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Creating Interior Mayhem in *The Castle of Perseverance*

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Abstract

This article examines the fifteenth-century morality play *The Castle of Perseverance* in conversation with the 2015 Disney/Pixar film *Inside Out*. The film certainly serves as a contemporary afterlife of the psychomachia, externalizing the turmoil of a young girl into the epic journey and struggle of her embodied emotions like Joy, Sadness, and Disgust. I discuss how I teach *Inside Out* and *The Castle of Perseverance* together to undergraduate students and argue that the film also offers an entry-point into potential immersive performance practices of *The Castle of Perseverance*; audiences may have followed both a central linear arc (the journey of Mankind) while exploring the narrative tools of the playing-space on their own.

While preparing my Medieval and Early Modern Drama syllabus in October 2020, I was arrested by a flippant Halloween-themed Twitter post by the Middle English Text Series account that proposed *The Castle of Perseverance* as a haunted house story. “Think about it,” it said. “The protagonist spends his entire life in and out of a castle that is beset upon by otherworldly forces who alternately tempt and torment him until his death” (@METS_Texts, October 29, 2020). Beyond the potential for psychomachia as gothic horror, I was interested in the performance space of the haunted house: a series of nonlinear encounters that create individualized affective experiences. The haunted house serves as a rough cousin to both contemporary site-specific theater like Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* and the permeable staging of early English morality plays. Indeed, contemplating *The Castle of Perseverance* as a haunted house spoke to my own pedagogical anxieties about teaching the fifteenth-century morality play to undergraduate students, especially about how to choose realistically assignment-sized excerpts from a play whose power inheres in its massive scope. How does one uniformly excerpt a play whose staging plan and use of improvisational breakaways seem to prioritize diverging audience experiences? Choosing only ‘key’ fragments from the arc of Mankind’s fall and repentance would flatten the play’s movement between linear didacticism and nonlinear ludic revelry.¹ *Castle’s* shifting modes invite, like a haunted house, varying pathways of engagement through its vast totality.

In the conclusion to her recent book *Theater of the World: Selfhood in the English Morality Play*, Julie Paulson offers the 2015 Disney/Pixar film *Inside Out* as an aid to instructors struggling with similar questions about teaching allegorical drama. Paulson illustrates how the film demonstrates the continued vitality of the medieval psychomachia, focusing both on the film’s intricate interior landscape that allows for a “pre-Cartesian performative selfhood” and the penitential narrative that allows the main character Riley to “fall,” confess, and engineer a communal reconciliation among her family (2019, 168–9, 173). In this article, I take up Paulson’s consideration of *Inside Out* as an afterlife of medieval psychomachia and offer a model for excerpting *The Castle of Perseverance* that both solves the dilemma of the play’s massive size and recreates its non-linear, multidirectional, fundamentally disruptive dramaturgy in the classroom.

Teaching medieval and early modern survey courses offers an excellent space to consider afterlives; in addition to the intertextual relationships between course plays, I encourage students to bring in the thematic or generic inheritances that they spot in contemporary pop culture. For example, when reading the domestic tragedy *Arden of Feversham* we discuss the long history of the murder ballad, from the broadsides of the English Broadside Ballad Archive to The Chicks’ 2000 song “Goodbye Earl.” However, the survey structure sometimes leads students to consider the reading schedule a teleological progress towards Shakespeare. I’m often working to push back against student desire to center course playtexts that represent, to them, a more naturalistic approach to character: the turn away from the allegorical towards the individual, or away from the psychomachia and towards the soliloquy. *The Castle of Perseverance* serves as a challenge, given its length, scale, and seemingly sedate

¹ I am particularly thinking of Claire Sponsler’s reading of “unruly bodies” in morality plays in *Drama and Resistance*; her examination of the carnivalesque would also certainly speak in interesting ways to a contemporary haunted house (1997, 75–83).

pacing.² While later course texts like *Doctor Faustus* certainly adapt and modify the use of allegory from medieval morality plays, I want to avoid the potential dismissal of medieval moralities as ‘pre-lives’ or less sophisticated forebearers of commercial playhouse performance.

Inside Out offers a narrative journey of its ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ protagonists; a preteen girl named Riley learns to navigate depression while her allegorical emotions Joy, Fear, Disgust, and Anger learn to make space for a personified Sadness. However, *Inside Out* also offers a series of spatial or organizational heuristics that offer modes of audience engagement independently of Riley’s plot. What I mean by spatial and organizational heuristics are frameworks of audience engagement within a text that act as transferrable tools for self-representation or identification; perhaps, our most infamous example is the stubborn persistence of Hogwarts Houses as a kind of pop culture Myers-Briggs. *Inside Out* offers Riley as a representative case study (an Everygirl) while making clear that her allegorical cast of emotions and her intricate interior geography are present in and available to others (including the audience). While *Inside Out* imparts these templates as a parting gift with which the audience might play in their own time, *The Castle of Perseverance* switches between linear narrative and interactive mayhem in a way that invites this contemplation both during *and* after a live performance. In the classroom, I use *Inside Out* to show my students how to use afterlives to read backward and demonstrate the comparative interactivity of a much older multimodal text.³

***Inside Out* and Riley as Everygirl**

Inside Out follows 11-year-old Riley’s emotional turbulence as she is forced to move from Minnesota to San Francisco with her family. Per the title, *Inside Out* moves between Riley’s outward actions and the inside of her head, her cognitive Headquarters populated by five allegorical emotions. These five emotions—Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger—are personifications who share the control panel of Riley’s actions and reactions. Outside of these Headquarters lie Riley’s five Islands of Personality, hovering plateaus that embody a core part of her sense of self like Family, Honesty, or Goofiness. *Inside Out* tracks the journey of Joy and Sadness as they attempt to return to Headquarters after being accidentally expelled to the outer margins of Riley’s mind, following a conflict that threatens the structural integrity of her Islands of Personality. Joy has previously reigned over all of the other emotions, attempting to marginalize Sadness by enclosing her within a chalk circle to prevent her from ruining Riley’s memories and actions. Without Joy, the other emotions (Anger, Fear, Disgust) are forced to take the helm to turbulent effects, while Joy comes to appreciate the contributions of Sadness as they venture through the industrial scaffolding of Riley’s mind. Riley’s allegorical emotions play analogous roles to the Vices and Virtues of a morality play, and their collaboration and reconciliation bring about Riley’s reconciliation with her family: a reconciliation that requires empathy and recognition rather than penitence (Paulson 2019, 173). As Paulson argues, without the presence of the divine, Riley’s interior becomes a “remarkably mechanistic” system of “storehouses, hydraulic lifts, conveyer belts, pneumatic tubes, front loaders, cranes, and an electric rail line” (2019, 173). Yet, the

² There are also comparatively fewer pedagogical resources for medieval drama; I am grateful to my fellow participants in the Folger Library’s 2016–2017 Teaching Medieval Drama seminar, which centered some of these discussions.

³ I am grateful to Candace Barrington for discussing the use of contemporary afterlives to “read backward” in her response to the 2019 Sewanee Medieval Colloquium panel on American Afterlives in Medieval Texts and Culture, where I presented a very early version of this article.

film leaves several “metaphysical mysteries” about the organization and power of this interior machine that bars its audience from certain types of interactive engagement (2019, 173).

When teaching *Inside Out* as an afterlife of *The Castle of Perseverance*, I also focus on the invitations or unanswered questions that the film poses to its audience to consider the broader world of these internal Headquarters for characters other than Riley. After assigning the film for students to watch independently, I show two specific scenes in class to prompt discussion of these brief digressions. As Riley eats dinner after a disastrous day at school, the remaining Emotions helming the center console steer Riley into direct conflict with her parents (a clip of this scene is available on YouTube [here](#)). For the first time, the film zooms into the Headquarters of Riley’s parents, temporarily decentering Riley as the representative Everygirl of the film. This movement into the Headquarters of Riley’s parents provoked questions from psychologists invested in the cognitive worldbuilding of this film: for example, why are Riley’s parents’ emotions so much more homogeneous in appearance compared to her own (Markotić 2019, 167)? This zoom outward and into the ‘insides’ of other characters happens only twice; during this dinner scene and then at the end of the film, when Riley’s “penitential arc” has concluded and she triumphantly returns to playing hockey (Paulson 2019, 168). The film not only zooms into the Headquarters of Riley’s parents but also the Headquarters of a random teenage boy, who panics when Riley talks to him. This final dispersion outward allows us to leave Riley behind and consider variations within these intricate interior biomes. Riley’s journey towards empathy and recognition as a re-mapping of the self and other is offered to us, the audience, as a heuristic of engagement. Both the spatial template of the Islands of Personality and the varied casts of Emotions offer explicit invitations for interaction, invitations that have been taken up, of course, by teachers and psychologists who seek to use the film for pedagogical purposes (Bodnar 2015; Judd 2015; Markotić 2019). However, as a film, *Inside Out* is limited in the ways it can interact with its audience; viewers must speculate, as my students do, on their own. This in-class conversation about the affordances and limitations of film as a medium prepares my students for our discussion of *The Castle of Perseverance*, both on the page and as an imagined live performance.

Heuristics of Engagement in *The Castle of Perseverance*

When asked about the limited number of emotions portrayed in *Inside Out*, director Pete Docter responded, “[l]ook, I recognize that there are 15 to 20 emotions, but if we had 15 to 20 characters it would be mayhem” (Judd 2017). This mayhem is central to *The Castle of Perseverance*, which calls upon a dizzying number of vices and virtues to narrate the entire moral life of Humanum Genus or Mankind. This theatrical undertaking required at least 35 actors, five scaffolds, and a small mountain of props. The action of the play, very broadly summarized, follows Mankind from his initial temptation in the World by Covetousness, Greed, and their attendant Vices to his recovery by Penitence and reconciliation with the Virtues in the Castle of Perseverance, where he stays through a battle between the Vices and Virtues. However, Mankind is tempted back by Greediness towards the Vices as an old man, depositing his riches back in the Castle before being killed by Death’s Lance. Mankind’s Soul is carried towards Belial’s scaffold to be transported to Hell, but the Four Daughters of God intervene and advocate to God on Mankind’s behalf; God ultimately allows Mankind to leave Hell and sit on God’s scaffold in paradise. In performance, *The Castle of Perseverance* balances a linear narrative of Mankind’s fall and redemption with a playing space that might serve as a kind of immersive theatrical

playpen, one that offers many entry points and modes of orientation. In the final portion of this article, I want to focus on how *Inside Out* might offer students cues for engaging with *The Castle of Perseverance* that emphasize the interactive biome of the play without totally de-emphasizing its final arc towards repentance and divine judgment.

The stage plan of *The Castle of Perseverance* depicted within the Macro manuscript gestures at the variation possible in audience experience. The proportions and use of the *platea*, moat/ditch, and surrounding scaffolds have long been debated, especially when it comes to where the audience is located relative to these markers. Are they standing within a large inner circle as actors pass through them on their way to the Castle, or are they located outside a smaller inner circle, positioned in front of the scaffolds? The plan does explicitly gesture to two elements of staging; first, that the Castle itself is off-limits to the audience “for lettyng of syt, for ther schal be the best of all” (Klausner 2010).⁴ Second, that there are “stytelerys” who might be in charge of managing the audience and keeping passages clear for actors. Both of these details seem to signify a mobile and distributed audience who are placed somewhere within the action of the performance and a staging that offers the Castle itself as the only universally visible stage space. The 1979 PLS (Poculi Ludique Societas) production of *The Castle of Perseverance* deemphasized that potential for mobility or variability by organizing its seated audience in parallel scaffolds, leaving the space surrounding the *platea* available to the actors and maintaining clear lines of visibility no matter where audience members were positioned (Johnston, Parry and Edmunds 1980). Vices and Virtues who were not centered in performance also retreated to their respective scaffolds, keeping attention and sightlines focused on speaking characters.

Yet, the playtext of *The Castle of Perseverance* seems to preempt an audience whose engagement might falter in and out of the spoken text. The play’s “leisurely, or at times repetitive” style likely stems from the practical concern that many characters’ monologues could only be fully heard by certain sections of the audience, creating an individualized theatrical experience based on spectator location (Schell 1969, 3). Additionally, more than any other existing morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance* relies on unscripted, likely improvised action. Since the majority of the play’s 35 actors stay within the playing space, once introduced, the processional style of performance in *Castle* often leaves many characters within the playing space with no scripted action. If the action on scaffolds or in the Castle itself offers moments of maximum visibility and aural clarity, then the moments of procession and vacillation between these scaffolds might lapse into interactive exploration. For example, when Mankind is pricked by the lance of Penance and enticed into the Castle of Perseverance, the resulting 300 or so lines include the introduction of the Virtues of Humility, Patience, Charity, Abstinence, Industry, and Generosity. During this section, all seven Vices, as well as Belial, Backbiter, and the Bad Angel are left on the other side of the playing space, presumably either cavorting amongst themselves or interacting with the audience until the Bad Angel brings Belial news of Mankind’s conversion in line 1560. Given the processional quality of the plot, which follows Mankind’s vacillation between scaffolds, many characters are left lingering within the playing space, silently but visibly inhabiting their particular spiritual region. For example, when Mankind is welcomed within the Castle of Perseverance after his first spiritual reversal, Backbiter goes on a journey around the scaffolds, sharing

⁴ I have intentionally chosen the TEAMS Middle English Series public-facing online edition of *The Castle of Perseverance* to ensure instructor/student accessibility.

the ‘bad news’ with other vices and causing general violence and mayhem. Backbiter invites the audience to join him in this chaos and “make debate abouten to spring,” framing himself as a pedagogue of sin: “If any bakbyter here be lafte, / He may lere of me hys crafte” (1785, 87–8). Given the slow progression of Backbiter between scaffolds and his repetitive engagements with the Vices that result, Backbiter’s announcement might serve as a kind of cue that the performance is moving from centralized action to dispersed interaction; in addition to inciting them into games, Backbiter is cueing to the audience the play’s movement between two different types of engagement.

My vision of an interactive, chaotic staging of *The Castle of Perseverance* certainly aligns with existing scholarship on the play, especially Andrea Louise Young’s *Vision and Audience in Medieval Drama*. Young offers a stage plan that emphasizes audience fluidity, listing at least ten different audience positions or actions that would radically change their orientation and focus to the performance (35–8).⁵ I’m heavily influenced by the staging of more recent PLS productions, including the *Pride of Life* set in the midst of the 2016 New Chaucer Society conference in London (Sergi 2016). However, these critical debates can be difficult to translate into in-class activities for undergraduates with less experience in staging and theater history. Pairing *The Castle of Perseverance* with *Inside Out* as a contemporary afterlife offers my students a way to better understand the potentially radical choreography of the play. The film follows Riley’s/Joy’s particular journey to embrace Sadness and engage with the allegorical systems or maps of the film (the cast of Emotions or the Islands of Personality) as a heuristic for describing the interior self (or others). Because *Inside Out* is a film, those two modes of engagement are separated between the time run of the film itself and potential imaginative interactions after the film that the audience must take on themselves. In contrast, *The Castle of Perseverance* might actively switch in performance between visibility and mayhem, the turn between the communal engagement with Mankind’s linear narrative of fall and redemption and the individualized exploration of an allegorical world. When assigning *The Castle of Perseverance*, I split the text to try and recreate an experience through which wandering audience members might both follow the linear trajectory of Mankind and trace their own narrative trajectories and affiliations.

In order to re-create these potential jumps between modes of engagement, I divide my students into four groups and give each a different excerpted reading of *The Castle of Perseverance* that is due for our class session. This, as you can imagine, disrupts student assumptions that course readings should be linear, comprehensive, and standardized. The reading plan for the class looks somewhat like this:

⁵ See also Richard Southern’s vision in *Medieval Theatre in the Round* (1957) and subsequent debate by Schmitt, Kelley, Belsey, etc.

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Group 1 (World/Mundus) | Group 2 (Greed/Avarice) | Group 3 (Following Bad Angel/Good Angel) | Group 4 (Following Backbiter and Mercy) |
| ALL: Lines 1–156 | | | |
| 456–90, 575–814, 1836– 99, 2410–2777 | 815–905, 1010–1336, 1844–1968, 2410–2777 | 275–455, 1238–1336, 1715–90, 1968–2409 | 646–905, 1715– 1898 |
| ALL: Lines 2778–3029 (Death of Mankind) | | | |
| | | 3030–3128 | 3129–3560 |
| ALL: Lines 3598–3649 (Final Judgment of Mankind) | | | |

As the group designations demonstrate, each group is organized either by a focus on a particular location (World and their Scaffold, for example) or the trailing of a more mobile character like Backbiter. While we all read the opening of *The Castle of Perseverance* together, which includes a spoken summary of the play’s plot, the student reading experience then intentionally dovetails. I designed these groups in order to set up thematic conversations for later readings; for example, we focus on the Bad Angel in order to later discuss the dramatic afterlives of the Bad Angel/Good Angel in *Doctor Faustus*. However, instructors may use other reading divisions based on particular thematic categories or areas of the playing space; this tactic might also be helpful for other longer performance texts beyond *The Castle of Perseverance*. The divisions themselves serve as a prompt for discussing varied student experiences and impressions of the play. What did they perceive as the main action and what was tangential? How did their impressions of the play differ from other groups? What kinds of audience desires or pathways might account for their excerpted experience?

This focus on varied audience experiences and engagements also allows for conversation about medieval playing conditions and immersive drama. Students might be unfamiliar with contemporary immersive drama like *Sleep No More*, so we also discuss how immersive performance spaces like the aforementioned haunted houses create individualized audience experiences based on nonlinear encounters. If audiences can choose their own adventure, perhaps occasionally hailed to pay attention to some central event, then how and why would they navigate the narrative world of *The Castle of Perseverance*? This is where the film *Inside Out* becomes an afterlife that offers both a contemporary mode of understanding psychomachia and a less radical and experimental form of the genre. Juxtaposing the Macro Manuscript performance plan of *The Castle of Perseverance* and the Islands of Personality in *Inside Out* allows students to see how spatializing exterior action to represent interior change might be executed in contemporary storytelling to great effect. However, the film also falls short of the kind of interactive engagement that a performance of *The Castle of Perseverance* might offer.

The jumps outwards invite the audience to consider its spatial systems as narrative tools to relate to their own interiority (what does my cognitive Headquarters or Islands of Personality look like?) but only after the film has concluded. In an immersively-staged production of *The Castle of Perseverance*, audiences might, as my students do, move between a focus on the linear narrative arc of Mankind's life and an exploration of their place within the environmental storytelling of the playing space both during and after performance.

As I continue to modify this assignment for future course iterations, I will certainly make additional changes. Even with summaries of the play, students definitely struggled with the Middle English, especially since the TEAMS online version was less standardized and modernized than some of our other course texts. Later in the semester, students completed an etymology assignment that asked them to explore a single word from the Towneley "Second Shepherds' Play" or the moral interlude *Nice Wanton*, using resources like the Middle English Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary.⁶ I would move this assignment earlier in the syllabus so that students are more comfortable with these tools when tackling *The Castle of Perseverance*. Though *Inside Out* is a children's film, its externalization of interior change allows students to see allegorical representation as less childish or narratively flat; our class conversation about this adaptation of allegory often explores how these forms of storytelling offer unique and often radical tools of portraying neurodiversity or mental health. Several students brought in web cartoons or social media posts that portrayed depression or anxiety as a (sometimes humorous) interaction between various personified elements of the self.

Focusing on the potential live ephemerality of a live performance of *The Castle of Perseverance* also impacted my students differently when attending class in the midst of COVID, while many were hampered by the limitations of remote engagement and interaction. They were particularly attuned to the limitations of digital engagement and were perhaps more enthusiastic than most about the idea of such active kinesthetic participation in live theater. The potential mayhem of *The Castle of Perseverance* seemed less like bacchanalian incoherence and more like the type of interactive communal experience that was not available to us. One unexpected result of this activity was my students' later focus on the affordances and restrictions of filmed performances like The Globe Theatre's 2014 production of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The filmed performance included a live audience at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, but also contained heavy directorial interference with frequent changes in angle or zoomed close-up shots that directed the viewer's attention onstage. While COVID certainly highlighted the importance of filmed performance for public accessibility, students also pointed out their diverging experience from the live audience at the Wanamaker; the camera's intervention often restricts the focus to a single character or area of the stage. Our turn to early modern commercial theater included a conversation about the "diminishing liberties" of the audience in different performance spaces and modalities (Simpson 2002, 1).⁷ Many students embarked on final projects that explored both those directorial choices and their potential shortcomings in attempting to control visual as well as kinesthetic

⁶ My thanks to Joey Gamble, who allowed me to borrow a modified version of this assignment from his own Early Modern Drama syllabus.

⁷ In citing Simpson's thesis in *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, I am also considering Richard Emmerson's response to Simpson's chapter on "The Dramatic," particularly Emmerson's argument about the shortcomings in Simpson's diachronic approach in recognizing the continuity of various genres and performance practices across the perceived medieval/modern divide. My methods of teaching afterlives try to model this more synchronic dialogue.

wandering. This framing of *The Castle of Perseverance* sparked semester-long conversations about the relationship between texts and their afterlives as a dialogue rather than a linear trajectory.

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