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Life with Concepts: Allegory, Recognition, and Adaptation

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Abstract

This essay examines questions around teaching allegory to undergraduates in a liberal arts setting, with a focus on the uses for both reading and inviting students to write contemporary adaptations of premodern works. The complexities of literary character are sometimes reflexively disallowed to the personified figures of premodern allegory. A better tack, without assimilating medieval literary modes into modern ones, might have us attend to the variety of ways in which concepts are given embodied, social life in allegory. Adaptation assignments can invite self-involving hermeneutic engagement, analytic rigor, and creative response from students. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *Everybody*, a recent adaptation of *Everyman*, is looked to here as a model conversation partner for such a pedagogical approach.

For all literary medievalists, the scene will be a familiar one.¹ It's a survey class on Western literary history. You're trying to give your students a supple feel for reading allegory. You've chosen an excerpt from *Piers Plowman*—a lively crowd pleaser, you think: the confession of the vices in Passus 5 of the B-text. You want to stage some of the complexities of how a writer might pursue social and political critique, ethical and philosophical reflection, and aesthetic experimentation in premodern poetic and narrative modes. In class discussion, students note Langland's vivid imagery and biting satire of various forms of hypocrisy. They love the gulping, burping, pissing, farting, puking, and snoring Gluttony. Slimy-eyed Sloth, his head ringing with rhymes of Robin Hood, sounds like a misunderstood Lit major. Wrath as a cook serving up wicked *words*—slander, lies, backbiting—making a meal of media, this agent of social indigestion resonates. But when you feel obliged to take literary-critical stock, asking about the distinctive potentials of Langland's form as he is practicing it, a student, provoking a ripple of nods around the room, objects to the “flat characters” of all allegorical writing, including the writing the class has just praised. Suddenly your spunky medieval allegorist is hamstrung, doing his best no doubt but at the mercy of a concept-thumping imperative.

How to parse this objection? Traffic in speaking abstractions, so posits your objector, has come at the expense of psychologically realistic personal biography. The poet would surely have been capable of writing more compelling characters if he had only had a more thorough MFA workshop leader (show, don't tell!), or perhaps if his post-plague fourteenth-century English audience had had more advanced, less anxiously moralizing aesthetic tastes. Pivoting from global pronouncements on literary character, you re-focus. Taking up Langland's brilliant depiction of Gluttony as an example, you point out that the vice in question isn't simply an intellectual abstraction, but most certainly has a body, is a body. (A round, rather than a flat one, at that.) Gluttony's viciousness is comically suggested precisely as incontinent bodily function: all that pissing and puking. He is also, you note, a decidedly social figure, embodied in particular kinds of space, implicated in the lives of others. His whole vignette takes shape as a detour born of a conversation with a neighbor, who, clearly not for the first time, invites him into her tavern for a drink. Headed for mass and confession, Gluttony is hailed by a breweress on a first-name basis with him, herself named Betty, who calls out: “I have good ale, gossib ... Gloton, woltow assaye?” (B 5.303).² Gluttony is readily responsive, as if he had been waiting for the invitation: “Hastow ... any hote spices?” (5.304). Inside Betty's tavern, Gluttony is greeted convivially by a host of men and women, with “glad chere” as well as “good ale” (5.319). When he later stumbles in a drunken stupor, Clement the cobbler catches him by the waist and steadies him. For his good turn, Clement is on the receiving end of his inebriated friend's upchucking.

And Gluttony is not merely his tavern performance, you say. He has a domestic life. The weight of Gluttony's characterizing performance of vice in the tavern—he is a “gret cherl,” we're told—is literally borne by others, there and, still more consequentially, at home (5.354): “With al the wo of this world, his wif and his wenche / Baren hym to his bed ... / after al this excesse” (5.358–60). Indeed, it is the rebuking voice of his wife, who perhaps above all others feels the weight of her husband's

¹ I would like to thank reviewers of this essay Helene Schöwing, Katie Little, and Steven Mentz, whose editorial suggestions and insights have improved it.

² All references to *Piers Plowman* are to Langland 2002.

actions, that echoes in his conscience (“wit” or “inwit”), prompting at last his self-recognizing confession: “I, Gloton ... guilty me yelde” (5.368).

In the course of his confessional vignette, then, Gluttony’s gregariousness is revealed as an equivocal tenderness for relationship, rather than an unambiguous extension of his viciousness. Such personal ambiguity is fundamental to Langland’s portraits of the sins. In your class discussion, you haven’t yet broached the complicating perspectival and ideological dynamics of satire: just what sort of person, with what kind of social location, is being pictured as vice’s embodiment? From what kind of writerly perspective, for what sort of audience, and to what ends?³ Nor have you yet given your earnest spiel on the dangers of excerpting an allegorist like Langland (it’s a survey class!), lifting discrete scenes like this one from the churning accretive, recursive, and dialectical processes of the poem. You’ve just been trying to do some basic work on what seems to you a limiting, reflexive picture. Your objecting student’s picture of what character had to mean to be interesting had (understandably) blocked him, initially, from following the intricate aesthetic and intellectual work of Langland’s allegory—including where it, too, was teeming with psychological and social realism.

Your imaginary, if recognizably familiar, objecting student (my real one) had envisioned “psychological realism” as offering up a cunningly sobered, modern-day observational foil for a stylized medieval other. It’s a teachable moment, one of a family of such moments for those who teach things medieval: realism is stylized too (it may just be less honest about it), and allegory can be realistic. As character goes, medieval or modern, realism is also hardly the only game in town. Realism is not what we ourselves routinely expect or hope for from many of the characters that we acknowledge as, in their different ways, capable of speaking to us. In an essay that takes up readerly identification as a heuristic for understanding the varieties of literary character, Rita Felski (2019) has noted:

Neither do we need the “illusion of reality” to identify—an assumption that fails to account for attachments to Bugs Bunny, Cinderella, or Vladimir and Estragon. Characters do not have to be deep, well-rounded, psychologically complex, or unified to count as characters; nor, of course, do they need to be human. They need only to be animated: to act and react, to will and intend. Why do critics so often equate character with the genre of realism—whether they come to bury or praise it? ... The draw of character has far less to do with realism than with qualities of vividness and distinctness. As any cartoonist knows, a few well-chosen strokes can be far more effective than a detailed rendering; stylization is a powerful tool. In “Notes on ‘Camp,’” for example, Susan Sontag writes: “character is understood as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one very intense thing.” (78)

“A person being one very intense thing” is not a bad working definition of the kind of personification allegory on display in Passus 5 of *Piers Plowman*. Among the powers afforded by the intensifying tool of personification is a kind of sociological focus, allowing for inquiry into what characters a particular society or community may tend to produce. Allegorical persons are explicitly written on by the discourses and institutions that shape them. Allegory can hold up such figures, thematize them, for

³ On Gluttony’s social status, see Aers 1988. For recent reflections on teaching Gluttony, see too Anderson 2018

exemplary as well as critical attention.⁴ Being one thing intensely, moreover, doesn't preclude being other things too. Gluttony, for example, becomes slothful; he's also a great, swaggering swearer and a petty gambler. His comic persona in the tavern has a darker shadow in his home life: the shift of scene is itself suggestive of multiple dimensions to his personality, of act and consequence, of identity as well as prior formation, of networks rather than simple essences. As Langland's arguably sympathetic portrait of tavern "chere" seems to invite us to acknowledge, too, Gluttony is not simply depicted as a vacuum-sealed, antisocial habit of self-gratification. We might recognize ourselves in his vulnerability, his dependence on the watchful eyes and steadying grip of others. These suggestive links to additional qualities—vices but also inchoate virtues, as well as other, more equivocally human endearments—do not detract from the "continual incandescence" of his being gluttonous. They help define it, in part by insisting that habits of character, human and literary, are relational, never self-contained.

One might, further, pause on a seemingly tiny moment in Gluttony's story, as it reflects an important dynamic at work in the pedagogies of so much premodern allegory. What is involved in Gluttony's recognizing himself *as* gluttonous ("I, Gloton")? In an essay on the later fifteenth-century penitential drama *Mankind*, Sarah Beckwith (2012) helpfully troubles this work's conventional designation as a morality play, insofar as that term may encourage us to foist abstract, punctually-present essences ("mercy," "mankind") onto figures that the play itself treats in far more particularizing ways. As Beckwith points out, naming moral concepts alone hardly exhausts the "dawning process of recognition and self-recognition" that defines this play's allegorical drama, a drama that displays "the difficulties of teaching and the imbrication of education in maturity and growth" (114, 115).⁵ In a similar spirit, Cora Diamond (1988) has written, "grasping a concept ... is not just a matter of knowing how to group things under that concept; it is being able to participate in life-with-the-concept. What kinds of descriptive concept there are is a matter of the different shapes life-with-a-concept can have" (266). In exploring the distinction between naming and recognition in allegorical drama and fiction, Beckwith uncovers the careful attention in this tradition to what life with concepts must involve: time, change, relationships, practice, failure, duplicity, contradiction, error, and self-delusion, as well as confessional revelation.

For our students, allegory may seem a concept that has little life in it, at least life of the incandescent or deeply felt sort. And yet a central task the form sets for itself remains an ethically and existentially compelling one: exploring and attempting to display the living concepts to which we are deeply (and perhaps unreflectively) attached. Allegory invites its readers to pause over questions about the relationships between feeling and form, affect and idea, learning and time, and theory and practice in their own lives. Literary allegory from Prudentius to Dante and beyond, as Brian Stock (2001) has remarked, is after all both a product of and an invitation to contemplative reading practice. In such practice, I am necessarily at stake in what I read: so I'm asked to read with a kind of double vision, always keeping in view a multilayered, often hyper-intellectual narrative, in light of my own life in

⁴ For a powerful account of allegorical character as "social person" and "social process," see Fowler 2003. For a sociological treatment of character, see Sennett 1998.

⁵ On *Mankind* as "participatory" comic drama involving complex forms of conceptual recognition, see too Johnson 2018. On the play's "relentless topicality" (as opposed to "abstract" allegorizing), see Robertson 2006.

language.⁶ As a reader, I'm thereby always implicitly asking where I myself might fit in the flurry of words-as-persons parading before me. Whether it's a dramatic allegory like *Mankind* or not, the form's iconographic and dialogic features seem to invite dramatic reproduction, imaginative re-inhabiting. I've accordingly found, as perhaps many of us who teach premodern literature have, that engaging students around these themes as readers *and* as creative writers can help them learn to see more fully the varied potential uses of such ostensibly antique forms. So, too, can such work lift the hood on how we ourselves go about navigating our own conceptually-laden worlds. How, then, can we teach students to read allegory like writers of it? And how can we invite them to write it themselves, with full awareness that a life with concepts is very much their life, too?

II.

Students in my 300-level survey class had intuitively and enthusiastically responded to the liveliness they glimpsed in Gluttony and other of Langland's vices. Attention to the poet's form, however—a concept I named as allegory, which, when summoned to consciousness, my students apparently positioned with knowing propriety toward a primitive end of a progressive and complexifying sequence of literary and cultural development—had chilled their response. Looking back, whatever cavils or suspicions the notion of allegory itself might have provoked in the class, justly or not, I'm struck that the flat charge was also a salvo back in my own professionalizing language. I'd after all just turned from the immediate joys of jowly hypocrites and gaseous rationalizers to the critical detachment of formal analysis. My students responded in kind: *I see your "form"—and raise you a "flat!"*⁷

One way I've sought to allow for students to discover life in formal concepts is by asking them to compose their own adaptations of premodern works and literary traditions. In my setting at a small, public liberal arts college, where many of our majors aspire to be creative writers, either as professionals or amateurs, such assignments work particularly well (recently, two have turned into creative senior theses). Even for those mystified or terrified by creative writing, these assignments frequently prove to be surprising favorites. I always include some sort of analytical reflection component in the assignment, in which students can turn their close-reading analysis of their models into a rationale for their own creative choices. In my literary survey, I included these prompts for an imaginative paper assignment:

1. *True Confessions: Vices Edition*. Choose a traditional vice (pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth) and give it a modern life and voice. What does it look and sound like? How might we know it by looking at it—or would we? If it were invited to confess, what might it say? Is it telling the truth, or pulling one over on us—or both? [Note: you might find it best to choose just one vice for fullest development, but you may also do more than one, for some back and forth.]

⁶ For a lucid recent explication of the Wittgensteinian theme of a "life in language," its relationship to theoretical concepts, and its relevance for literary theory and criticism, see Moi 2017, 44–63.

⁷ On what might be learned from such professorial mood-killing in the face of more immediate kinds of student response, see Badot 2019.

2. *A Fair Field Full of (AVL) Folk*. You're a sketchy wanderer—perhaps a holy seeker, perhaps a poet looking for material, perhaps a layabout avoiding work, perhaps all of the above—and you're on a walkabout in Asheville, North Carolina (AVL). You reach a summit for a vision of the folk below, and you descend for a closer look in a local watering hole. Somehow, you're all in this thing together. Write an “AVL Prologue” à la Langland and Chaucer in which you, a sketchy observer, sketch your fellow local pilgrims. [Note: choose at least two.]
3. *Visions of Consolation*. You (or a persona rather like you) are stuck—in a lamentable way. You need some words of counsel and consolation, maybe a song or two. Suddenly, a figure appears you seem to recognize, but not quite. Write a girdle-book-worthy dialogue (along the lines of Yale Beinecke MS 84) for troubled souls like yourself (Boethius n.d.).

In a similar assignment in a core Humanities class, I include a prompt for a *psychomachia*, inspired by Prudentius's poem. For students grappling with lived questions around mental health, the idea that my own identity might be fractured rather than unitary, might be a site of conflict, has visceral appeal. The *psychomachia* has its political allure as well. The Biden campaign claimed, for example, that Americans were in a “battle for the soul of the nation” during the 2020 election (Biden 2020). But students can reflect, too, on the limits of the battlefield metaphor, what victory in terms of cathartic violent fantasy could mean, and the poem's literally edifying ending in a postbellum building project—an apparent acknowledgment that neither perpetual battle nor conquest, in themselves, can amount to worthy goals for an ethical or social life.

In a Drama class in the English major, I ask students to write their own modern morality play. The assignment calls for students to write one complete scene, to provide a full *dramatis personae* and a summary of the play, and to write analytic production notes, which should include relevant social and intellectual contexts (for their model and for their adaptation), an account of what aspects of the plays we've been reading they are adapting and how, and any notes on staging, costuming, and so on. For this assignment, I've found that giving students a contemporary model adaptation can help them open out imaginative possibilities for their own adaptations. Such contemporary works can also help students read premodern texts with a stronger sense of the potentials already, or alternatively, available in them.

Contemporary playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, author of the recent, Pulitzer-finalist play *Everybody* (an adaptation of *Everyman*), has remarked on the surprising kinds of reflective vision dramatic allegory might make possible.⁸ I've taught Jacobs-Jenkins's play alongside *Everyman* as a prelude to students writing their own allegorical dramas both in my core Humanities course and in the Drama course in the English major. Asked about his fascination with adapting older theatrical and performance traditions—often wildly reimagined in his plays, from the blackface minstrel show and ancient Greek tragedy twisted into metatheatrical knots in *Neighbors* (2010), to the nineteenth-century

⁸ For another recent adaptation of *Everyman*, see Duffy 2015. I discuss the play text of *Everybody* below. For reviews of live shows, see Als 2017 and Brantley 2017.

melodrama of Dion Boucicault given a Brechtian reframing in *An Octoroon* (2014)—Jacobs-Jenkins remarks:

When I think about genre or old forms, I think of them as interesting artifacts that invite a kind of archeology of seeing. How much are Race and Gender about visual cues that we don't question? Genre comes out of the needs of a historical moment, of a community requiring a new way of looking at old things. So I'm interested in why we saw things the way we saw them five hundred years ago. What actually is different about the way we look at things and people now? So for *Everybody*, I was like, how interesting that five hundred years ago it was totally okay for an abstraction to be played by a person. Whereas I think in our culture now there's an overwhelming proclivity for thinking that actors can only play other people. It's part of my ongoing struggle with naturalism as our default mode of storytelling. (Jacobs-Jenkins n.d.; Foster 2019)

Jacobs-Jenkins's archaeological imagery here might evoke problematic pictures of lively interpreters and dead objects, but he goes on to suggest that the kind of spadework he has in mind is powerful at least in part because it is hermeneutically reflexive, that our own customary ways of seeing—"naturalism" as a default mode of storytelling—are as much what require unearthing as apparently distant, long-buried works from the past. The playwright confesses that entering into a creative dialogue with *Everyman* around one of the aspects of the play that most interested him, its forthrightly instructive character as a dramatized *ars moriendi*, was in some ways as off-putting and bemusing as it was attractive. As he remarks:

I've read all this weird medieval history and been like, I can't believe this is the way people walked around and interacted with the world. *Everyman* was playing to, essentially, a homogeneous religious society, but we fancy ourselves today living in a secular, diverse, democratic republic. (Jacobs-Jenkins n.d.)

Putting aside the bald claim about the "homogeneous" social world of *Everyman* (a play that, in the early decades of the sixteenth century, arguably stages its own counter-reformist polemics in its call to penance rather than simply timeless and primal themes, or homogeneously "religious" ones), Jacobs-Jenkins hits here on a meaningful provocation. Reimagining this austere late-medieval play about living and dying well—"Love, Death, and Deeds" as I like to summarize it in class—means nothing less, Jacobs-Jenkins explains, than facing the question of "whether we are even interested anymore in moral theatre" or "thinking through an ethics of the stage" (Jacobs-Jenkins n.d.).

Where *Everyman* is a mortifying drama of detachment whose sacramentality vies with a kind of spiritual isolationism, *Everybody* is a suspicious comedy of identity not content with its own suspicions. The play's mixture of earnest moral and spiritual questioning, pop-chattiness and academicized identity lingo (e.g., "You literally just like racialized my unconscious!" "Or maybe you just don't want to recognize my subject position as having equal value?" [Jacobs-Jenkins 2018, 34, 40]), and agnosticism about its own concepts ("God" is voiced in perpetual scare quotes) is what gives it its intellectual energy. In Jacobs-Jenkins's play, it is not just Death that comes suddenly and against our wishes, but the very roles we play, the identities we inhabit, in life. The play dramatizes such

contingencies with a lottery-ball scene in which its five “Somebody” roles are divvied up randomly for every performance (the actors thus memorize multiple roles, including that of Everybody). As the play opens, an usher-cum-dramaturg, who also plays “God” and Understanding, explains *Everybody*’s inspiration as an adaptation of *Everyman* and makes an apologetic appeal on behalf of its peculiar allegorical form, amidst directing us to turn off our cell phones and to unwrap our lozenges before the show starts. We get an embedded theater history lesson and some notes on sources. The “specific play you’re at right now,” says the usher, is “not that play or either of those plays exactly”—i.e., *Everyman* as a medieval Catholic play or as read in light of the Buddhist fable that, the usher informs us, scholars have noted as among its formative source materials—“though it does have similar ambitions” (10).⁹

In *Everyman*, my friends and family, my things, even my good deeds apart from the grace of penance, cannot speak for me in the “rekenyng [reckoning]” I’m called to give (Davidson et al 2007, line 20). Unlike *Mankind*, *Everyman* does not surround its protagonist with vices but with real, if limited, goods, which cannot accompany Everyman on his mortal and eschatological summons. Jacobs-Jenkins leans into these limits in *Everybody*, asking us to attend to the routinized ways in which we might know these goods, *as concepts*, and inquiring after what pressures they might or might not bear in these terms. Everybody’s would-be companions—Friendship, Kinship, Stuff, Strength, Beauty, Mind, Senses—reveal themselves as fragile bonds, flimsy fabrications even, that may not bear the weight of our expectations.

In a chapter on recognition in an earlier work, *Uses of Literature*, Felski (2008) offers an account of the “diagnostic force” of “misrecognition” in Flaubert that applies to the forms of conceptual ascesis enjoined upon us in *Everybody*. Like *Sentimental Education*, Jacobs-Jenkins’s play puts on display

the various pathologies of misrecognition afflicting those who seek to glean a sense of personhood from collective fictions and counterfeit identities. . . . the reader’s own jolt of recognition assumes a self-critical rather than a consoling form.... Here acknowledgment is oriented not around a sense of shared identity, but an apprehension of a negative commonality. (41)

Felski associates such procedures with modernism, but readers of medieval allegory will recognize a familiar instructive attention to interpretive missteps and wayward attachments. What is Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* if not an interrogation, in the form of a Boethian lament and therapeutic dialogue, of a “negative commonality” around the concept of woman? One could certainly make the case for similarly self-critical forms of conceptual recognition pursued in *Piers Plowman*, as in the *Canterbury Tales*, whether in an allegorical mode or not.

Of course, medieval allegory is typically not content with the diagnostic force of staged misrecognitions. Here *Everybody*, too, aspires beyond its instructive suspicions, whether about misleading material attachments, shallow forms of friendship, the making and breaking of family life, or the passing vitality of the body and mind. While the play doesn’t have much to offer directly by way of embodied life with concepts that might do more than mislead or abandon us, its disorienting lottery-casting itself teaches, inviting us to recognize ourselves in the bad friends’ roles—is this what

⁹ On Buddhist backgrounds to the story of Barlaam and Iosaphat, see Davidson, Walsh, and Roos 2007; Hirsch 1986; Ikegami 1999.

I'm like?—as much as that of the jilted Everybody. Michael Rau (2020), director of a recent production of *Everybody* at Stanford University, has remarked on how the lottery-casting feature of this show was deeply pedagogically attractive in the challenge it posed for his student actors. The pedagogical force of the point for the play's actors can be extended to its viewers. At a climactic point, an apparent audience member who we learn is called Love, a version of *Everyman's* Good Deeds, stands up to walk out of the theater. Everybody addresses the audience member, who responds by objecting to the play's avowed representational aspirations, which Love says it's not living up to: "I thought this was supposed to be about everybody?" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2018, 42). Love feels slighted and unimpressed: the whole drama has been "some sort of showbiz inside joke" (42). In Love's walk-out, the play attempts to metabolize our own suspicions about the limits of representation, the dangers of trying to pull off a "moral theatre" that would speak not only to but for its audiences (Jacobs-Jenkins n.d.). But once more, Everybody pleads for companionship. Love at last gives way, on the condition—here adapting the scene of confession and penance in *Everyman* that leads to Good Deeds' resurrection—that Everybody undress and repeat a litany of surrender to a changing, vulnerable, mortal existence. Naked and exhausted, Everybody achieves catharsis, and Love becomes a companion all the way to the grave.

In *Everybody*, what a life of love might actually look like is left an open question—we might be tempted to say, a vacuous one. As moral drama, *Everybody* is intently suggestive rather than prescriptive. Kynde's counsel to Wille in a moment that comes to mind in *Piers Plowman*, to "Lerne to love . . . and leef alle othere," is likewise suggestive but calls on a range of thick descriptive resources in the poem, for discerning what such a "craft" might be (B 20.208, 207).¹⁰ We are largely only negatively equipped, by contrast, for imagining what "Good Deeds" an Everybody in league with Love might perform. In many ways, it is the modern play rather than the medieval one that moves toward increasing abstraction from concrete forms of relationship, mutual obligation, and embodied individuality. Yet in carefully positioning Love as an unsatisfied viewer of this ambitious play about relationships and our relationship to ideas, Jacobs-Jenkins does more than beat his critics to the punch. In Love's walk-out, *Everybody* stages an exclusion of its own making. This dramatic journey that has proclaimed itself attentive to the painful, shared realities of mortal and moral failure, loss, and longing has felt to this viewer—and perhaps to us—as a self-involved "inside joke," in which Love has had no real role to play. More comfortable with reflexive suspicion and critical distance than with settled affirmation, the play seems to acknowledge that it's after all not quite sure how to talk about love. This honest acknowledgment makes for an outward turn: in Love's recuperation as lay confessor to Everybody, the play invites its audiences themselves to feel addressed by Love's claims, rather than simply jilted by Love's failures.

III.

I've suggested here, by way of my own experience teaching *Everybody* alongside its model *Everyman*, some uses for contemporary adaptations of premodern works and forms in the classroom. Reading works like *Everybody* can help us attend to what Stanley Cavell (2003) once called the "unfinished business" older texts may have with us still, business that must always be discovered,

¹⁰ On *Piers Plowman's* treatment of aging and dying, see Aers 2003.

along with our own starting points in attempting to pursue it (314). Such potentials are not well accounted for in notions of making relevant or updating, and perhaps not in the terms of some kinds of historicism, either. Adaptations themselves, like dramatic reproductions more generally, are works of recognition. As such, they are risky and self-involving, and can take a variety of registers and postures, from admiring and deferential to vexed and combative. (In a “Prologue” scene to Jacobs-Jenkins’s *An Octoroon* (2019), an autobiographical playwright persona named BJJ, having just painted himself in whiteface, squares off with Dion Boucicault, nineteenth-century author of the play’s model, the wildly popular melodrama *The Octoroon*: the Prologue ends with the two screaming obscenities at one another, each comically accusing the other of being “melodramatic” [147–48].) For students, adaptations pose a hermeneutic challenge as well as a creative one. Asking students to write their own creative adaptations of model forms like *Everyman*, or the confession of Gluttony, or Boethian or Pizanian visionary therapy, or the psychomachic soul as battlefield, is to invite them discover what life may have been, and may be, in allegory’s concepts. As writers, students can likewise discover life in the formal concept of allegory itself. Works of adaptation model productive answers, in short, to the interpretive question we often ask of texts with our students in the classroom: “What do you make of this?”

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