

Medieval Contemptus Mundi: The Original Black Celebration

I've mentioned a few times in class discussion the [Contemptus Mundi](#) tradition, going back to our study of Augustine. It is an important theme in Medieval literature. There were many poems in circulation entitled *De Contemptu Mundi*, *On the Contempt for the World*, including one written by a Pope. It was a mystical Christian literary genre.

What it means is not really a "contempt for the world," as in a hatred for creation itself, or of fellowman, but rather a spiritual or philosophical detachment to the things that most people naturally desire: wealth, glory, offices, honors, social status, feasts, pleasures, treasure, luxury and forms of sensual indulgences of the physical body (the "flesh" as opposed to the psyche or spirit). Contemptus Mundi is a *philosophical* renunciation of fleeting pleasures of the material world in favor of a more gratifying but disciplined, spiritual, contemplative and intellectual life which is connected (in Christianity) to lasting pleasures of eternal life. The tradition was originally associated with medieval monasticism, but later on, during the Renaissance, with philosophy, study, hermeticism, insight and genius.

There is a parallel tradition to Contemptus Mundi in the visual arts called Vanitas painting, which subtly demonstrates the concept that earthy treasure and pleasures are fleeting and ultimately pointless, mere *vanities* (examples of Vanitas still life painting will be shown in class when we discuss *Hamlet*). Wikipedia defines Vanitas as "a symbolic work of art showing the transience of life, the futility of pleasure, and the certainty of death, often contrasting symbols of wealth and symbols of ephemerality and death." This theme may be crudely represented in iconography by piles of treasure and exotic objects covered with a thin layer of dust or a skull or crown on top (indicative of the fact that its owner is deceased). More subtle Vanitas paintings are odd still life paintings depicting cut flowers and other luxury objects, often in a dark setting.

At first glance, the viewer may not notice the dust and decay, or that things are amiss; you are drawn in by the opulence, the exoticism (sometimes a weird collection of objects, which is another clue it is to be interpreted symbolically), finery, gorgeous or delicious items, all realistically and beautifully depicted, with careful attention to surface textures (symbolizing the flesh). Then, as you study it, the change happens as if before your eyes: the leaves of the flowers of the bouquet are slightly wilted and curled, the water in the vase is cloudy, the fine porcelain has a hair thin crack, the fruit is bruised. There may be a fly or strange beetle on the table. Look closely and note *everything* is in a subtle state of decay. Somewhere is a timepiece, hour glass or a skull symbolizing mortality. I've seen one with bubbles suspended in the air as if about to burst. The spread of food on the table, a feast suddenly and inexplicably interrupted, is just a tad rotten around the edges, but it might not be all that noticeable on the surface. The fading beauty of the flowers, the temporality of all worldly pleasure and wealth, is the point of it all. It is rich and exquisitely beautiful on the surface, but the pleasure or the beauty doesn't last long.

That's what Contemptus Mundi in art is about. The artist gets to show off his virtuosity and skill as an artist, but also his morality. When they work, they can be brilliant, because they operate on two levels, the material and the intellectual/spiritual. The rubes of the world will say, "Oh, what a beautiful picture! I love the flowers! What astonishing realism!" and keep walking. These ordinary people, like Gawain's comrades at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,

won't grasp the significance of the green sash, either, the fact that it is an outward sign of Gawain's fallen condition and penitence, as he says "his fault," even though to the reader Gawain seems to be perfect (the rest of the knights laugh at him and don't get it, saying he is being too hard on himself).

In many ways, Gawain embodies aspects of *Contemptus Mundi* as does Shakespeare's most mysterious play, *Hamlet*—also a play critics often do not get (some have called it pointless). We will discuss more of this when we get to *Hamlet*. It has all of the imagery and elements of *Contemptus Mundi*.

In most instances, *Contemptus Mundi* is more like an ambivalence or cool indifference to the things of this world, anti-materialism, a withdrawal into a kind of reflective or penitential state of being, rather than actual contempt—with one exception. In literature, *Contemptus Mundi* is also often characterized by what we might interpret to be "misogyny," a hatred for women, or more specifically a rejection of women as temptresses and deceivers. It is possible to read both Gawain's speech at the end of *SGGK* and Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia (Get thee to a nunnery) as part of the medieval *Contemptus Mundi* tradition, because rejection of all women as sexual / sensual creatures, tempters of men, was a very prominent part of that monastic tradition.

Although *Contemptus Mundi* went by other names after the Reformation, and monasticism ended in Protestant lands, Puritans and Calvinists were also big on *Contemptus Mundi* (and Augustine too, by the way, just different aspects). Milton's companion poems *L'Allegro Il Penseroso*, which contrasts frivolity and Mirth, simple pleasures, including pleasing imagery, with the unseen intellectual pleasures of nun-like "Melancholy," can also be read as a *Contemptus Mundi* poem. Milton, who was very religious, turns Classical pastoral genre on its head, contrasting the visceral, sensual delights of the countryside found in pastoral poems with the unseen spiritual intellectual pleasures which comes from study and contemplation of the divine.

Close readers will pick up on who the winner of that competition is, but you have to study it carefully to uncover its hidden meanings and to see black Melancholy is a celebration of unseen pleasures which Mirth cannot provide. --ENT