The Interlude
of Youth

Jesus that his arms be wide
And on a tree was done to dead
From all perils he you defende
And in audience I have made an eye
For I am come from God above
To occupy his laws to your behove
And am named Charlie
There may no man fail to be
Without the help of me
For he that Charlie both refuse
O by rightes though he do the same
Without Charlie it will not be
For it is written in the faith
Cast and Crew

Charity – Jamie Pugh
Youth – Dominic Davies
Riot – Christian Darnell
Pride – Greg Vicary
Lady Lechery – Joe Ramsden
Humility – Joe Ramsden
Minstrel – Alex Cottrell
Director – Sarah Peverley
Assistant Director – Martin Poile
Script – Martin Poile
Costumes and Props – Sarah Peverley
Programme – Mark Lane, Martin Poile and Sarah Peverley

With special thanks to

The National Trust; Helen Westwood and staff at Rufford Old Hall;
The Friends of the University; Liverpool Centre for Medieval and
Renaissance Studies; and The School of the Arts, Liverpool University.
Images taken from the sixteenth-century prints of Youth.

Plot Summary

Charity sermonises on the virtue represented by his character, welcoming the audience and outlining his relationship with God, after which Youth enters arrogantly lauding his beauty and strength.

Charity attempts to persuade Youth to repent his waywardness and seek salvation. When Youth threatens him with a dagger, Charity exits to seek his friend, Humility. Youth desires to see his ‘brother’, Riot, who has just escaped the noose at Newgate.

Riot describes the robbery he has just committed and Youth explains that he needs a serving man. Riot engages the services of Pride, who enters in extravagant clothing and scorns the poor. Pride offers his sister, Lady Lechery, as a mistress for Youth. The four set off for the tavern but are confronted by Charity, who is fettered by Riot.

The revellers go on their way, singing, leaving Charity to be released by Humility. The two virtues resolve to convert Youth to a moral way of life. Riot, Youth and Pride re-enter, drunk, and Youth resists conversion once again, seduced by promises of a life of drinking and gambling with Pride and Riot.

Charity explains Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross and Youth repents. Pride and Riot are dismissed and Youth is given new clothing to symbolise his contrition. Humility ends the play by blessing the audience.
The Interlude of Youth

The Interlude of Youth is both a moral allegory, teaching its audience how to find salvation through Christ’s sacrifice, and a political play about the early years of Henry VIII’s reign. The play draws on several earlier sources – the morality play Everyman (c. 1495), Henry Medwell’s Nature (c. 1495), and Stephen Hawes’s Example of Vertu (1503-4) – but Youth is unique in its vision, political outlook, and handling of the religious material.

There are a number of socio-political allusions within the play, such as legislation about the cost of imported hats, the punishment of those in Holy Orders, and the popularity of gold collars among knights, which help to date Youth to the period 1513-14. The play was performed during the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, and was printed three times; it is mentioned in the Stationers’ Register as late as January 1582, when the printing rights transferred from Sampson Awdeley to John Charlewood.

In medieval and Tudor times, very wealthy noblemen, like Henry Percy, fifth earl of Northumberland, were great patrons of the arts and kept a small group of actors, who had other household responsibilities. Their troupes would normally consist of four men and a boy (to play female roles), who would double-up roles as necessary and perform at banquets and other celebrations, such as Christmas, Shrovetide, and Easter. Youth bears signs of being acted by such a troupe of ‘players’, possibly ‘chapel gentlemen’ or choristers, attached to a noble household, at Christmas 1513 or Shrovetide 1514.

The play was originally intended for indoor performance as part of a banquet at a great hall like Rufford Old Hall and the term ‘interlude’ most likely refers to the play’s performance during a break in the evening’s proceedings. Perfectly suited to a banqueting hall, the play uses minimal props and doesn’t require any elaborate staging. While our production is performed to a seated audience, the Tudor actors would have performed to a room containing seated and standing spectators, who would have been able to move around at will and who wouldn’t have sat in ordered rows like twenty-first century theatre goers. Several references in the play account for the fact that the actors would be in close proximity to the audience, at times even pushing their way through the crowd.

The character of Youth has its roots in the ‘Ages of Man’ concept, a popular theme in medieval and Tudor times, which was commonly represented in plays, poems, illustrations, and decorative items, such as tapestries. Youth was portrayed as a handsome individual between the ages of 25 and 35 years old, who was prone to impulsive and misguided behaviour. The action of the play traces the progress of the eponymous protagonist, from his state of riotous arrogance, indulging in the sins of Pride and Lechery, to his redemption through the virtues of Charity and Humility.
The history of the play and its author is largely unknown, but its origins may lie with Henry Percy, fifth earl of Northumberland. Percy held a number of estates in the north of England, where the play originated, and he is known to have employed his almoner as a ‘maker of Interludys’ in 1514. Percy’s historian, William Peeris, likewise had a hand in revising the Beverley Corpus Christi play in 1519-20, and we know that two of Percy’s houses at Leconfield and Wressle in Yorkshire had decorative verses linked with the subject matter of Youth inscribed on the ceilings and walls.

If Percy did commission the play, it could have been intended as moral guidance for his son, Henry Percy (later the sixth earl of Northumberland). In the 1520s the fifth earl accused his namesake of ‘prodigality’ and of having ‘always been a proud, presumptuous, disdainful, and a very unthrift waster’, all characteristics of the play’s protagonist. An interlude like Youth would have helped to educate his young heir.

However, while Youth offers a moral paradigm for young noble men, it also has much to say about the politics of Henry VIII’s court and could have been intended as political satire. The play leaves us in no doubt that Youth is of high degree, perhaps even a king, a title that invites comparison with Henry VIII, who, interestingly, referred to himself as ‘Youth’ in his songs.

In the early years of his reign, King Henry was renowned for excessive spending, gambling, vanity, and pursuing beautiful ladies (all vices of Youth). Northern lords, like Percy, frequently complained of the difficulties of imposing justice and order in their domains after the king diminished the power of local officials to convict rioters, so commissioning an interlude that centred on the riotous figure of ‘royal’ Youth eschewing vice and embracing the virtues extolled by Charity would have been a perfect way of making a political point and flattering the temperamental monarch. Of further significance in this respect is the fact that the character Charity, the virtue associated with giving alms to the poor, might have been based on Henry VIII’s almoner, the famous Cardinal Wolsey, who by 1514 had significant influence over the young king.

Whoever commissioned the play, and whatever motivations helped shape the drama, the dangerous inversion of Tudor social hierarchies dramatised within it, as Pride, Youth’s ‘servant’, begins to govern his master and make him subject to his will, reaffirms the traditional structures that gave noblemen their power. It emphasises the responsibilities of the ruling class to help the poor, not scorn them, and to act with humility, not pride, as Christ once did.

We hope that our use of a five-man troupe, minimum props, contemporary costumes, and, of course, the stunning Tudor hall that we are so privileged to be performing in, offer tantalising glimpses of what it might have been like to see an interlude like Youth being performed in the sixteenth century.