas Wells— truth seems to recede as the players get closer to it. The soldiers arrest them and take them to the Lord's castle, where they are bid to play the murder for the third time and before a most singular audience: the Lord himself, Sir Richard de Guise, who is brought into the play by Martin in the role of Pride wearing the mask of Superbia:

> He [Martin] was using a voice not his own. It came through the cruel and bitter mouth of the mask, slow, deliberate, with a sound of metal in it: it was the voice of the Lord. I [Nicholas] glanced at the others as they stood there motionless and stiff with no parts to play. Straw and Springer had moved closer together and they were holding hands. And now Superbia spoke again, again in that borrowed voice.
>
> "What care I for one dead boy, or five, or fifteen, so I keep my name and state? Pride it was that held the court, that buried the boy in dark of night, that hanged the traitor monk in his shift..."
>
> It was more than the voice now. To my staggered mind and fevered eyes, as I looked from the mask of Superbia to the face of the seated man [the Lord], I saw them come closer in resemblance until in that flickering light there was only one face, that of the mask, with its sneering mouth and bulging eyes and jutting brows (p. 161).

Yet, it could not be otherwise, the performance is interrupted by the Lord's daughter. Nicholas takes the chance and manages to escape, leaving his friends trapped, literally, in the castle and, figuratively, in the play. Saving them would amount to imposing an ending by solving the mystery. Though it is revealed in the end, it is worth noting that the identity of the criminal in classical detective fiction is not the result of the discourse, but, rather, its point of departure. From this perspective, then, the fact that the play remains unended should be regarded as an exponent of the players' frustrated wish to tell, and, ultimately, as a frustrated search for origins.

Endings in detective fiction mean the collapse of the two stories: the story of the investigation ends with the detective's final explanation, which includes a reconstructed version of the story of the crime. Nicholas' escape thus takes us back to the first diegetic level, where the murder of Thomas Wells is no longer presented as a play but merely as a part of a larger morality play that includes *The (True) Play of Thomas Wells*. After the fashion of a morality play then, that Nicholas comes upon another character: the Justice. He is simultaneously the allegorical figure — Justice— and the King's Justice, who has come to town for reasons unknown until this very moment. As Nicholas shares what he knows with him, the Justice manages to solve the mystery. Thomas Wells was not the first one. Other boys, orphans and vagabonds, had disappeared near the town. Only two things made Thomas different: he was found and he had a purse. The murderer was not the Lord, but his son. The monk brought him children for his acts of sodomy. When he finished

with them, he broke their neck and the monk buried the bodies. But he had no time to do so with Thomas Wells. The sun rose, there were people in the woods, so he left him by the roadside and invented the story of the theft, a mistake he paid for with his own life.

Following Foucault, Uri Eisenzweig (1983: 12-13) calls attention to the narrative nature of the penal system as the victim's corpse invariably stands for the absent story of the crime, while detection replaces the criminal's dead body. Detective fiction offers narration in the place of vision. The unmasking of the criminal leaves the reader with the certainty that s/he will be punished: reading came to replace the sight of the criminal's dead body at a time in which people started to feel more inclined to peruse the pages of a book than watch the culprit's hanging, as was the case before the first aesthetic rewritings of crime. Accordingly, the story of detection in *Morality Play* ends up with Nicholas and the Justice unburying the dead body of Thomas Wells, which not even his mother had been allowed to see. The body still bears the signs of the crime (sodomy) but also the marks of the Plague. Thus, though the murderer is not apprehended by the Justice, the reader is led to assume that the boy passed the disease on to him. The boy's dead body thus allows for the reconstruction of the story of the crime and adds the last piece to the story of the detection, where the remarks on the Plague replace the account of the criminal's punishment.

Though it is not the players but the Justice who eventually solves the mystery, the novel could appear to have a closed ending, even though *The Play of Thomas Wells* lacks it. However, Nicholas' (and the reader's) sense of relief, which is also the ease of closure, are upset as (the) Justice behaves/acts out of character. He did not come to the village to avenge Thomas Wells and the other boys, or to prevent the hanging of an innocent. He did not listen to Nicholas because he was worried about the players' fate. In a word, he had not gone there to make justice but to get information about Sir Richard de Guise, one of the strongest barons in England, who had become dangerously powerful and with whom the King had had trouble for years. The only way to make him dutifully submissive to the King was to find something against him, something like a story of sodomy involving his own son and heir. That is why, to Nicholas' indignation, the Justice remarks that they have been "fortunate in the nature of the crime" (p. 176). He regards the dead boys as useful for his purposes, and the girl and the players as mere incidents. The Justice turns out not to be Justice and the apparently well-made plot reveals its flawed nature:

> "[D]o you think I would leave [the King's] business in York and come these weary miles in this weather, to this wretched inn where I am served food not fit for the swill-tub, for the sake of a dead serf and a dumb goatgirl?"

> "I did not think there could be other reasons for your coming. I thought— "
> "You thought I was one of your company, one of the players, somewhat belated, come to put on the mask of Justitia in your True Play of Thomas Wells. There was the Monk and the Lord and the Weaver and the Knight. And now the Justice, who sets all things right in the end. But I am in a different play" (pp. 173-74).

Thus, Nicholas realises that life is not a (morality) play where everything forms part of a carefully devised plot. By the end of the novel, he is fully convinced that our lives are ruled by chance, which contrasts with his former belief that "what is incident to the ignorant, the wise see as design" (p. 24). It was only chance that had forced on them and the murdered boy "a part in another play, that in which the Justice was a player and the King also" (p. 180). Ultimately, the play *en abyme* does not reinforce the "reality" of the first diegetic level but, rather, questions it. Like *The Play of Thomas Wells*, life is a *mise-en-scene* that does not follow any pre-established plan. It simply goes on as if impelled by the casual changes of script in a play that human reason cannot explain, and not because God's designs are undecipherable but, more disquietingly, because perhaps the latter do not exist at all. If the play in which we are all actors and actresses cannot be inscribed in a superior, overall plot that justifies it, then it is useless to ask for logical explanations since, as with the questions Nicholas poses to the Justice, there may be no answer or, at best, only a disappointing one.

Despite the fact that the criminal's identity is unveiled, the novel ends with a feeling of uneasiness, frustration and uncertainty that sets it apart from both moralities and classical detective stories. The openness of *The Play of Thomas Wells*, the suspicion that the Justice's message to the Lord may have come too late (or have even been completely ignored) to save the players, whom the reader never hears of again, Nicholas' doubts about Martin's love for the girl, now that she is free..., all weigh strongly with the reader. His/her expectations for an ending which gives meaning to everything that has come before are thus frustrated, as is his/her belief in a universe where harmony can only be temporarily disrupted and is eventually restored once evil has been isolated and done away with. Nothing can be taken for granted, neither order (divine or human), nor feelings, nor even our own self. This is what Nicholas learns and this is also the reason why, on being offered a recommendation which would enable him to return to his Bishop's authority, he refuses to go back. He once thought that being a subdeacon was his true self, but he was only acting at the direction of the Bishop, "the master-actor for all the company of the Cathedral" (p. 187). He did not know at the time, but he does now. Others may believe in a coherent and unitary self, as he used to, they may let themselves be trapped in a role for fear of admitting that there is no essence that holds their selves together, but he has learnt, and so he will remain a player. To Nicholas, then, being a player amounts to facing man's nature, the fact that we all

play roles and wear masks which change as a player changes parts from one performance to the next. Eventually, these masks reveal rather than conceal what we are, because the only truth, if there is any, is the teasingly open truth of the playing.

Notes

[1]. The research carried out for the writing of this article has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (Department of Humanities and Social Sciences), BFF2001-1775. This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper delivered as a contribution to the 24th AEDEAN International Conference (Ciudad Real, December 2000).

[2]. Cawelti's work constitutes a well-developed synthesis of several critical traditions: the analysis of genres, conventions and archetypes that began with Aristotle's *Poetics*; mythic criticism, with Northrop Frye as its main representative; and the study of popular literary formulae, including practical manuals for writers of popular fiction.

[3]. See Alison Lee (1990: 80-98) for an analysis of the role played by performance in the postmodern debate. She approaches the subject through a study of the use that three postmodern novels —Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, John Fowles' *The Magus*, and D. M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*— make of several aspects of theatrical representation as a means to destabilising realist assumptions regarding the relationship between reality and fiction, the coherence of the self, the authority of textual process and textual reception, etc.

[4]. This distinction between fear and dread is developed by William Spanos, who takes the terms in turn from Martin Heidegger. Fear always has an object which can be analysed, attacked or endured. It has no ontological status because, having an object that can be taken hold of, as it were, one is certain that it can be dealt with. Dread, on the other hand, has nothing as its object. It is existencial and ontological, as it represents the essential impossibility of defining the "what" (Spanos 1987: 15-16).

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SMART PRINCESSES, CLEVER CHOICES. THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE CINDERELLA PARADIGM AND THE SHAPING OF FEMALE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ADULT AND CHILDREN'S CONTEMPORARY REWRITINGS OF FAIRY TALES[1]

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The fairy tale, relying on various forms of cultural transmission and ever-changing ideological configuration for its very existence, has pride of place in the system of children's literature. The initiating and socializing function of children's literature, concerned, among other things, with transmitting the cultural inheritance of values, experiences, and prohibitions, makes it necessary to address an audience whose ability to decode must rely on their recognition of familiar genres and narratives —hence the value of retelling as a strategy to activate the implied child reader's often partial competency and this reader's aesthetic pleasure of recognition and appreciation. Even a hasty overview of the rise of the literary fairy tale in Europe reveals evidence of its hybridity and intertextual nature. As we are often reminded, the fairy tale was not originally a genre meant primarily for children, and was appropriated in Europe during the last three centuries by educated audiences who turned the oral tradition into "a type of literary discourse about mores, values and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time" (Zipes 1991: 3).

Any scholar who handles fairy tales (as folklorists are perfectly aware) must necessarily abandon the idea of a faithful, "original tale" and take the plunge into the wide sea of folklore variants in different countries or centuries, with diverse historical perspectives and ideological conformations. The case of "Cinderella" is emblematic: although it exists in hundreds of versions, as testified by folklore

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