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## Trabajo Fin de Grado

History, Drama and Mystery in Barry Unsworth's  
*Morality Play*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Genres have been evolving since the first time they were considered as such. The case of the historical and the detective genres are not an exception. The rise of the historical novel in its modern form has traditionally been associated with Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). The trilogy *Waverley* (1814), *Guy Mannering* (1815) and *The Antiquary* (1816), which deals with Scottish history from the 1740s through to the 1800s, created a passion for the historical novel that has remained up to these days, even if the genre, as could not be otherwise, has changed with the passing of time. The same can be said of detective fiction, which also goes back to three nineteenth-century works, the three short stories in which Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) introduced the detective Auguste Dupin, thus establishing the foundation for the classical detective story: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842–3) and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). Later writers, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, refined the formula and detective fiction had its Golden Age in the years between the two World Wars.

Contemporary literature, and more specifically postmodernist fiction, is packed with examples of how the classic understanding of these genres has changed and been transformed into something else. The postmodernist novel has typically been associated with intertextuality and rewriting, with presenting what was known to us in a different guise. Both the historical and the detective novel remained popular in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the change of worldview in the postmodern period accounts for a different approach to history, reason, truth, and therefore, for a different way of writing about the past and about crime and detection. In important respects, Barry Unsworth’s *Morality Play* (1995) is a good illustration of the change in the two genres –the historical and the detective novel– and it is along these lines that my analysis of Unsworth’s work

will proceed. Before doing so, though, I will focus in what follows on how these kinds of literature have been reworked in a postmodern context.

### **1.1. NEW HISTORICAL FICTION**

When thinking about history, one thing that comes to mind is history as a subject, as something to study and remember. History as a discipline helps us to understand what came before and what makes us what we are in the present. History aims at accuracy and at producing an account of things as they happened. However, the ability of history to provide a true account of the past was questioned by Postmodernism. In an article that revisits Hayden White's views of history, Ghasemi points out that "there exists no single fixed meaning and interpretation of history, but plurality of readings and interpretations" (1). He also explains that the treatment of history has been different since it started to be seen as a text, a linguistic construct which "consists of a set of words, selected and assembled by historians into narratives with plots" (1). History is not regarded as the "Truth" about what happened, but as narrative discourse, a version of what happened. This means that there is no longer a clear-cut distinction between history and story, history and fiction. Therefore, history is used as one more intertext in postmodernist novels, especially so in the genre that Linda Hutcheon sees as most representative of the postmodern worldview: historiographic metafiction. According to Linda Hutcheon, the past acts as intertext in these novels because history is rewritten, the official version of history, but also the common knowledge of the past and the books that have already told about it (8). This is related to Umberto Eco's remark about his novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980): "I discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" (20). This awareness of an inevitable intertextuality is often coupled with the text's self-consciousness, and so the reader's awareness that the text s/he is reading is a fictional

construct. This is what Hutcheon means when she talks about metafiction, which is a characteristic feature of postmodernist literature. The emphasis on its own constructedness and the play with history define Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction", novels that are "at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" (3).

The term "new historical fiction" is used, among others, by Martha Tuck Rozett in her book *Constructing a World: Shakespeare's England and the New Historical Fiction* (2012). She approaches it in the context of Postmodernism's "play[ing] genres off against one another, making fluid the boundaries between novel and autobiography, novel and history, novel and biography..." and she relates the genre to a changing attitude towards history in that these novels, which tend to blur the frontiers between research and imagination to produce transformations of the past, "share with the New Historicists [...] a resistance to old certainties about what happened and why", as well as "the uncertainty, the multiplicity of 'truths' inherent in any account of past events" (2). The scope of Rozett's definition is wide, as the play with history in these novels frequently includes but is not necessarily coupled with the use metafictional techniques, as is the case with Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction". More interestingly, both Hutcheon and Rozett agree that this is the most representative genre of Postmodernism because it is the one that embodies better the ideas of the time, which mark a break with tradition not only in literature but in every artistic discipline. This relates to the break with the traditional view of history too, and the dichotomy fact/fiction: in postmodernist historical fiction the key point is not so much to produce an accurate portrait of historical realities, but to call into question the possibility of representing the past accurately, thus problematizing the relationship between reality and its (always imprecise) representation.

Hutcheon argues that postmodernist literature is "characterised by intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality" (3). This self-reflexivity is also present in

the description Elisabeth Wesseling gives in her work *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel* (1991), where she distinguishes between different types of self-reflexivity: the one that started with the modernists and the one that postmodernist writers introduced in their works. This second type of reflexivity differs from the first “in the object of reflection. It does not so much dissect the writing but the making of history” (119). She goes on to explain that this focus on exposing history in the making is in tune with the poststructuralist attack on the idea of solid facts outside language to which discourse refers, but without contaminating them. As mentioned above, some postmodernist novels convey this idea by exploring the borderland between fiction and historiography. Her line of thought follows Hutcheon when the latter explains that “the intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction [...] offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can only be known through its texts, its traces –be it literary or historical” (4). Historiographic metafiction challenges a naïve realistic understanding of representation but also a radical formalist separation of art and the world. This literature comes from an archive “that is both historical and literary” (6) and the effect of the parody at work in it “is both to enshrine the past and to question it” (6).

Some examples of novels that belong to this genre are John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980). These novels have those characteristics that Hutcheon mentions regarding historiographic metafiction, including self-reflexivity and intertextuality. They deal with past times, blending real and fictional facts and placing them at the same level. The main characters are invented by the author, and so are most of the events, but the context in which they happen is faithful to the times in which the narratives are set. As Umberto Eco explains in his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, his characters “may not appear in encyclopaedias [...] but everything they do could only occur in that time and place” (in Rozett 1-2). This

also happens with the novel I will analyse in this essay, *Morality Play*. In it the context can be considered historically accurate, the main events and the characters are fictional, but their combination invites us to consider the blurring of clear-cut divisions between history and fiction.

## **1.2. METAPHYSICAL DETECTIVE FICTION**

The detective novel has also experienced an evolution similar to that of historical fiction, in the sense that important changes are related to postmodernist skepticism and questioning of truth. The classical detective formula builds upon the belief in reason, in man's ability to find out the truth in a universe that makes sense and where the crime is just a temporary disruption. Such comforts are alien to the postmodern worldview.

As mentioned above, the American Edgar Allan Poe is considered the father of the detective novel. With *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) and the other Dupin stories he set the basis for this genre, which T.S. Eliot compared with solving a "chess problem" (464). As Wenru Xu explains, the basic idea of all detective fiction is an ordered society in which a crime happens and that provokes disorder. After the crime, the detective-hero arrives and solves it through logical reasoning. Finally, the order of society is restored (1). The forces of reason and truth win the battle and harmony returns in the end.

Detective fiction had its own Golden Age in the 1920s and 1930s. In this era, many of the best detective fiction writers were British and their novels followed similar patterns and styles. One of the best-known authors of this Golden Age is Agatha Christie, who wrote many detective novels, such as *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *Crooked House* (1949) (both recently made into movies), which follow that structure of detective fiction in which the crime is solved and the murderer meets punishment.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century advanced, the beliefs that made classical detective fiction possible were increasingly questioned: the trust in order, in truth, in reason, in punishment

for the criminals and rewards for the good people. Just as new historical fiction, or historiographic metafiction, came to be seen as the most representative genre in postmodernist literature, other critics think the same with regard to those narratives that subvert the classical detective formula in what has been called the “anti-detective novel” and also “metaphysical detective fiction”. Among them is William Spanos, who claims that the anti-detective novel has the purpose of evoking the impulse to “detect” in order to frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (154). This is exactly the opposite of the structure used before, which was all about solving the crime to restore order in society. Patricia Merivale and Susan E. Sweeney prefer the other term and define the metaphysical detective story as “a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions [...] with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot” (2). In this sense, the metaphysical detective story also deals with “the questioning of the limits of knowledge, the nature of reality, subjectivity, fiction, narrative and interpretation” (Martínez Alfaro, ““When the Notebook Ran Out of Pages”” 227). Therefore, the metaphysical detective story is not only a puzzle to be solved; it is rather the presentation of life as puzzle. This is what Holquist suggests when he compares the classical detective story with the metaphysical detective story in terms of familiarity vs. strangeness. The metaphysical detective story undermines the idea of a reality where everything makes sense and disturbs, rather than comfort readers: “if in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved.” (155, italics in the original)

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The new historical novel and the metaphysical detective story as explained above provide an interesting frame to analyse Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play* (1995). These are the two perspectives from which the novel will be approached in the following section: firstly, the novel can be seen through the lens of the new historical novel when focusing on the historical side of the story, which accurately recreates a historical setting with its corresponding fictional characters and events that transport the reader to the realities of the 14<sup>th</sup> century; and secondly, the novel can be interpreted from the perspective of the metaphysical detective story when it comes to analysing the mystery and its investigation. This investigation of a murder is the main element in the novel's plot but it only makes sense thanks to the recreation of the historical setting in which the action occurs. Here medieval drama plays a key role and, especially, the author's invented version of how religious drama evolved into secular drama, as will be shown in what follows.

## **2. ANALYSIS OF BARRY UNSWORTH'S *MORALITY PLAY***

*Morality Play* (1995), by Barry Unsworth (1930-2012), was published in the context of Postmodernism and it makes use of the traits of the historical and detective genres at the same time, even if these conventions are the traditional ones as altered by postmodern ideology and, consequently, by literary practice in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novel is set in 14<sup>th</sup>-century England and, in important respects, it is a historical recreation of the period: famine and the Plague; the corruption of the Church and the aristocracy; village life and the peasants' exploitation by abusive feudal Lords; the partiality of justice; etc. This recreation is made through a story concerning a group of players, as at the heart of the novel is Unsworth's version (a reinvention) of how the change from religious to secular drama took place in medieval times. This unrecorded piece of history is what Unsworth makes up, showing us how the troupe of players decide to move from the religious subjects of mystery and morality plays to a real-life event –the murder of a young boy– concerning the people of the village where they have stopped to perform and get some money. The murder becomes the subject of a play to put on for the villagers and their playing proves to be a vehicle for investigating the crime, which turns the players into detectives of sorts.

In the analysis that follows, I will start by discussing the historical setting in which the novel's action takes place, focusing on the harshness of a time of corruption and the Plague, but also a time where medieval drama developed as an art form and an entertainment, too. After that, the focus will be on the historical gap that Unsworth plays with, namely, the invention of a new kind of play, the appearance of the first work of secular drama. To end with, I will discuss the detective side of the novel, with the players' investigation, their performance of the play that gets them closer to the murderer, and the resolution of the mystery, which differs from the outcome of a traditional detective story and is more in tune with postmodernist questioning and uncertainty.

## 2.1. NARRATION AND HISTORICAL SETTING

The novel is set in the England of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and is narrated retrospectively by the main character, a renegade priest turned actor called Nicholas Barber, who is also, then, an autodiegetic narrator. He is writing at some point after the events occurred, as he is telling his own story, a kind of autobiography. Moore argues that the narration is Nicholas's confession: he tells about the events that surround the death of the murdered boy, Thomas Wells, so that he can confess his sins and reflect on sin and evil (330). As I mentioned in the introduction, Rozett tells about new historical fiction's "play[ing] genres off against one another" (2), and here we see how autobiographical elements get mixed with a confession and a historical novel. Nicholas, as a fictional character, is narrating his own life in a historically accurate setting. It can be seen how history in the novel is treated as a resource to put the story in context: first, the exposition of the realistic setting and then, the characters and the events that occur which are clearly fictional, as fictional is the moment when the leader of the troupe of players proposes to perform a different kind of play, based on the murder. The novel establishes a "coherent version of the past" (Boccardi 205), which is essential for a novel to be called historical, but also, in line with Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, history and fiction are put at the same level by reworking the past as known and mixing it with an alternative version of historical events.

The narrator, Nicholas Barber, can be considered according to Martínez Alfaro as a "Watson-type figure" (82), because he presents the events of the murder as a chronicle, just as Watson does in Sherlock Holmes' stories, and uses retrospective narration in order to tell what happened. According to Moore, Nicholas establishes his narrative as a teller narrative, which means that the narrator "uses the past tense for the purpose of distinguishing it from and relating it to his present" (324). In addition, Nicholas repeatedly interrupts himself in the course of the narrative with comments and observations in the

present tense that bring the reader to the moment in which he is writing about his experience with the players and the investigation of the murder. Moore considers this problematic because many of these interruptions criticise the actions that the ending seems to validate, as for example Nicholas's decision not to go back to being a priest and keep traveling as a player (322). The difference between the events of the past and the statements he makes along the telling prevent the narrative from being closed and unified, as this raises certain questions which remain unanswered, regarding, for example, which is the narrator's situation at the time of the telling, whether he is still a player, whether he saw the other players again, etc.

In terms of historical setting, the novel shows some accurate aspects that are representative of the England of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The most visible are the corruption of the Church and the aristocracy, the Plague, and the consolidation of medieval drama as a form of entertainment and religious instruction. Corruption in the novel is also related to the partiality of justice and how difficult it is to punish the powerful even when they are doing terrible things.

The corruption of the Church is present from the very beginning, when the narrator and main character is introduced: Nicholas is a priest forced to leave his diocese because he is caught in bed with a married woman, he then gambles away his holy relics and ends up joining a group of players when he finds them in the woods right after they have lost a member of their company, victim of the Plague. He will be trained to occupy his place. As Rozett points out, Nicholas is a narrator who learns about drama at the same time as the reader does, because even though he is an educated person –and that makes him a good teller– he belongs to a different environment and knows nothing about performance. Both character and drama undergo a change, an evolution, in a context that can be described as a Church-dominated society that is also about to change due to the impending Reformation

(85). Therefore, evolution –of Nicholas, drama and society– is an important issue that is dealt with in the story because it throws light on changes from that dominance of certain religious patterns that mark the three (the personal, the theatrical and the social) into something different. In the case of Nicholas, he changes his life from being a priest to a player; drama starts to develop from religious to secular; and society, even though it is the less obvious and the slowest change, starts its way towards a more civil-based society, one that will try to keep in check the power of feudal lords and corrupt clerics.

Nicholas, then, joins the company on their journey. The company is treated as a possession that their Lord sends from one place to another just because he can treat them as things, not people. His power as a rich and aristocratic person gives him the right to do so. Unsworth gives here, as Rozett remarks, information about how patronage and protection worked and lasted until Shakespeare's time (87). When the recently renewed group of players arrive at the village in which the crime has taken place, the detective part of the story begins. In this village, the representatives of the Church are also corrupt. As the players' investigation will reveal, Simon Damian, a monk bound to the Order of the Benedictines, is the one who chooses and provides young boys to satisfy the cravings of Lord de Guise's son, who forces them to have sex and then kills them while the monk gets rid of them afterwards. The monk is the Lord's confessor, but lies in order to protect the powerful family, maybe because he is afraid of them or for what he gets in return. He dies before he can face any serious accusation of his implication in the crime.

In addition to the corruption of the Church, there is the corruption of the feudal system, in which the powerful people use and abuse the poor. As I have just mentioned, the first lord who appears in the novel is the one who owns the company of players and he is less than considerate by sending them so far away in the middle of winter, which is what he is doing, without food or money. They have to perform on the way to sustain

themselves. But even this was not the worst, since those players that did not have the protection of a noble lord were in even worse circumstances. In the village where they stop as the novel begins, there is also a lord who lives in a castle away from the peasants and whose main preoccupation is the organisation of a tournament which will cost a great deal of money just for the entertainment of a few, while the village people live in poverty. This was, after all, what feudalism was like: power for a few, while many live in conditions close to slavery. There is an obviously unequal distribution of money and power that makes these poor people of the village miserable and dispensable. In fact, the reasons why the murderer is caught have nothing to do with a desire to make justice and vindicate the unfair deaths of several lower-class boys (Thomas Wells is only the last in a series). A Justice sent by the King is interested in the murders, but only so that the King has a reason (given the nature of the crimes) for keeping the Lord de Guise under control, so he cannot rebel against him. In fact, he does not care about justice, or about the young boys that have died, or about the innocent girl who is in jail charged with the murder of Thomas Wells, or what the villagers had to go through. The Church and justice are both at the service of power.

The Plague is also a serious threat the characters face in the novel. The Plague arrived in Europe in the mid-1300s and it killed more than 20 million people over the next five years. Its presence coincides with the approximate date in which the novel is set. In the novel, it is not the most serious issue but it is present and related to the murder because the boy murdered and found shortly before the players reach the village had caught the disease. This probably meant that the murderer would have it too, as the boy was sodomised. In the end, when the nature of the crimes is discovered, it is clear that Thomas Wells' illness was passed on to the son of Lord de Guise. It can be interpreted as some kind of divine punishment because it seems there will be no real punishment for him in

terms of earthly justice: he commits a crime repeatedly and is not punished for that, until the death of Thomas Wells, when he is infected with the Plague. However, nothing is clear at the end of the novel: will he get punished by the Justice? Will he die of the Plague? These questions, like others, are never answered, but the Plague seems a more likely punisher than the King's Justice.

## **2.2. GAPS OF KNOWLEDGE: THE TRANSITION FROM RELIGIOUS TO SECULAR DRAMA IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

As I mentioned above, one important part of this new kind of historical fiction is the accuracy of the historical setting combined with invented facts that rewrite history or that often fill in a gap in our knowledge of the historical past. This is what I will deal with in this section: Unsworth's version of the evolution of drama in the Middle Ages. Although this century was a time of crisis, illness and corruption, literature flourished, an especially medieval drama provided a very much needed entertainment.

Forter mentions formal self-reflectiveness as a characteristic of postmodernist fiction and, drawing on this, he explains that Unsworth's novel is clearly fictional, but that he plays with the existence of "counterstories of human possibility that have been snuffed out by [official history]" (781). In connection with new historical fiction, Rozett (84) also comments on the attraction that writers can be said to feel, in the light of the novels in this genre, by gaps in our knowledge of the past, gaps in history that have come down to the present without a clear explanation. In the case of Unsworth's novel, we can say that official history gives us the interludes as a transitional kind of drama, but in a vague way, which means that the evolution of drama was smooth enough so the change from religious to secular drama was not too sudden or visible. Certainly, historical records do not connect it with a point in time, a specific person or play. By contrast, Unsworth imagines exactly this: a person (the leader of the troupe) that has the idea, a play (based on Thomas Wells'

murder) and players (the troupe) that materialise it, a moment in time when secular drama was born. Martin, the players' leader, decides to play the story of the boy's murder led by the artistic goal of creating something unheard of and by the practical need to get some money from the performance in order to continue their journey to Durham; the investigation into the murder will be in charge of the troupe of players, the novel's main characters, and with the information they gather they will make up a new play for the people of the village.

In the Middle Ages, religious drama was didactic but also a most common form of entertainment, so this is actually part of the realistic historical setting on which the novel is based. There were different types of plays, the most important being mystery and morality plays. As they are defined by Howes (2018), the mystery plays are called like that because they dealt with the mysteries of God and they aimed to show the whole history of the world, from the creation of Heaven and Earth to the Last Judgement. They were based on biblical episodes and often represented in cycles. Morality plays, most popular in the Middle Ages, were allegorical plays that provided the audience with moral guidance. The allegory was based on the metaphor of the *homo viator* and life as a journey, so the protagonist, who represented all human beings, made a journey and he met helpers and opponents on the road, characters that personified abstract virtues and vices. His choices on the road of life determined his salvation or damnation. The characters were allegorical, too, as the ones that appear in the novel when the players perform moralities: Mankind, Avaritia, Good Counsel... These characters had each their own costumes and masks because the players did not usually show their faces during the performance. Given the fact that no many records are kept, Unsworth's detailed reconstruction of the performances is an interesting aspect of the narrative. In the novel we find different examples of these mystery and morality plays, which is what the troupe usually performs, like the *Play of*



*Adam*, the first play they put on when they arrive at the village, or the *Play of Our Lord's Nativity*. The players have their own fixed roles, even Margaret, the only woman in the company, has the task of gathering the money and helping the men during the performance –as a woman she cannot act in any play because it was forbidden by law. Connected with this is the set of roles that a boy called Springer has to take: most of the time he plays female parts, or sometimes the young characters because of his youth.

With the passing of time, drama changed and slowly became more secular. It was a process that led to the consolidation of a different type of plays at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These are the interludes, which marked the transition from medieval religious drama to Tudor secular drama. As explained by Martha Fletcher Bellinger (140), the interludes were usually short and humorous pieces with a reduced number of actors –from two to four– and which were usually represented in banquets. In fact, one interlude is mentioned in the novel, *Way of Life*, which is invented by Unsworth and from which the actors take some lines for the prologue of the new play. But it is above all the morality plays they know that are the basis they use to compose *The Play of Thomas Wells*: the boy was on the road, returning from a nearby town where his parents had sold a cow; they stayed in the tavern and he returned with the money; wanting his full purse, a girl tempted him to go off the road, as Vices tempt the main character in moralities... The players can thus use the already-established scheme of the moralities to build a play about something that really happened. It is Martin, the leader of the troupe, who tries to convince the rest to play the murder of Thomas Wells instead of the morality plays they are used to. He says that he has been thinking about it (making plays not based on the Scriptures) for a long time, which makes him appear as self-conscious of his art and a very innovative player, almost a visionary. The other players are initially shocked by what Martin proposes and do not seem convinced in the beginning, as when Tobias, one of the players, says: “[p]lay the

murder? [...] Who plays things that are done in the world?” (73). The reason he gives is “[t]here is no authority for it [...]. It is not written anywhere” (73). In those times it appeared unthinkable, and even sinful, to play something that was not written in the Bible or inspired by it. After some controversy, the players agree to perform such a play. They have the victim, the place where he was found, and the identity of the murderer, as a girl is already in prison, charged with the crime which happened during her attempt to rob him of his purse. So Martin finally succeeds and they agree to investigate the murder –gathering as much information as possible to then produce the play’s plot and dialogues– and perform a new play by using as a skeleton the traditional morality play. This will be the first secular play.

### **2.3. THE PLAYERS BECOME DETECTIVES**

In a classical detective novel, the detective would use his or her intellect and maybe his or her experience in these matters to investigate and infer the truth in order to solve the case and punish the criminal. However, in a metaphysical detective novel the investigation may not be in charge of professional detectives as is the case of this novel, where there is a group of people asking questions without really knowing what they are looking for and with no experience at all, since they are not investigators, they are players. Once the players decide to make *The Play of Thomas Wells*, the discovery of what happened becomes their main concern. It is now that the players take action and start asking people and investigating the murder so that they can make the play as faithful as possible to reality, to the truth of what happened. The characters divide and start asking questions to the villagers. After the first contact with the people, the players meet to share what they have found and organize the play, building their dialogues and characters upon those of the morality plays they know. In “The Typology of Detective Fiction” (1977), Todorov

explains that there are always two stories in a detective tale or novel: one is the story of the crime and the other is the story of the investigation. The first, the story of the crime, has taken place when the other begins. The story of the investigation tries to reconstruct the story of the crime. In Unsworth's novel there are different representations and versions of the play, as part of the investigation process. Each of those performances (three in all) gets them closer to what really happened, to the true story of the crime, as the players soon realise that the official version, with the jailed girl as murderer, is not consistent and she is nothing but a scapegoat.

The first performance they make draws a lot of attention from the people of the village, not only because it is something new but also because they want to know what really happened to Thomas Wells. The players, with no time to rehearse, have to go on stage and perform. The fact that they adapt parts of different plays they know helps them with the performance since they do not have a lot of time to practice. The performance is constantly interrupted by the audience, who keep making comments about the murder. During the investigation, they did not gather much information because people were not willing to talk about the murder, but during the performance people seem more willing to talk in order to correct the players' errors. The first play starts to generate questions that destabilise the official version of the murder. Instead of a coherent story and a closed ending, what becomes most obvious is the story's loose threads and the players' improvisation. However, the success of the play provides them with enough money to resume their journey to Durham, but, as they feel, they are already trapped in the play: they decide to stay in the town to keep on investigating and make a second version. This second time they go again to question the people of the town, including Jane Lambert, whom they visit in prison to confirm she could not have murdered the boy in the circumstances he was killed, and that means that she is innocent. Here appears a new objective: to find the real

murderer. Money was an important reason for the first play, but now finding out the truth is the real goal, and their innovative play becomes the means to that end. As the story advances, then, suspense arises “not only from the unknown identity of the murderer but from the very process of the inquiry to which the reader has access in the form of a morality play” (Martínez Alfaro 82).

For their second performance, they change the title to *The True Play of Thomas Wells* because of the new information they have discovered, which they hope will lead to the truth about the murder. While they are performing this new version, Simon Damian, the monk who accused Jane Lambert of Thomas Wells’ murder, is found dead. The players get more confused because more information related to the murder is getting to them and they have to react quickly and introduce it as smoothly as possible into the play so they do not stop the performance for a second. They do not have time to finish because they are taken to the castle of Lord de Guise, where they are “invited” to perform one of their plays for him and his guests. The Lord asks them to perform *The Play of Thomas Wells* so he can see if they are close to solving of the crime or not. De Guise’s concern about their advances in the investigation can be considered suspicious, and they understand he is connected with the murders somehow. This is a new version (the third one) of the play where Martin, dressed as “Pride and Arrogancy, Lordship and Sway” (178) attempts to subtly accuse the Lord. After the play, they are not allowed to leave the castle. Only Nicholas manages to escape and reaches the town where he finds the Justice, sent by the King, and talks to him. It is now that the Justice explains to him what is really happening in the castle with the son of Lord de Guise and the murdered boys.

Martin was partially right in his accusations to the Lord, while the Justice had known about the crimes for some time. However, he did not do anything to stop them because the real reason why he was there was to get irrefutable evidence against the Lord

only for political interests. This means that the case was solved from the beginning, at least for the people who should have stopped it. It was not the players-detectives the ones who got to solve it. When the truth is revealed, the reasons the Justice gives to Nicholas do not satisfy him. He was expecting some evil in William de Guise, Lord de Guise's son: "I wondered who might have planted such a seed and when it had been done. I thought it might have been done by Satan ..." (205). After all he has experienced, he still turns to God to get explanations, as the real question that troubles him has to do with sin, with the reasons why William de Guise began to sodomise and murder young boys. Moore (337) explains that Nicholas' final decision to remain a player may have to do with this lack of answers, and asserts that what he has learned about human nature and evil continues nonetheless to haunt him when he writes his story. He had been tormented by the knowledge of evil since he saw the dead body of Thomas Wells, but he still clung to the essential goodness of things, which the outcome of the investigation further questions. Moreover, this outcome is different from that in classical detective fiction, where the detective would have discovered the murderer and solved the case without help, not by chance, as happens here, and thanks to the help of the Justice. The "chess problem" Eliot talked about to describe detective fiction is a comparison that does not apply here. The players just get closer and closer to a truth that was already known by the Justice, a Justice who has not really come to make justice at all, but to get for the King better cards in their game of power with his nobles. Unlike what happens in a classical detective novel, there is here no sense that justice has been made, that the guilty party will pay for his crimes, that closure has been achieved and harmony restored. Here, the crimes punished are not the murders, but the political ones. If Lord de Guise would have been in better terms with the King, these crimes probably would have never been solved.

As mentioned earlier, during their performance in front of the Lord the players are arrested, only Nicolas escapes and he hopes his conversation with the Justice will help to free his friends. But the novel's ending is an open one: there are only more questions instead of answers. We do not get to know what will happen to the Lord or to the players when everything is over. As is the case with metaphysical detective stories, nothing seems to be really over. By contrast, in the case of the film, *The Reckoning* (2002), the ending is clearly closed because we see the punishment of the de Guise family, whose castle is devoured by fire, and there is less ambiguity in the future of the players, mostly in the case of Nicholas (Paul Bettany), who dies at the end of the film. In the novel Nicholas survives and narrates the story sometime after everything happened, but that only highlights the lack of answers. As the story comes to an end, Nicholas' new vision of the world emerges as one where nothing is stable or can be taken for granted: order (divine or human), feelings, or even our own selves, since we are all players of sorts. As Nicholas reflects, in facing the Lord in the mask of Superbia, Martin "had forced on him a part in another play. That in which the Justice was a Player and the King also, a larger play in which the suffering of the innocent was of no importance except as a counter to bargain with" (197).

As was mentioned in the introduction, in the metaphysical detective story it is not so much death that is a puzzle but rather life that becomes a puzzle to be solved. Nicholas' final reflections, and his decision to remain a player, go in that direction, as what he learns is that if our actions are not part of a larger divine script that acts as a stable centre and makes for our believing in order and justice, then all is transitory and unreliable, like the roles an actor plays in a structure of plays within plays that is also unstable and uncertain.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As was pointed out at the beginning of the essay, Postmodernism has changed the way history is seen and written about, as well as some of the main traits of classical detective fiction. Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play* is a good example of the fruitful combination of these two renewed genres: new historical fiction and the metaphysical detective story. On the one hand, the narration is set in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a historical period that is accurately recreated and that feels like a window opened to the England of the late Middle Ages, the setting where the plot develops. On the other hand, in this believable setting, Unsworth introduces his theory of the transformation that medieval drama underwent: a visionary actor in love with his work realises that the key to survival is to produce something different, different from the stories that audiences knew before seeing the plays; something that people can engage with and that can be artistically challenging and profitable for actors. Something new. The other actors follow him. And so the play starts by adapting the old moralities but it does gradually become something new, something that marked the beginning of something. As Rozett explains, *Morality Play* is, among other things,

a story of origins, modelled on the myths and tales by which cultures recount the origins of practices, places, dynasties or traditions. The multiple revisions of the *Play of Thomas Wells* participate in the process of making sense of the past that has been part of the literary enterprise since ancient times. Unsworth narrative doesn't set out to displace an existing story of origins, but rather to invent a hitherto unwritten, imaginary supplement to the historical record. (Rozett 102)

This imaginary supplement to the historical record, to use Rozett's words above, needs the murder story to progress. That secular play, that new thing, is about the murder of a young boy who turns out to be one of many, the one whose body was found out, and that is in turn the excuse that the author uses to turn the players into detectives. They are amateur

detectives that try to discover what happened but, in the end, they are not the ones who reveal the truth. The restoration of order and certainty that characterizes the classic detective story is absent here, as the novel takes sides with metaphysical detection rather than with traditional patterns of detective fiction. This being so, the ending remains open, as the truth that is found out does not lead to punishment and closure, order is not restored, justice is not enforced, and many questions are left unanswered –for instance, whether or not the players are punished by the Lord for what the latter sees as trespassing the limits in their search for truth. Far from defeating crime and evil, the novel’s detectives may have been killed. This is something that the older Nicholas narrating the story never mentions, thus making even more noticeable the gaps in the story he tells. A morality play follows a clear-cut scheme of rewards and punishments, but the play they devise, based on real things, ultimately shows that life is not so simple and easily ordered as a morality or, for the same reasons, as comforting and well-structured as a traditional detective story.



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