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Verbal Texture and Wordplay in the York Cycle

Those who have concerned themselves closely with the text or with performance of the York Cycle have sometimes remarked on the importance of aspects of its verbal texture, bearing variously as they do upon its dramaturgic, its theological, and its poetic character. Alexandra Johnston, for example, has pointed out how some facets of the language of the Cycle are conditioned by the practices of processional performance, and elsewhere she has remarked upon the somewhat paradoxical effect whereby the Cycle's 'poetic diversity' coexists with 'over-arching patterns of imagery that echo from one episode to another'.[1] The present study begins by pointing out some of the pervasive and general characteristics of the verbal complexion of the Cycle as a whole, and it then goes on to explore some of the ways in which the specific phenomenon of wordplay (as a marker of self-conscious poetic inventiveness on the part of the dramatists) exists within that context. Two caveats, however, are called for. In the first place, it is plain that a comprehensive account of the verbal texture of the Cycle demands a great deal more attention and detailed documentation than the space available here permits. What follows offers an impression, whose value must reside partly in functioning as a signpost for further investigations, and as a basic sounding board against which more thorough analyses may be tested. As for wordplay, it does no harm to remind oneself that this is notoriously an area of enquiry involving, at several levels, subjective judgements: the intention of the writer, the inflection of the speaker, and the ear of the listener all play their part in creating an effect which may appear palpable to some but dubious to others.

Modern criticism of medieval English poetry in general often acknowledges the presence of wordplay, in a number of forms, though critics have varied widely in their expectations as to the extent of that presence, and in their assumptions concerning its functional significance. The fact that wordplay often tends to be treated incidentally, as a matter of passing observation in commentaries, or in articles collecting up scattered puns, seems to be symptomatic of critical uncertainty as to its status and purpose in writings of this period. The

absence of any extended and systematic treatment of the principles, attending equally to both linguistic technicalities and critical issues, is noticeable.[2]

As far as the early drama is concerned, the biblical plays attributed to the Wakefield Master and the morality *Mankind* have sometimes (for obvious reasons) attracted critical attention devoted to their linguistic resourcefulness and richness of expression, with wordplay often having a significant role. That some of the York plays themselves possess comparable features has not escaped notice: for example, the Shipwrights' *Building of the Ark*, beneath its generally limpid and matter-of-fact verbal surface, covertly moves toward a complex and resonant pun on the word 'craft' in its closing lines; the Pinners' *Crucifixion*, composed in language of a greater dramatic intensity appropriate to its subject, plays in a similarly extended way on 'work', 'travail', and their cognates, both visually and conceptually, as well as verbally.[3] It may well be that these undeniably sophisticated and 'through-written' instances of word-play are untypical of the York Cycle as a whole. Room exists, however, for an overview, though I believe it is an enquiry that should first take account of certain contexts within which late-medieval English literary language was mediated to those who would be expected to attend to it. At the outset it is important to bear in mind that we are dealing here with a text that was designed exclusively for the attention of those who listened to and saw the plays, and not (except for incidental or intermediary purposes) for readers.

Written texts of all or parts of a cycle of biblical plays seen at York may well have existed from at least the last decade or so of the fourteenth century, but we have no information about the form or forms they took. There is, indeed, no evidence of the existence of a consolidated text of the whole cycle (or of as much of it as could then be assembled) until well into the later half of the fifteenth century. The great Register (now British Library Additional MS 35290) that was probably compiled towards the end of the period between 1463 and 1477 embodies most of the text in the form in which we now read, analyse and present it, but the cycle continued to evolve, and the Register passed into a state of partial obsolesence soon after it was copied.[4] A deputy to the city's common clerk was nevertheless still able to use the Register as a check against the text the actors were speaking in performance in the second and third decades of the sixteenth century, and he took the opportunity to enter sporadic marginal and interlinear notes of where entire plays, speeches, single lines, and even individual words had changed. He counts as our only identifiable contemporary *reader* of the cycle, though there were probably a few others whose purpose was almost certain to have been equally practical.[5] Other written forms of parts of the cycle certainly or probably existed throughout its long history, and their

purposes would have likewise been pragmatic – 'originals' of individual pageants belonging to the guilds, of which the sixteenth-century booklet containing the Scriveners' play of the *Incredulity of Thomas* is a chance survival,[6] and no doubt 'parcels', long strips of paper or parchment containing the speeches and cues for the various parts, from which the actors learned their lines.[7] Towards the end of its working life the text in the Register seems to have been read for the first time for a purpose not immediately related to performance practice when in 1568 and 1579 the reforming ecclesiastical authorities 'perused' it with the intention that its content should be 'amendyd' and 'correcte[d]'.[8]

Various forms of the 'text of the York Cycle' (using the term now in a rather broad and notional sense) were, then, the object of attention for the best part of two centuries in the late-medieval and early modern period, but it was probably apprehended as a written substance by relatively few pairs of eyes, as compared with the vast number of pairs of ears that heard it spoken. This is worth emphasizing, because in modern times the situation has been starkly reversed. It is important that we at least recognize, even if we can do comparatively little about the fact that our approach to the text is primarily conditioned by subconscious and sometimes inappropriate habits of response derived from many generations of private reading, whereas in the original and intended environment the experience was entirely auditory, conditioned by habits of hearing rather than seeing words. On the other hand, it is a particular pleasure to record, in the present setting, how the efforts of the more enlightened adapters, directors, producers, and actors of the plays in recent years have made a significant contribution to mitigating this disabling mismatch. While none of us will ever hear northern Middle English as it was heard in Micklegate or Stonegate, echoes of those sounds and traces of those locations as they once were still exist, and on these we can work with tact and discretion. It is scarcely surprising that in our own time it has been writers from Yorkshire, Ted Hughes and Tony Harrison, whose local dialects have been essential to the constitution of their poetry, who have responded explicitly and creatively to the sounds and syntactical patterns of the language in which these plays are written, who have 'heard' it most clearly.[9]

The dramatic language used in the York Cycle must be seen in several fairly broad contexts if we are to begin to understand the nature of a contemporary audience's attunement to it. Valuable work has been devoted to the actual and recorded remains of the processional route through streets of the city and the 'places to hear the play',[10] a characteristic phrase from the records in which the word 'hear' should be given its due weight. To 'hear (alongside 'see') a play' was common parlance until, it appears, the latter part of the seventeenth century, when theatregoing had become an exclusively indoor activity, and 'to see a play'

became the only way of referring to the activity.[11] The question of approximately how many people could comfortably hear and see the pageants at each of the stations on the processional route in York remains undecided, and it is quite likely that the number would have varied from one place to another, with an upper limit of perhaps not much in excess of one hundred. Modern revivals using parts of the original processional route seem to indicate a figure in this order and, in terms of the required acting style and vocal projection, lend some support to Eileen White's hypothesis that in performance the York Play is better viewed 'not as an epic, but as a very intimate dramatic experience'.[12] The intricate stanzaic forms used in a significant number of the plays suggest that their authors were conscious of writing for an audience with a taste for listening to dramatic language patterned and shaped in various ways, and from 1476, if not earlier, formal civic provision existed for the annual auditioning of actors, to ensure that they were of satisfactory 'Co*n*nyng, voice [and] p*er*sonne' for the forthcoming performance.[13]

The term that best describes the audience of the York Plays, within this context, comes in the form of a somewhat awkward but serviceable word of recent coinage, 'audiate', used to describe 'experienced hearers, possessing both competence in the matter and manner of traditional oral and aural literature as well as a "quite remarkable facility for maintaining their attention and grasping matters of individual detail or overall structure"'.[14] Whether or not members of the audience were also literate is something of a side-issue here, though they would obviously have included some professional and recreational private readers, and, in the fifteenth century, increasing numbers of those who practised pragmatic literacy in connection with (for example) urban commercial activities.[15] For the majority, however, the primary and habitual mode of reception for most forms of verse composition was auditory, through the reading aloud of texts, in small groups in domestic settings, or more publicly in larger companies in parish churches, religious houses, and guild halls. Evidence for the commonplace and pervasive auditory experience of reading in courtly and elite environments during the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has recently been ably marshalled by Joyce Coleman.[16] What she has to say about the nature of audiate literary experience in these well-documented spheres is a fortiori true of the much wider public reception of the massive quantity of homiletic, instructional, and devotional writing that was in circulation, much of it in verse designed to be read aloud, and all of it inherently closer to the plays in style and substance than the romances and secular narratives with which it was avowedly designed to compete.

The hundreds of surviving manuscripts of works like the *Prick of Conscience*, *Speculum Vitae*, the *South English Legendary*, the *Northern Homily Collection*, *Cursor Mundi*, the *Northern Passion*, *Handlyng Synne* and so on attest to the vigour with which the late-medieval campaign of vernacular religious instruction (of which the plays themselves were a part) was carried forward, representing as they do only a very small fraction of the total number of copies of these works that must once have existed. A look at the manuscripts themselves can be revealing, since their layout (often in single columns, with wide margins and line-spacing) and their handwriting (tending towards the more formal or set book-hand models) show how they were designed to facilitate public reading to a general audience such as a parish congregation or a guild assembly.[17] The numbers that could gather in a York parish church or guild hall were likely to have been rather similar to those we might envisage at one of the 'places to hear the play' mentioned above, and it is in these and in other more domestic settings that the audience's habits of reception of these verse compositions would have been formed.[18]

The direct connections between the episodes in the Corpus Christi play and northern religious verse compositions such as the *Northern Passion*, the *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament* and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* are well established, and it is quite possible that the *Speculum Vitae* was somehow related to the city's Paternoster Play. In wills and book lists it appears as the book of the (or *liber de*) Paternoster, and is plausibly attributed to the York ecclesiastical lawyer William of Nassington (fl ante 1384).[19] The audiate clerical and lay milieu in which texts of this kind were circulated and used in York is evoked in the mid-fifteenth century wills of two secular priests, also guild chaplains, who were closely associated with both parish and civic drama. The fuller and better-known is that of William Revetour (d. 1446), sometime deputy common clerk of the city, who, as well as beqeathing a copy of the Creed Play, also left the *Prick of Conscience* and other books probably to be identified as the *Northern Homily Collection*, *Speculum Vitae*, and the *Cursor Mundi*. William Downham (d. 1464) also left copies what are likely to have been *Speculum Vitae* and the *Cursor Mundi*, as well as a copy of the Paternoster Play itself.[20] Prelection of texts of this kind could be affective as well as instructional. The complaint of a fourteenth-century sermon writer, concerning one who is left unmoved by the story of Christ's Passion read in the Gospel for Holy Week, but who is stirred to tears when the tale of Guy of Warwick is read aloud to him, suggests as much.[21] It was not only texts in verse that were designed for aural reception. Nicholas Love's widely-circulated translation of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (*The Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesus Christ*, c 1400–10), made at Mount Grace

Priory, north of York, was cast in a form which can be used for either private meditation or reading aloud, and its dramatic and affective character later influenced the composition of the N-Town Mary Play in East Anglia.[22]

The vocabulary, style, and audiate orientation of writings of this kind bears immediately on a discussion of the verbal texture of the pageants in the York Corpus Christi Play, and the audience's attunement to it. To define and quantify the diction of the plays, giving appropriate regard to all their stylistic variations, is potentially a very large undertaking, but some broad preliminary statements can be made as to its general lineaments. Here, a considerable but still somewhat neglected resource is the *Concordance* to the text of the Cycle, edited by G.B. Kinneavy in 1986.[23] A concordance enables us to assess, amongst many other things, the extent and complexion of a text's vocabulary, which in the case of the York Cycle can be safely described as comparatively restricted. It certainly does not possess the richness and variety immediately apparent, for example, from the concordances to the writings of Chaucer, Langland, or the *Gawain* poet. The York Cycle runs to upwards of 13,500 lines, but its language can only very seldom be described as elaborated or recondite, and it is clear from the *Concordance* that a significant proportion of the vocabulary consists of basic lexical items that are frequently repeated.[24]

Against this observation must be set the fact that the plays are plainly to be attributed to several authors, who contributed to the Cycle at different times, writing in a variety of styles and metres, some displaying more lexical resourcefulness and apparent self-consciousness than others. Nonetheless, the repetition from one play to the next of a significant proportion of the total vocabulary, consisting primarily of substantives, pronouns, and verbs rather than qualifiers, suggests a shared and no doubt tacit asssumption of stylistic restraint in this respect. A similar principle has been observed at work in a secular prose composition of the period, the relative transparency of whose verbal texture has more than once been linked to the nature of its thematic concerns. The lexically restricted style favoured by Malory in the *Morte Darthur* has been described as a 'deliberate narrowness and simplicity of vocabulary that directs our attention, by insistent repetition, to key words and concepts in the narrative'.[25] The York Plays seem to me to share this characteristic, though whereas in Malory verbal repetition tends to be interpreted largely in terms of 'literary' effect, in the plays its presence (having regard to aural reception) also has much to do with the creation of what linguists call textual cohesion, a term encompassing those sets of verbal and syntactic features that lend a text its characteristic internal connectedness, unity, and coherence.[26]

The ranking-frequency lists in the *Concordance* to the York Plays are of considerable interest, and provide some insight into the range of vocabulary that is most frequently repeated.[27] Leaving aside the area of the vocabulary made up of items of very common occurrence, whose functions are primarily syntactical (articles, pronouns, prepositions, auxiliary verbs), it is possible to identify a range of internally cohesive 'significatory' words that occur upwards of fifty or so times, and which are spread fairly evenly across the text of the Cycle as a whole. Such words are likely to be found to be of frequent occurrence irrespective of the metre or style of a given play, and regardless of whether or not it is known to have been revised, or can be dated early or late in the history of the Cycle. In every play the dialogue will thus foreground this basic range of vocabulary, often expressed in repeated formulae, which it is guaranteed to share with both its immediate and distant neighbours in the Cycle as a whole. Simple synonyms are preferred to circumlocutions, metaphorical expressions, euphemisms, and the like.

The verbal skeleton of the Cycle that is constituted by this range of high-frequency vocabulary contains no surprises, and consists of words, which, wherever else they may be found, are not out of place in the demotic and colloquial registers of everyday speech. The fact that relatively little of this stratum of the vocabulary has become obsolete (though some items that have do remain in northern dialect) is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the plays communicate so directly to modern audiences. It includes terms that form the eschatological co-ordinates of the universe in which the action is set – heaven (bliss), hell (bale), world (earth, land) – and which define the physical spaces on or immediately around the pageant-wagon sets. The essential dramatis personae are likewise strictly denoted: God (Lord, Father, Maker); man, men/mankind, folk; fiend/devil. The same universalizing tendency is present in a wider variety of words expressive of pairs of components in a range of basic binary oppositions, for example, light and darkness, weal and woe, life and death, motion and stasis, truth and falsehood, good and ill, grace and sin. It is also clear that there were certain semantic fields in which the dramatists tended to confine themselves to a relatively restricted range of expressions. Physical activity, whether human or supernatural, is characteristically described by parts of the verbs 'to work', 'to make', and 'to dight', and especially, in preterite contexts, by 'wrought'. The French derivate 'travail' is also significant in this group. The commonest related substantives are 'maker' and 'making', and that which is done is usually referred to as a 'deed'. The kinds of action that are frequently either performed or invoked are expressed by words like 'give', 'take', 'help', 'save', 'find', and 'grant'.

Another settled and restricted set of terms is used to express movement, or the lack of it: as well as 'come' and 'go', 'gang', 'wend', 'move', 'haste', 'pass', 'send', and 'lead', together with a variety of less frequently occurring synonyms, are pervasive, and a good many such words function in the context of the processional dramaturgy of the Cycle, what Alexandra Johnston has described as 'the constant sense throughout each episode that the story of salvation history being unfolded ... consists of many journeys'.[28] Greetings and leave-takings are frequent, and to stop or stay is usually to 'bide'. No less conspicuous is the insistent emphasis on visual perception, with verbs like 'see', 'look', 'lo' and 'behold' occurring everywhere. That which is seen is usually a 'sight'. Also frequent, and sometimes in contexts related to the visual, are sets of words relating to verbal articulation ('say', 'speak', 'tell', 'tale', 'word') and cognition ('wit', 'know', 'deem', 'lere', 'rede', 'trow').

Analysis of the most frequently occurring words in the York Cycle, and of their semantic groupings could be taken very much further.[29] However, the textually cohesive function of this kind of dramatic diction, for an audience who would expect to hear this very extended text on only one special occasion annually, is very clear. It is also worth remarking that a high proportion of the frequently occurring verbs have marked performative or deictic aspects, in that what is said is intended to relate directly to something that is being done, or to draw attention (often implying gesture) to action. That these characteristics of the diction are developed within a particular orientation with regard to the audience is indicated by the relative frequencies of the pronoun forms in the text as a whole. To judge from the especially high frequency of 'I/me/my/mine' as against second and third person forms, the speaking character and the actor behind it tend to be presented to the audience as noticeably self-referential.[30] The underlying verbal texture of the Cycle, within which the authors of particular pageants or goups of pageants worked in their own styles and metres, appears to have been relatively stable and homogeneous, and predicated upon the embodiment of certain universalized actions and concepts, in a demonstrative mode that was closely integrated with the manner of presentation and the acting style.

Though it might be thought that this would be a relatively inauspicious environment for wordplay and verbal display generally, it is nevertheless clear that just as some of the authors who contributed to the Cycle saw an opportunity to exhibit their metrical ingenuity, others (and sometimes the same ones) were alive to the possibilities of linguistic nuance within the generally functional and denotative linguistic mode described above. An appropriate comparison might again be Malory, whose studiedly quotidian and restricted diction

by no means precluded the development of special resonances and connotations in certain contexts.[31] Sophisticated and extended explorations of thematically significant resonances involving the important words 'craft' and 'work' in the plays have been mentioned above, but a variety of more localized examples, which can be roughly classified under several headings, are worth bringing into focus. Sometimes they appear on the page to be little more than jingles or incidental echoic effects, though a good actor will want to bring out their latent significance, as when Peter, in the Cordwainers' *Agony in the Garden*, anticipates Jesus' impending death with the words:[32]

> Oure liffe of his lyolty his liffe schall he lose,
> Vnkyndely be crucified and naylyd to a tree.   (ll.25–6)

Here, the first occurrence of 'life' (a key word in the Cycle as a whole, appearing upwards of 120 times) carries the extended sense of 'saviour' or 'salvation' (cf. *MED* lif *n.* 4(b)),[33] and glances back to God's numinous words at the opening of the cycle: 'Ego sum Alpha et O: vita, via . . . I am lyfe and way vnto welth-wynnyng' (l.3), as well as recalling the recurrent divine epithets 'lord of lyffe' (*Cain and Abel*, l.1; *Moses and Pharoah*, l.181; *The Transfiguration*, l.72) and 'lampe' or 'light of liffe' (*The Woman Taken in Adultery*, l.130; *The Entry into Jerusalem*, l.532). Verbal effects of this kind, depending on repetition, or repetition with sense variation, are not uncommon in the Cycle, but one other example may be given in a cautionary spirit. What looks like a play on 'stone' and 'a*ston*ished', in a speech of one of the soldiers who unsuccessfully guard the tomb in the Carpenters' *Resurrection*, is perhaps debatable:

> We wer so radde euerilkone
> Whanne þat he putte beside þe stone,
> We wer so stonyd we durste stirre none
> And so abasshed.   (ll.377–80)

The original rhymes are likely to have been on *a* ('stane' rather than 'stone'), but the alliteration, and the instability of the vowel sound at the time, are probably sufficient to sustain what sounds like a rueful pun on the soldier's part. It should also be borne in mind that the scribes who copied the play manuscripts would probably have recognized and may even have participated in wordplay. Near the beginning of the Saddlers' *Harrowing of Hell*, Jesus explains the predicament of those whom he has come to release:

Þe feende þame wanne with trayne
Thurgh frewte* of erthely foode (ll.9–10)

(*Towneley MS fraude)

'Fruit' taken literally may seem redundant, and the Towneley version's straightforward 'fraude' may be the original reading; but 'fruit' with the sense 'reward' (MED fruit n. 5 (c)) is certainly an interesting variant.

Wordplay also has much to do with the creation of dramatic irony in some contexts, where a speaker or his interlocutor is unconscious of a secondary meaning in what is being said. In the Pewterers' and Founders' *Joseph's Trouble about Mary*, the deluded and ill-tempered Joseph greets his wife's servant with:

JOSEPH.   All hayle, God be hereinne.
I PUELLA.   Welcome, by Goddis dere myght.
JOSEPH.   Whare is þat ȝonge virgine,
             Marie, my berde so bright? (ll.75–8)

The sardonic jest in lines 77–8 tends to overshadow the irony of line 75, where the conventional greeting is momentarily imbued with the numinous significance of the Incarnation that has lately taken place. Unknown to Joseph, God is physically 'hereinne', and in a sense that is about to shake him to the core. In the Parchmentmakers' and Bookbinders' *Abraham and Isaac*, a poignant irony of which Abraham and the audience are aware, but of which Isaac remains unconscious, comes to a point in the word 'stand' (l.144):

ABRAHAM.   Sone, yf oure lord God almyghty
             Of myselfe walde haue his offerande,
             I wolde be glade for hym to dye,
             For all oure heele hyngis in his hande.
ISAAC.   Fadir, forsuth, ryght so walde I,
             Leuer þan lange to leue in lande.
ABRAHAM.   A, sone, thu sais full wele, forthy
             God geue þe grace gratthely to stande. (ll.137–44)

The ostensible sense of 'stande' here is that Abraham encourages his son to remain steadfast in his professed obedience to the will of God, but other senses – to withstand or endure, or even to survive the suffering that Abraham believes he must inflict upon him – are surely also present (MED stonden v.(1), (24(a), 1a(d), 6(e)). The pageant of *Herod and the Magi*, for which responsibility was divided between the Masons and the Goldsmiths,

contains several plays on words with different shades of irony. It begins with a characteristic boasting speech from the Masons' Herod, giving absurd emphasis to his supposed dominion over the celestial bodies of the solar system. One of his soldiers replies with the customary flattery:

> All kynges to youre croune may clerly comende
>> Youre lawe and youre lordshippe as lodesterne on hight.   (ll.23–4)

'Lodesterne', or guiding star, is entirely consonant with Herod's astronomical fantasy, but it also brings to mind the star in the east, guiding the way to Bethlehem, which each of the Three Kings mentions during the course of their successive speeches in the next scene, played by the Goldsmiths (ll.57–90). Presumably a special effect existed to keep this real star visible to the audience throughout. In the first scene, Herod's speeches continue with lurid threats against his enemies, echoed faithfully by his guards:

> [HERODES].   What browle þat is brawlyng his brayne loke ȝe brest,
>>   And dynge ȝe hym doune.
> I MILES.   Sir, what foode in faith will ȝou feese,
>>   Þat sott full sone myselfe sall hym sesse.   (ll.38–41)

Here, the pejorative 'browle' and the neutral 'foode' could be used of any human being, but the primary sense in each case refers to young children, 'brat' and 'infant' respectively (*MED* brol *n.* (a); fode n.(2) 1a (a)). An ominous prolepsis of the *Slaughter of the Innocents* would have been distinctly audible to the audience (cf. l.196, 'Ther browls schall dere abye'). Appropriately, 'foode' reappears soon afterwards in its specific sense when the Second King pays homage to the infant Jesus, evidently with Eucharisitic significance (*MED* fode n.(1) 1a (a)):

> Hayll, foode þat thy folke fully may fede,
>
> . . . .
>
> Hayll mylde, for þou mett to marke vs to mede,
>> Off a may makeles þi modir þou made.   (ll.321, 325–6)

'Makeles', meaning both 'peerless' and 'without a mate' (and perhaps also 'spotless', 'immaculate') is familiar to us, and was no doubt to some contemporaries from the exquisite Incarnation lyric 'I syng of a myden þat is makeles '.[34]

In other instances of wordplay it is evident that speakers are portrayed as being conscious of more than one meaning in what they say, and it tends to be wicked characters who use language in this way. A simple example is found in the Saddlers' *Harrowing of Hell*, where the devils comment upon the commotion among those in hell who anticipate being 'saved' (ie, rescued) by Jesus rather than being 'saved' (ie, kept) by their captors:

I DIABOLUS.	Þei crie on Criste full faste	
	And sais he schall þame saue.	
BELSABUB.	3a, if he saue þame noght, we schall.	(ll.107–9)

An apocryphal episode in the Cooks' and Waterleaders' pageant of the *Remorse of Judas*, in which Pilate and the High Priests cheat an anonymous squire out of his mortgage on the Field of Blood, builds towards plays on the same word with slightly different shades of meaning, upon which the squire is dismissed empty-handed:

PILATUS.	What wolde þou borowe, bewshire? Belyve late me se.	
ARMIGER.	If it ware youre lekyng, my lorde, for to lene it,	
	xxx^{ti} pens I wolde 3e lente onto me.	
KAYPHAS.	Yis bewshire, þat schall þou haue.	
PILATUS.	Shewe vs thi dedis and haue here þi mony.	
ARMIGER.	Haue her gode lorde, but loke 3e þame saue.	
PILATUS.	3is certis, we schall saue þame full soundely,	
	And ellis do we noght dewly oure deuere.	(ll.352–9)

In the Cutlers' *Conspiracy*, one of the learned doctors who comes to indict Jesus ornaments his testimony with a clever quibble on 'counted' (arising from 'telle'), in the context of the casting out of the money-changers from the temple:

[I DOCTOR].	For in oure temple has he taught by tymes moo þan tenne
	Where tabillis full of tresoure lay to telle and to trye,
	Of oure cheffe mony-changers – but, curstely to kenne,
	He caste þam ouere, þat caystiffe, and counted no3t þerby.

(ll.71–4)

Later in the same pageant Judas, in soliloquy, proves himself capable of the kind of extended equivocation that an Elizabethan stage villain might have admired. Speaking of the costly ointment used by the woman (traditionally,

Mary Magdalen) to anoint the feet of Jesus, he remarks as follows, developing malevolent puns on the word 'part', out of 'de*part*id to' (= divided amongst), through 'þare part' (= concern for them/the portion due to them), to 'þe tente parte' (= the percentage he believes himself entitled to as the disciples' purse-bearer):

> Þat same oynement, I saide, might same haue bene solde
>   For siluer penys in a sowme thre hundereth, and fyne
> Haue ben departid to poure men as playne pité wolde;
>   But for þe poore, ne þare parte priked me no peyne –
> But me tened for þe tente parte, þe trewthe to behold.   (ll.141–5)

It is not surprising to find that Satan, in his first appearance in the Coopers' *Fall of Man*, is prone to equivocal manipulations of language. Announcing his intention to subvert God's new creation, he makes toward Eve, and it is not clear whether the 'redy way' he refers to is simply the route he takes across the stage, or Eve herself:

> But he has made to hym a make,
>   And harde to her I wol me hye
>   That redy way,
>   That purpose proue to putte it by.   (ll.14–17)

The words with which he encourages Eve to taste the fruit can also be understood in two different ways:

> Byte on bodly, be nought abasshed,
>   And bere Adam to amende his mode
>   And eke his blisse.   (ll.80–2)

Eve understands Satan's 'amende' in its ostensible sense of 'improve' (*MED* amenden *v.* (8)), but it could also be used more neutrally, to mean 'change, alter' (*Ibid.* (10)); 'eke' can be taken as a verb ('enhance') in the same spirit as 'amende' = 'improve', but the adverbial sense, 'also', gives a negative meaning in the light of 'amende' = 'change'. A final instance, detailing an exchange between the brothers in the Glovers' *Cain and Abel*, illustrates that it is not always the wicked characters who are conscious of verbal play:

> [CAYME].   Ya, daunce in þe devil way, dresse þe downe,
>   For I wille wyrke euen as I will.

What mystris þe, in gode or ille,
Of me to melle þe?

ABELL.   To melle of þe myldely I may.   (ll.52–6)

In context, it might be thought that in picking up Cain's 'melle' (= 'meddle, interfere with', from 'medlen') and returning it to him as 'speak to' (from 'melen') Abel only makes matters worse for himself, though alternatively it may be that he misses Cain's sense in the first place.

The language of the York Cycle as a whole has here been considered synchronically as an 'audiate' construct, the bedrock of its diction determined by insistent attention to essential concepts and actions. Its calculatedly 'restricted code' of basic expression has much in common with that of the aurally oriented penitential and homiletic texts (themselves largely of northern composition) whose didactic aims it shares. Some aspects of this essentialized verbal texture are also undoubtedly conditioned by the circumstances of processional production, and by strong deictic and self-referential elements in the rhetoric of the acting style. Within this basic framework different dramatists developed their own range of verbal and metrical inventiveness, which included the various sorts of incidental wordplay exemplified in the preceding pages, as well as the more sustained or 'through-written' kind of attention to relationships between words and actions, mentioned at the beginning. The Cycle does not, however, in general tend towards the active verbal exuberance found in the work of the Wakefield Master and the *Mankind* dramatist. Instead, and in common with its understated metadramatic gestures and its relatively modest recourses to the type of theatricality generated by 'special effects', wordplay in the Cycle is apt to be a discreet presence, merged into an overall verbal texture that is itself informed throughout by the spirit of *ars est celare artem*.

Notes

1 Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The *York Cycle* and the *Chester Cycle*: What Do the Records Tell Us?', *Editing Early English Drama: Special Problems and New Directions* Alexandra F. Johnston (ed) (New York, 1987), 128. See also her 'The York Corpus Christi Play: A Dramatic Structure based on Performance Practice', *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, H. Braet et al (eds) (Leuven, 1985), 362–73. See her 'The Word Made Flesh: Augustinian Elements in the *York Cycle*', *The Centre and Its Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of*

John Leyerle, R.A. Taylor et al (Kalamazoo, 1993), 225–46 for suggestions concerning certain theological bases for the York playwrights' preoccupation with 'words and the patterns of sound that they make' (228). R.J. Collier, *Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play* (Hamden, 1977), chapter 1, 'The Poetry of the Play', lays some intelligently conceived foundations for a critical approach to poetic diction and verse form.

2 N.F. Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London, 1977), chapter 5, 'Word-play', offers an overview of the topic, and is suitably cautionary.

3 The verbal exuberance of the Wakefield Master has recently been critically assessed by Peter Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, Richard Beadle (ed) (Cambridge, 1994), 150–4. The thematic significance of language in *Mankind* was well set out by Paula Neuss, 'Active and Idle Language: Dramatic Images in *Mankind*, *Medieval Drama*, N. Denny (ed), Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 16 (London, 1973), 41–67. For further references to wordplay in the York Shipwrights' and Pinners' pageants, see Beadle, *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 87, 103.

4 Richard Beadle, 'The York Cycle: Texts, Performances, and the Bases for Critical Enquiry', *Medieval Literature: Texts and Iinterpretation*, T.W. Machan (ed) (Binghamton, 1991), 121.

5 Peter Meredith, 'John Clerke's Hand in the York Register', *Leeds Studies in English* ns 12 (1981), 245–71.

6 A.C. Cawley, 'The Sykes Manuscript of the York Scriveners' Play', *Leeds Studies in English* 7–8, (1952), 45–80.

7 No 'parcels' survive from York but for an East Anglian example, see Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. f. 2, containing the eponymous role only from an otherwise lost play know as *Dux Moraud*; facsimile in N. Davis (ed), *Non-cycle Plays and the Winchester Dialogues*, Leeds Texts and Monographs, Medieval Drama Facsimiles v (Leeds, 1979).

8 Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds), *York*, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto, 1979), 354, 390. Hereafter referred to as REED *York*.

9 For Ted Hughes' statement of his debt to his native dialect and its medieval literature see the interview with Ekbert Fass, printed in *London Review*, 10 (1971), 5–20 (and reprinted in E. Fass, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, 1980), 202): 'I grew up in West Yorkshire. They have a very distinctive dialect there. Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self.... Without it, I doubt if I would ever have written verse. And in the case of the West Yorkshire dialect, of course, it connects you directly and in your

most intimate self to Middle English poetry' (11–12). The significance of these remarks is aptly developed by Seamus Heaney in his appreciation of Hughes's poetry in 'Englands of the Mind', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London, 1980), 155–6. Tony Harrison's eclectic adaptations from the northern mystery cycles for the National Theatre, London (1977–85), published as *The Mysteries* (London, 1985) – where he memorably described his role as that of 'the Yorkshire poet who came to read the metres' – are well-known. He had already drawn on some aspects of the style of the York Plays in his translation of *The Oresteia* (London, 1981); see further N. Astley (ed), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: 1. Tony Harrison* (Newcastle, 1991), 267, 279, 294, 316–30.

10 Meg Twycross, "Places to hear the play': Pageant Stations at York, 1398–1572', REED *Newsletter* 2 (1978), 10–33; Eileen White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', *Medieval English Theatre* 9 (1987), 23–63. Also relevant is David Crouch, 'Paying to See the Play: The Stationholders on the Route of the York Corpus Christi Play in the Fifteenth Century', *Medieval English Theatre* 13 (1991), 64–111.

11 The uncertainties of Elizabethan terminology for the activity are well set out in Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 2nd ed (Cambridge, 1996), 86–98.

12 White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christ Play', 57; Crouch, 'Paying to See the Play', 99, concurs. Cf Johnston, 'The York Corpus Christi Play', 366: 'This form of drama is, above all, intimate'.

13 REED *York*, 109.

14 J. Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, 1996), 31, quoting W.F. Bolton, *The Middle Ages*, Sphere History of Literature, 2nd ed (London, 1986), 8, where the word seems to have been coined as a 'missing term' to set against 'literate'.

15 On pragmatic literacy see M.B. Parkes, 'The Literacy of the Laity', *Scribes, Scripts and Rreaders: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London, 1991), 275–97.

16 See Coleman, *Public Reading*, chapters 4–7.

17 For examples, see the descriptions of the manuscripts in R. E. Lewis and A. McIntosh, *A Descriptive Guide to the Manuscripts of the* Prick of Conscience (Oxford, 1982), and M. Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary* (Leeds, 1974).

18 The numerous parish churches of York were not particulary large buildings and would mostly have accommodated a congregation of up to one hundred or so; see B. Wilson and F. Mee, *The Medieval Parish Churches of York: The*

Pictorial Evidence (York, 1998) for plans and illustrations. It is relevant to note that extracts from the *Prick of Conscience* are quoted in inscriptions accompanying the fifteenth-century stained glass of All Saints, North Street. Two of York's medieval guild halls, the Mercers' and the Taylors', are still extant, and a plan of the Butchers' (demolished in the 1930s) is shown in *The York Butchers Gild* (York, 1975), 7. For an example of a verse text designed to be read aloud at a guild meeting see the *Life of St Anne* in *The Commonplace Book of Robert Reynes of Acle*, C. Louis (ed) (New York, 1980), 196–228, 414–15.

19 For references to the vernacular sources of the plays see Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), 41. The *Speculum Vitae* remains unpublished; the best account of its nature, content, mode of delivery, and likely authorship is in A.I. Doyle, 'A Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in English in the 14th, 15th and early 16th Centuries', Ph.D thesis, vol 1 (University of Cambridge, 1953), 77–92. See also Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York: The Creed Play and the Paternoster Play', *Speculum* 50 (1975), 55–90.

20 J. Raine (ed), *Testamenta Eboracensia* Part 2, Surtees Society, vol 30 (1855), 116–18, 268. The probable identifications of the books are those suggested by Doyle, 'A Survey'. Revetour's will has recently been re-edited by Alexandra F. Johnston, 'William Revetour, Chaplain and Clerk of York, Testator', *Leeds Studies in English* ns 29 (1998), 153–71.

21 London, British Library, MS Harley 7322, f 49: 'Et nota hic de isto qui tempe Passionis audiens legere de factis Guydonis de Warwik. Cum peruenisset ad locum vbi agitur de gratitudine leonis, et quomodo interfectus erat, cepit fortissime. Reprehendens quidam frater, ait: "O ingrate, qui tot lacrimas euitis pro vna truful, nec doles pro Christo, iam pro te dampnato et mortuo"'. (Abbreviations silently expanded). For the context, see G.R. Owst, *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2nd ed (Oxford, 1961), 13–14.

22 Richard Beadle, '"Devoute ymaginacioun" and the Dramatic Sense in Love's *Mirror* and the N-Town Plays', *Nicholas Love at Waseda*, S. Oguro et al (eds) (Cambridge, 1997), 6. The Nicholas Love who had a career as an Augustinian friar in York during the last decade of the fourteenth century (becoming prior in 1400), may, as A.I. Doyle has suggested, be the same man as the translator of the *Meditationes;* 'Reflections on Some Manuscripts of Nicholas Love's *Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ'*, *Leeds Studies in English* ns 14 (1983), 82.

23 G. B. Kinneavy (ed), *A Concordance to The York Plays* (New York and London, 1986).

24 The *Concordance* records an overall raw total of 92,413 words in 8,917 forms in the cycle (x). The 'rawness' of the latter figure is significant because it

includes very large numbers of orthographical variants, and of the inflectional forms of various parts of speech. To arrive at the much smaller figure (ie, to establish an 'index verborum') that would represent the actual size of the 'vocabulary' of the cycle, it would be necessary to go through the laborious task of working through the ranking frequency lists in the *Concordance* to identify and discount the orthographic variants and inflectional forms.

25 J. Mann, 'Knightly Combat in *Le Morte D'Arthur*', *Medieval Literature: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition*, B. Ford (ed) (Harmondsworth, 1982), 332; cf. P.J.C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style* (London, 1971), 57–65, 132–5.

26 M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London, 1976). For a discussion of the concept with reference to Middle English writings, see D. Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (London, 1983), 76–99 ('Textual cohesion'), especially the remarks concerning lexical sets (84–5, and references there).

27 *Concordance*, 783–812.

28 Johnston, 'The York Corpus Christi Play', 367.

29 The ranking frequency lists in the *Concordance* are interesting in a great variety of ways. For example, the commonest interjection by far is 'alas', and the high frequency of words like 'care', 'woe', 'sorrow', 'bale', 'dread', 'fear', and so on seem to suggest that some of the most prevalent emotions expressed in the plays are connected with suffering, dismay, or disillusionment. On the other hand, the highest ranking adjectives that hang together as a group tend towards approbation: 'dear', 'good', 'worthy'.

30 See the data in *Concordance*, 783ff, but note that item 7, 'þe', conflates 'the' (def art) with 'thee' (pron), rendering the occurrence of the latter very much lower.

31 J. Smith, 'Language and Style in Malory', *A Companion to Malory*, E. Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (eds) (Cambridge, 1996), 111–13.

32 Quotations from the plays are from Beadle, *The York Plays*.

33 H. Kurath et al (eds), *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1954– ; in progress).

34 C. Brown (ed), *Religious Lyrics of the xvth Century* (Oxford, 1939), 119.