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Seeing and Hearing; Looking and Listening

Raymond Williams warned that 'The real range of dramatic method, in writing and in performance, is immense. But this does not mean that the whole of this range is available to anyone wishing to use it'.¹ The student of medieval theatre does well to proceed with caution in speculating on or theorizing about the relationship between medieval plays and their audiences. We can read the text of a dramatic action, and reconstruct plausible versions of that action, and we can even intellectually construct what the original audience decoded from what it saw and heard on the occasion of an individual performance, but dramatic action is metonymic in that its enacted speech stands for a part of a whole experience, and different audiences will always form discrete interpretative communities participating in different and ephemeral whole experiences. It is important that we draw attention to these dimensions of understanding medieval drama as theatre, even if the result must ultimately be an acknowledgment of the ineffable, if we are to avoid foregrounding the evident literary simplicity of some of these texts at the expense of acknowledging their cultural complexities.

The critic can, of course, elect to detach enacted speech from the other elements of the theatrical experience. When this happens the relationship between the heard and the seen, in some plays at least, seems straightforward enough to pin down: it appears to enact the kind of relationship between language and realization which is fundamental to Christian doctrine. The opening of John's gospel tells us that the Word preceded the flesh. The act of creation described in the opening of the book of *Genesis* was consequently seen as a verbal act, creation by word. The York Barkers' *The Fall of the Angels* translates this hierarchy of speech over realized action for the theatre, as the actor playing the Creator commands that the universe materialize around him bit by bit, and thereby stage-manages an elaborate visual spectacle:

And in þe fyrste, faythely, my thoughte to fullfyll,
Baynely in my blyssyng I byd at here be

A blys al-beledande abowte me,
 In þe whilke blys I byde at be here
 Nyen ordres of aungels full clere,
 In louyng ay-lastande at lowte me... (ll.19–24)²

Medieval theatre is often described because of scenes like this as ‘show-and-tell’, but it is more properly and fundamentally ‘tell-and-show’.

There are, moreover, occasions in the York Plays when the speech appears to offer more than just a cue for immediately following physical action, but where the logic of the scene suggests that physical action is delayed, creating straight-forward theatrical suspense through the use of ‘voices off’. For example, the fall of Lucifer in the Barkers’ *The Fall of the Angels* could be played in a number of ways, and the York Plays are short on stage directions to help us, but Lucifer clearly falls during six short lines of dialogue:

Ther sall I set myselfe full semely to seyghte,
 To ressayue my reuerence thorowe righte o renowne;
 I sall be lyke vnto hym þat es hyste on heghte.
 Owe, what I am derworth and defte – Owe! Dewes! All goes downe!
 My mighte and my mayne es all marrande –
 Helpe, felawes! In faythe I am fallande. (ll.89–94)

The last of these lines, when he talks of his changing appearance, ask to be spoken out of sight, so that the transformed devil can appear a stanza later to describe hell and to confirm what the audience can see:

My bryghtnes es blakkest and blo nowe... (l.101)

If this were the case, the spoken word would not only lead the action, but the primacy of telling over showing could be used to conscious theatrical effect. The implication is that the audience is given time to absorb what has happened to the fallen angel intellectually, drawing on referents in their own experience and knowledge which can then be reinforced by the shock appearance of the disfigured devil, giving double impact to a single event.

If speech appears to cue action, that action, we can confidently assume, was circumscribed by the requirements of Christian iconography to produce plays which are a living book. This kind of analysis is useful in that it delivers an understanding of a particular mode of playing, but it is important to realize the limitations of its apparent certainties. Thus far, we can construct some of what

the 'ideal' member of the original audience may have decoded in performance. There are, however, other dimensions to the experience of performance which are not contained within the simple speech-act relationship generated by the text. These are elements which demonstrably arise from the processional method of performance. For example, sound inevitably 'leaks' from one station to another so that the audience watching *The Flight into Egypt* can hear Herod raging at the next station. Here is another relationship between watching and listening, and one which is not part of the written play. It has only been noticed by commentators thanks to experiments with processional staging, but it is surely part of the experience of any audience, medieval or modern. Such experiments, actual or imagined, accordingly are valuable for us to develop an understanding of how wider circumstantial combinations of text and action can combine to generate meaning.

A fully-fledged attempt at a theory of the reception of medieval plays requires a little more, however, than a demonstration of how word and action, written or circumstantial, relate in the imagined playing space; it requires a characterization of the audience. This is bound to lead into the problematic area of reconstructing the differences between medieval and modern audience assumptions about the cultural event in which they are participating and its relationship to the world they inhabit. In what follows, I shall focus on the Butchers' *The Death of Christ* because it contains some particularly interesting examples of the combination of the aural and the visual as well as some specific issues surrounding reception.

The pageant opens with Pilate addressing the audience directly, drawing attention to himself :

Sees, seniours, and see what I saie,
 Takis tente to my talkyng enteere.
 Devoyde all þis dynne here þis day,
 And fallis to my frenschippe in feere.
 Sir Pilate, a prince withowten pere,
 My name is full neuently to neuen,
 And domisman full derworth in dere
 Of gentiltest Jewry full euen
 Am I.
 Who makis oppressioun
 Or does transgressioun,
 Be my discessioun
 Shall be demed dewly to dy.

(ll.1-13)

There is a high density of first person personal pronouns in this speech which conspires to concentrate the audience's ears and eyes on the speaking character. This is important from the point of view of plotting, of simple narrative understanding, as the character who opens the action imparts information about what has happened, what is about to happen and what his part in it is going to be.

The second stanza, however, opens up the deixis, the physical referents, of the language³:

Who þat to 3one hill wille take heede
 May se þer þe soth in his sight... (ll.16–17)

Stage directions are not required here for us to surmise that Pilate's opening speech is delivered in visual competition with a Calvary scene. The initial 'Takis tente' in this context is not just drawing the audience's attention to the fact that action is starting, but *competing* for attention with the Butchers' Calvary tableau, which alludes visually to the Pinners' Crucifixion wagon which has just departed. It is unclear whether Pilate's first stanza covers the Butchers setting up their crosses when the wagon has come to rest, or whether the crosses are already in place when he begins to speak. Either way, Pilate's initial stanza draws attention away from the scene to his person, before releasing it back to the Crucifixion scene, effectively giving the audience permission to look at '3one hill'. Where is the audience likely to be looking? A discriminating audience, accustomed to seeing the pageants year on year, is probably already looking at '3one hill', comparing it with the recently departed version of the same scene.

Pilate then turns the way in which the spoken text directs attention again:

His bloode to spille
 Toke ye you tille,
 Pus was youre wille
 Full spitously to spede he were spilte. (ll.36–9)

These words appear to be addressed to Annas and Caiaphas, who answer the accusation at any rate and, in the speeches immediately following, accept responsibility for the Crucifixion, but Pilate, could also be addressing the audience. If the wagon is '3one hille', Calvary, Pilate, and the High Priests may be at audience level. This also is unclear, and largely depends on the way we envisage wagon orientation. The 'you' could be exploiting the fact that there is no vertical or horizontal differentiation between the space occupied by the High Priests and that occupied by the audience. The original audience

might also be expected to accept the commonplace of orthodox Christian doctrine that Christ is daily crucified by all sinners.

The whole of the opening sequence of the play has two competing areas of attention: the 'action', that is the movement and dialogue of Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas, and the inert but visually arresting scene on 'zone hill'. It is not until l.80, when Annas addresses Christ on the cross with, 'We, fye on þe, faitour, in faye', that the competing spheres of attention are united, the active part of the scene connected to the static. Up to this point Christ has been referred to in the third person. Then Annas asks Pilate to remove 'yone writyng' (l.107) from the top of the cross. This effectively leads the attentive audience member's eye to the very apex of the scene, immediately before Christ begins to speak. The eye can then naturally travel down to the speaking face to be addressed directly with:

Pou man þat of mys here has mente,
To me tente enterly þou take. (ll.118-19)

All sorts of things are going on in this opening section. The construction of the dialogue seems knowingly to manipulate the visual and verbal sign-systems in a tightly controlled way, through, for example shifts in pronominal use. When the morally compromised characters Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas are speaking, the verbal field of attention has to compete with the visual because Christ is central and certainly more highly situated in the visual plane of the street audience than the speakers. In all visual fields we know that the eye is naturally drawn toward points of central balance, of focus, generally centre-stage. Action which takes place at the very edges of the stage, as far as is possible from the centre, exerts a competing attraction precisely because it is far enough away from the centre to assert independence, and lies outside the peripheral visual ambit of anyone focused on stage-centre. I think that Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas belong to a field of visual instability of this kind, either off-centre or, in wagon arrangement, significantly below centre, which eventually surrenders to the pull of the central image, and Christ's 'To me tente enterly þou take' wins over Pilate's initial bid for attention. When Christ finally speaks in the Butchers' pageant, the playwright has already set things up so that the attentive audience member's gaze is upon him. He does not have to call attention to himself, which is just as well since, being nailed to the cross, he cannot move when he begins to speak to show that he has taken over the dialogue. When he enjoins the audience to pay attention, it signifies more than 'look here', but 'look at this and decode it'.

Analysts of theatre praxis will tell you that written text is only a site, an opportunity, for constructing meanings in the performance.⁴ But when you

read the opening of Butchers' pageant with a director's eye, you find yourself, as in so many of the York Plays, in the company of a theatrical imagination who writes dialogue that appears to dictate and control action. There seems to be only one possible general scenic arrangement within what we know of staging conventions and contemporary iconography, and only one possible encoded meaning.

On the other hand, the modern audience member cannot avoid imposing upon the plays contemporary ways of seeing, particularly when it comes to scenic arrangement, in a way which betrays inherited assumptions about post-perspectival staging. It was Inigo Jones whose masque designs were perspectively contrived so that the perfect illusion could be seen only from where the monarch sat,⁵ but ever since then the proscenium stage has derived its perfect illusions from the assumption of the ideally positioned audience. Most members of the audience will not of course be positioned in the ideal or 'correct' position, but will settle for being in the 'wrong' place by imaginatively adjusting what they see to simulate the ideal position. (Michael Kubovy observes that in the case of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, this point is fifteen feet above the ground.⁶) My observations about the Butchers' play suggest that as would-be director and/or audience, I continue to project optimal viewing positions derived from the experience of proscenium staging, imaginatively constructing an ideal viewing point in which Christ's face is focal, irrespective of where in the street the individual audience member is standing.

In the examples with which I opened discussion, the apparent speech-act relationship which the modern commentator observes accords with medieval intellectual constructs and cultural assumptions about the relationship between word and image. But how do we read action where we can determine that modern assumptions about visual and verbal hierarchies may be very different from those of the medieval audience? There is, for example, a difference between the kind of focalizing I have just described, which is aesthetically determined, and an understanding of visual hierarchies which are ethically determined. Can we begin to construct how and where the audience not in the habit of aesthetic centring looks? Perhaps we can construct intellectually a different kind of visual hierarchy for them, one determined, like Langland's vision of the landscape in the Prologue of *Piers Plowman*, where high is good, low is bad, but can the modern audience authentically experience this? The question is whether, for the modern audience, aesthetic determinants of visual hierarchy substitute for tropological ones and, that being the case, whether this is what the modern director of medieval plays intuitively exploits. At any rate we run into the problem with which I opened discussion,

of how we critically acknowledge discrete interpretative communities when we attempt to articulate how a piece of culturally remote dramatic action generates meaning.

The original impression is that hearing and seeing are tightly controlled and connected in the Butchers' play, is further complicated in an enriching way if we move on to think about the performers themselves. It is from the mouths of the performers that most of what the audience hears emanates, and it is on the performers' bodies that their gaze most attentively will rest. One of the areas of particular interest in Cycle production at a moment like this is not, 'Oh that's Pilate and there's Christ on the Cross', but, 'Oh here's the Butchers' Pilate and the Butchers' Christ on the Cross', as opposed to the Tapiters' or Tilemakers' Pilate or the just-disappearing Pinners' Christ. This film editor's continuity-nightmare demonstrates that the bodies on the wagons in fifteenth-century York were engaged in a very complicated theatrical transaction. The audience is watching butcher playing Pilate (butcher of Christ), but it is also watching Christian playing Jew and, in the case of the Virgin Mary, man playing woman. Meaning is inflected in all manner of ways by these intervening dissimilarities and many of those inflections, particularly those relating known practitioners of trades and crafts to biblical figures, offer the same metonymic and allusive possibilities as the elements of performance which permit York to be read as Jerusalem. Others are controlled or suppressed by the nature of the dramatic action.

Later in the play, the Virgin Mary says:

Allas for my swete sonne I saie,
 þat doufully to dede þus is diȝt.
 Allas, for full louely he laye
 In my wombe, þis worthely wight.
 Allas þat I schulde see þis sight
 Of my sone so semely to see.
 Allas, þat þis blossom so bright
 Vntrewly is tugged to þis tree.
 Allas,
 My lorde, my leyffe,
 With full grete greffe
 Hyngis as a theffe.
 Allas, he dide neuer trespasse.

(ll.131–43)

To which Jesus replies, 'þou woman, do way of thy wepyng...' (l.144) How is this to be played? A question must arise for the modern director

or interpreter of how much vicarious expression of grief Mary should display at this point to achieve an appropriate decorum in the action.

In 1954 Raymond Williams identified four kinds of dramatic action.⁷ What he calls 'acted speech' and 'visual enactment' belong to this kind of drama. In both modes, speech and movement are determined by the arrangement of words, according to known conventions. The dramatist writes the whole performance, except where action is made necessary in one character by the speech of another. Williams' other two kinds of action, are, however, those more familiar to the modern audience. 'Activity' and 'behaviour' are types of dramatic action where there is no direct unity of speech and movement, where actions derive from conceptions of probable human behaviour in the circumstances presented. This seems to be what most frequently infects unsuccessful modern productions of medieval plays. As soon as the player begins to interpret too freely the probable behaviour of another human being in the circumstances (s)he is enacting, the improbabilities inherent in all the proposed similitudes are highlighted. Suddenly the audience sees that the weeping woman is a man in drag and hears that (s)he is, unaccountably, speaking Middle English verse. Consequently I would wish to argue that not only does the spoken text offer clues to the action of the play but that it provides strictures for that action. Mary does not weep, separately as it were, at the base of the cross; her *planctus* lyrics, spoken in a weeping voice, *are* the expression of her grief.

If one goes down to the very small scale, explicit local strategies for linking the spoken text with individual stage properties and single actions are also evident. Instruments of the Passion are produced and described, then integrated into the scene. For example, the character called Garcio produces the vinegar rod, then says:

A draughte here of drinke haue I dreste,
To spede for no spence þat 3e spare,
But baldely ye bib it for þe beste.
For-why
Aysell and galle
Is menged withalle;
Drynke it 3e schalle –
Youre lippis I halde þame full drye. (ll.240–7)

This is quite a long speech accompanying a short action. The significance of the vinegar rod, however, is as an object of contemplation, and it is on this

that the speech seems to make the audience focus, not on the action of administering the drink. A sequence of tell-and-show introductions to the instruments of the Passion threads through the play's dialogue demonstrating how the dramatist is mediating two pictorial traditions associated with the Passion, one which is purely schematic, the 'arma Christi', the other where the same visual ingredients are part of narrative Golgotha paintings.

The play (a 'quick boke') allows the dramatist to present what is simultaneous action for the artist as a narrative sequence. The Butchers' dramatist chose to freeze-frame moments of that action. Verbal and visual sign systems here intersect in different ways as the pace of progress in the play's narrative is controlled by shifting verbal modes. Alteration in scene and/or narrative development takes place through dialogue. Sometimes in this pageant dialogue constitutes the only visible action: neither Christ, nor the two thieves can move at all so the action which takes place amongst them is purely verbal. Then there are moments when narrative progress gives way to complete stasis, such as when the Virgin delivers her *planctus* lyrics, and when Longeus delivers his hymn of praise for Christ's restoration of his sight.

For the modern audience, pace of forward action, the display of signifying objects, the tell-and-show mode, can all be intelligibly experienced. But for the original audience of the Butchers' pageant, meditative verbal tropes interrupting narrative in, for example, the stations of the cross, would have had points of reference which are qualitatively different from those available to the modern audience. In particular, there are areas of the action's doctrinal determinism which can have no consensual meaning for the modern audience. For instance, there is a moment in the Butchers' play when the whole process of seeing is overtly linked to witnessing, when Christ's blood restores Longeus sight. Longeus's lyric hymn of praise arrests the narrative action to give emphasis to this point, the spoken text drawing attention to the particular connotations of seeing the *Corpus Christi*:

O maker vnmade, full of myght,
 O Jesu so jentill and jente
 Pat sodenly has sente me my sight,
 Lorde, louyng to þe be it lente.
 On rode arte þou ragged and rente,
 Mankynde for to mende of his mys.
 Full spitously spilte is and spente
 Thi bloode, lorde, to bringe vs to blis
 Full free.
 A, mercy my socoure,

Mercy, my treasure,
 Mercy, my sauioure,
 Di mercy be markid in me. (ll.300–12)

Many of the modern secular audience will spend the space of this lyric simply waiting for the next piece of narrative action to happen, perhaps even worrying about *rigor artis*. To generalize from this, the modern audience can appreciate aesthetically the alternation of narrative and lyric stasis in the pageant but they are unlikely to achieve a consensual acceptance of the spiritual benefit of pausing to look and listen.

There are many ways of interpreting the particularities of what the audience hears and sees, but all of them are in danger of presuming an understanding of a neatly contained play-world, separated from the audience's physical and spiritual reality. Yet the way in which mystery plays do not observe the barrier between the play and the world have been widely discussed. The modern audience, on the other hand, is accustomed to excluding from the visual field those elements which are not 'part of the play'. The modern audience of wagon plays in modern York may remark on the pleasing aesthetic consonance of the medieval city street and the material, all part of the over-used concept of 'heritage'. Similarly the audience in Toronto sees English medieval plays against nineteenth-century Victorian Gothic, which is evocative at a remove of medieval York because of its Christian, collegiate, and Anglocentric referents. For both modern audiences, however, these associations are extraneous, pleasing 'back-drops'. It is equally possible to perform reconstructions on a 1960s campus, confident that the audience will make efforts to screen out the visually irrelevant. Again this is the legacy of proscenium stage conventions and theatres in which the visually irrelevant is blacked out while the illusion is 'live'. Samuel Becket's late plays push these conventions to extremes: in *Not I*, for example, an illuminated mouth becomes the barest indicator of live inhabited space.⁸

But we know that the streets and buildings of York had different connotations in the visual hierarchy for the audience of the original production. The references throughout the Butchers' play to 'pis hill' activate a live analogy. Martin Stevens has pointed out that pageant of *The Entry into Jerusalem*, 'focused attention on the cycle itself and on the occasion of its performance and thus caused the city to become identified with the dramatic subject being enacted'.⁹ Accordingly, by the strategic paralleling of the Christ's entry into Jerusalem with the York Corpus Christi procession, the whole Cycle inherits the central proposition that York is equivalent to, is enacting, Jerusalem.

Stevens goes on to show how the royal entry as dramatic form mediates these meanings. If the audience's theatrical experience is predominantly of processions and royal entries, which mobilize inclusive rather than exclusive perceptual boundaries, they are not going to censor their visual field by setting up artificial boundaries to the pageant's setting. The opportunity to withhold the perceptual distinction between the simulated and the actual setting provides the citizenry of medieval York with an important mechanism for validating their own city and, by extension, their roles as citizens within a consensual mythic framework.

Modern reception theory, focusing as it does on assumed cultural norms, has a limited amount to offer the student of medieval drama in any direct way, but it can throw into relief the fundamental question of what we can know about medieval reception. What I have attempted to explore in this paper is both the areas in which we can have some confidence about the dynamic of word and image, and those – such as spatial hierarchy, communication of 'character', and understandings of the stage-world barrier – where we need to be more cautious. The decoding practices of the original audience are, in the end, largely unknowable. We can describe what is there to be seen and to be heard, how those elements dramatically interact in known playing conditions, and we can bring to that our knowledge of the surrounding culture, but in the end we cannot guarantee consistently attentive looking and listening. Audiences are not scripted and, particularly in an outdoor theatre with no box-office and no prescribed limits, their behaviour cannot be circumscribed –

A. *Who's speaking? Where is he? I can't see him.*

B is intent on the contents of a large covered basket she is holding, looks up, offers A a piece of cake which A accepts and begins to eat

B. [*also eating*] What? Oh, I don't know – he's probably over there, but I can't see round Mrs Cooper.

A. Who can these days? Talk about a barrel! Talking of which, is that Agnes' Will on the cross this year? Isn't he *skinny*! You'd think butchers at least would get a square meal. Give me Tom Nailor any day – there's a proper sort of man to be Our Lord. Still – I'm glad to see they've mended the crosses. That was a close call last year.

B. Oh, that's better – at least *he's* got a carrying voice. I always like this bit.

A. What? Oh...mmm...look...is that Alice Bolton over there? Who'd have thought she'd turn out in the street in her condition...

B. Yes. That reminds me, are you waiting for the Mercers this year or shall we do what we did last time? I enjoyed that...

A. Mmmm, yes. Good idea. Listen... why are they laughing? Oh, look! It's a pigeon.

B. What? Where?

A. See? Look. On top of the cross...

Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance* (Harmondsworth, 1954), 176.
- 2 Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), 49. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 3 Throughout this paper I draw on terminology developed from Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London, 1980), and Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life* (London, 1972), both of which I have found to provide useful models for discussing aspects of the staging of medieval theatre since I wrote 'Spatial Semantics and the Medieval Theatre', *Themes in Drama*, J. Redmond (ed), vol 9, *The Theatrical Space* (Cambridge, 1987), 45–58.
- 4 See for example, Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London, 1997), 9–19.
- 5 Roy Strong, *Splendour at Court* (London, 1973), 213–43.
- 6 Michael Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective in Renaissance Art* (Cambridge, 1986), 144–5.
- 7 Williams, *Drama in Performance*, 171–83.
- 8 See further Wolfgang Iser, 'The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theater', *Theories of Reading, Looking and Listening*, Henry R. Garvin (ed) (Pennsylvania, 1981), 139–89.
- 9 Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton, 1987), 52.