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***UNTHINKING GENRE IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP OF  
MEDIEVAL DRAMA, OR WHO IS AFRAID OF  
HISTORICISING GENERIC LIMIT(ATION)S?***

**Keywords:** *generic format, Christocentric devotionism, Conyhope cross, Tractatus pro Devotis Simplicibus, The Book of Margery Kempe, Dives and Pauper, Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*

**Abstract:** *Modern scholarship of medieval religious drama in England often assumes explicitly the capacity of the generic format, vaguely if at all identified as the thematic framework, and likewise of the festive setting to contain and control the range of interpretative possibilities available to original audiences. Unfortunately, the containment role of this unthought 'genre' comes into focus precisely where the modern interpretation of certain plays seems to allow for medieval responses potentially contrary to the teachings of the Church or the flow of power.*

*My purpose here is not to supply a working definition of genre that would somehow fill in a glaring definitional void so as to account retrospectively for late medieval social practices. Nor is it to offer guidelines for modern speculation on what reception of religious–dramatic–entertaining practices in late medieval England may have been like. Rather, I want, first, to suggest the inadequacy of our nineteenth-century grounded classificatory system for the medieval play and game in England by historicising it briefly. Second, I pursue not so much modern assumptions about the ultimate containment provided by 'genre' as medieval assumptions regarding the (un)reliability of types of devotional practices for fostering a desirable religious attitude. To this end, I garner evidence from (mainly) fifteenth-century texts that voice apprehensions about the reception of 'quick' (living) images either intended to have a devotional impact on the beholders or encapsulating casual everyday scenes. Sifting such evidence suggests that systematic preaching on how to 'read' religious iconography and 'generic format' alike did not guarantee audience reception and response.*

In his introduction to medieval drama William Tydeman proposes a taxonomy whose rubric 'drama of salvation', by which he references vernacular drama on religious subjects, gives him pause to reflect that '[i]t has become *traditional* to characterise the *principal types of plays* as Corpus Christi or craft cycles, moralities and moral interludes, saint plays, miracle plays and so on, but *recent studies stress that such classifications are in many respects arbitrary*' (Tydeman, *An Introduction* 18; my italics). Such remarks on the arbitrariness and epistemological inconveniences of modern classification of medieval drama are indeed salutary. What Tydeman unfortunately left out in his introduction – as

the entire *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* inexplicably did – is the ‘traditional’ aspect of classification of medieval plays. This taxonomic tradition, as David Mills usefully reminds us in *Recycling the Cycle*, is a nineteenth-century phenomenon which had little to do with historical facts as documented to date,<sup>1</sup> but rather more with the classificatory drive of the modern age. Its terminological queries in particular testify to an especially strong and depreciative modern position vis-à-vis a past deemed primitive – Petrarch’s and the Renaissance–Enlightenment legacy (Raedts; Bull) – in its indistinct terminology and ‘unscientific’ world-view.

My purpose here is *not* to supply a working definition of genre that would somehow account retrospectively for a cultural period – the ‘Middle Ages’ – whose practices may have been perceived at the time as much in their distinctiveness as in their commonalities, with different emphases, by individuals in all walks of life. Nor is it to offer guidelines for modern speculation on clearly drawn medieval normativities or on medieval reception of dramatic-religious-entertaining practices in England. (I use hyphens here to try to suggest a continuum in difference.) Rather, I want, first, to suggest the inadequacy of our nineteenth-century grounded classificatory system to account for the late medieval *ludus* (*play* and *game*) in England by historicising it briefly. Second, I compare *modern* assumptions that may be underpinning the critics’ confident assertion, yet one never fully accounted for, of the ultimate containment provided by an ill-defined genre or generic format, with *medieval* apprehensions about the (un)reliability of types of devotional practices to foster a desirable religious attitude. To this end, I garner evidence from (mainly) fifteenth-century (mainly) English texts that voice apprehensions about the reception of *quick* (i.e. living) *images* either intended to have a devotional impact on the beholders or showcasing casual everyday scenes.

### Historicising the context of dramatic terminology

Where we now entertain separate notions of everyday activity vs. theatre-going experience and put forth markedly different time and space delimitations, we would expect similar dichotomies to obtain (lexically too) in all other ages and therefore try to tease out the implications of vocabulary in extant records<sup>2</sup> in accordance with *our* modern horizon of theatrical expectations.<sup>3</sup> Yet terminology at its most confusing for modern

<sup>1</sup> Medieval theatrical terminology, as Clopper observes (5-11), ‘was not primarily generic in our sense’ (5), all the more so as the theatrical vocabulary and practice had been vilified in Western Europe since early Christian times and often deployed in ‘a rhetoric of abuse ... direct[ed] at activities having nothing to do with the stage’ (5), thus excluding and demonising anything that fell outside the scope of its definition of acceptability (25-62).

<sup>2</sup> Mills aptly notes that modern scholarship’s terminological quandary as concerns medieval practices is ‘perhaps symptomatic of a wider problem – that ... our ideas about medieval drama are shaped by our modern experience of attending plays’ (*Recycling the Cycle* 10).

<sup>3</sup> I use ‘expectations’ here with a nod to Jauss’s *Erwartungshorizont*. Jauss argues that ‘the literary work is conditioned by “alterity” – that is, in relation to another, an *understanding consciousness*’ (79; my

students occurs across the *entire* range of extant medieval writings – from dramatic scripts and proclamations of theatrical productions to extra-dramatic texts (religious and civic alike) – concerned with diverse forms of *entertaining activities*. Medieval terms such as *ludus*, *play*, *miracle*, tend now to be associated primarily with the ‘theatre’ of the late Middle Ages and deprecated as ill-defined or as used hardly consistently at the time. However, as Kolve argues (12), what we deplore as imprecision and ambiguity in the generic Latin term *ludus* and its Middle English equivalents *play* and *game* is instrumental in grasping the comprehensive medieval conceptualisation of drama and entertainment, significantly different from ours, given the words’ ubiquitous presence to denote vernacular plays and (from a modern perspective) unrelated entertaining and agonistic activities as well.

Unfortunately, it is endemic to studies of medieval drama in particular rarely to historicise the generic terms used and just as rarely, if at all, to explain their fundamental concepts, such as the notion of genre or generic format,<sup>4</sup> even as the containment role of the latter comes into focus; usually, this happens precisely where the modern reading of a particular play is wary of confronting medieval responses potentially *contrary* to the teachings of the Church or the flow of power. I suspect that the critics’ assumed notion of *genre* in such formulations implicates its definition as a ‘classification system ... that names types of texts according to their forms’ (Devitt, *Generalizing about Genre* 573-74). This is a rather problematic line of thought which, in Amy Devitt’s description, wrongly ‘requires dividing form from content, with genre as the form into which content

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italics), which in turn is shaped by a ‘*horizon of the expectable* ... constituted for the reader from out of [*sic*] a tradition or series of previously known works, and from a specific attitude, mediated by one (or more) genre and dissolved through new works’ (79; my italics). To the extent that any act of verbal communication is ‘related to a general, socially or situationally conditioned norm or convention’, to such extent any literary work as an act of communication (Jauss implicates) can be regarded to belong to a (loosely defined) genre, ‘a preconstituted horizon of expectations’ which ‘orient[s] the reader’s (public’s) understanding and ... enable[s] a qualifying reception’ (79). Jauss’s *Erwartungshorizont* cannot account for the configuration of (a new) genre or for the possibility of inadvertent, even dissenting, interpretations, as well as leaving in doubt the import of the actors’ contribution to meaning-making from page to stage to audience.

<sup>4</sup> Deploring the inherent ambiguity of medieval terminology has as its (disavowed) correlative modern terminological ambiguity right where classifications are envisaged. In his *English Medieval Theatre 1400-1500*, Tydeman proposes a fivefold taxonomy of vernacular religious theatre whose generic terms, used interchangeably, are the hypotactic ‘principal types’, ‘precise categories’ and ‘basic classes’ (9) and the subcategories of morality plays as a ‘genre’ or ‘form’ (18) distinct from the ‘cycle form’ or ‘plays of a cyclic nature’ (18) that exhibit a ‘cyclic pattern’ (19) or ‘cyclic structure’ (22) and which form a ‘cycle series’ (19). Unlike Mills in *Recycling the Cycle* (6-10) and Dillon (144-6), Tydeman never historicises these classificatory terms and especially the nineteenth-century pair ‘mystery play’ (belonging to the ‘mystery (or biblical) cycle’), and ‘morality play’; rather, his phrasing suggests an abiding belief that genre *is determined formally*, viz. in structural terms, where – as his classification proper suggests – the thematic is a secondary criterion of definition. This implicit conceptualisation of genre is the legacy of the early modern (prescriptive) application of ancient generic classification to contemporary (written) culture.

is put', and which moreover assumes a product-based perspective (574) in a social vacuum (575-7).<sup>5</sup>

There is one thematic aspect of medieval drama that, I believe, clarifies late-twentieth-century scholars' analytic premise and its generic ramifications. William Tydeman's discussion of *Mankind* in his *English Medieval Theatre* suggests an entrenched critical tendency not to question the text's politics, but to assume that a particular configuration of events, characters and speeches is so because the *function* of medieval drama is 'not to conduct a pragmatic exploration of the potentialities of the human condition' in their variable individual actualisation, 'but rather *to demonstrate a pre-determined theosophy* which remained *valid* for all sorts and conditions of men [*sic*] at all times and in all places' (8; my italics). On his reading, the *conventional*-sounding speeches of righteous characters are so because *Christian truths* are *invariable* (39). Tydeman thus appears to take the hegemonic discourse of the medieval Catholic Church at face value and appeal to it for authoritative endorsement of meaning-making in drama; he thereby replicates the very discourse under scrutiny, oblivious to the history of Christianity as a theological and socio-political battle for hegemony, manifest also in the attempts at imposing an 'orthodox' truth on Christians. From this early premise follows logically what Tydeman in *English Medieval Theatre* (17, 39), Meg Twycross (77) and David Mills in 'The Chester Cycle' (115) contend: that the generic format, itself subtended by the thematic (religious) framework (Twycross 45), and likewise the festive setting (Twycross 82-83), contain and control the range of interpretative possibilities available to the original audiences.

The rather vague and mostly implicit definition of genre, alongside its implicit social and institutional uprootedness, may account for the fact that the medievalists' proposition about the plays' 'generic format' as able to signpost unambiguously the

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<sup>5</sup> In her *Generalizing about Genre* Devitt (573-7) critiques conventional formal classifications of genre derived from literary studies drawing on Aristotle's *Poetics*, as they tend to focus exclusively and prescriptively on the (static) product, thus occluding the *process* of creation and also response (the focus of reception theory) as well as the social context (the focus of Critical Discourse Analysis). On the contrary, as Devitt argues both here (575-7) and in *Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre* (698), the rhetorical dimension of all communication should be harnessed to a reevaluation of genre classifications, and a *rhetorical re-conception of genre* should take into account the functional and semiotic aspects in their *social context*, whether the latter is narrowly defined as a rhetorical situation or more broadly as a linguistic (pragmatic) and cultural situation. Such social constructionist reformulation of genre theory, however, does not foreclose the possibility that genre contributes to meaning-making, in Devitt's view in *Generalizing about Genre* (575), presumably along the theoretical lines set by Jauss in identifying the 'horizon of expectations'. Devitt concurs with M. A. K. Halliday and Carolyn Miller that 'our construction of genre is what helps us to construct a situation' or cultural context to which genre is seen to respond; accordingly, '[g]enre not only responds to but also constructs recurring situation' (577; my italics), viz. the *frame* for understanding (577-8), which also accounts for the genre's dynamism and fluidity both synchronically and diachronically (578-9). Genre in Devitt's (re)formulation (580) becomes the mediator between the Saussurean abstract linguistic system and the particular 'utterance'.

overall didactic message to be conveyed and embraced tends to assume a monolithic audience. Awareness in recent genre theory of multiple audiences for a particular literary product can be extrapolated to social practices in general, so that a notion such as the controversial ‘discourse communities’ (Devitt *et al.*) may signal both the social constructedness of reception and the multiplicity of interpretative protocols available simultaneously to ‘multiple, interlapping communities’ (Devitt, *Integrating* 709).

David Mills’s ‘The Chester Cycle’ in the *Cambridge Companion* offers an interesting test case: while the critic subscribes to the already familiar idea that the religious framework of the ‘cycle’ provided a narrative blueprint and (thematic) deterrent to artistic purposes proper (115), thus shaping the audience’s metaphorical (eschatological) understanding of scenes of bedevilment (124), he also exposes the controlling *thrust* of the (never-defined) *genre*. Mills regards this generic control as a *formal* drive with (implicitly) an *aesthetic* weight, and thus as a form of textual and intertextual self-awareness indifferent to matters of reception (115). Nonetheless, when he focuses on the historically decontextualised episodes of the Chester *Abraham*, Mills argues that just as this technique makes the episodes ‘assume the character of marvels, literally strange to the point of absurdity’ (125), the explications provided by the Expositor work towards *suppressing* audience-response of the ‘why should God demand?’ type. Metadramatic *wonder* at the *cruelty* (127), God’s and Abraham’s alike, implicit in the sacrifice is thus curtailed and channelled towards showing the *admirable*, though ‘mindless’, compliance of Abraham, the patriarch put to the test of obedience to God and therein found a worthy exemplar – an ambiguous ‘role model’ (127) – to showcase to medieval Christians the (re)shaping of covenants of hierarchy and loyalty in the religious realm.

David Mills’s analysis of *Abraham* intimates the slippery interpretative ground that modern scholarship treads in confronting Middle English drama. On the one hand, there is the still strong traditional pull on studies of vernacular religious drama to concur with the Church whose message lurks in the scripts, and present humanity intra- and extra-dramatically (‘we’) as being in need of spiritual reformation through selfless compliance with the divine will. Reasons for the inertia behind embracing this traditional acceptance have, to my knowledge, remained unthought. On the other hand, close reading of the extant scripts suggests a counter-move according to which ideological biases *can* be discerned here and there. In the end, however, the generic format (the religious/eschatological framework) saves the day by providing the containment necessary to safeguard an ‘optimistic closure’: should the individual follow the prescriptions and proscriptions of the dramatic text and religious/festive context, there is hope for salvation.

My concern here is to look behind the *unthought* genre of modern commentary that purportedly explains an assumed medieval conformity of reception. I will hereafter investigate the scant medieval evidence of lay audience response to instances and representations of (religious) violence, as well as ecclesiastical response to actual or

imagined/feared lay response, moving from devotional practices to dramatic productions that involve graphic violence. What these case studies suggest is arguably the difficulty, then as now, in predicting and assessing the reception of and responses to representations of violence often assuming a spectacular form.

### **Case study 1. Ecclesiastical responses to lay responses to Crucifixion iconography**

Progressively more violent late medieval representations of the Crucifixion could at times elicit the populace's intense devotion or at least eagerness to see such devotional artefacts sometimes to the authorities' chagrin. The following is a one-off English case of excessive devotionalism and attempts to curb it, which occurred shortly before the introduction of the Corpus Christi feast in the Latin Church. As a unique record it has epistemic inconveniences as soon as it is brought to bear on medieval devotionalism in more general terms; even so, the dispute testifies conceptually to the possibility of reading the fault lines of the hegemonic discourse as gleaned from surviving records. As the London Annals for 1305 note (qtd. in Binski 343), Thidemann the German's expensive *crux horribilis* ('terrifying cross') was unveiled during Good Friday liturgy and remained displayed in the London chapel of Conyhope, attracting crowds of the faithful to an exercise in piety. However, Ralph Baldock, bishop of London, soon ordered the cross secretly removed and destroyed, fearful, as were the instigating canons of St Paul's Cathedral, that the popular fervour it had triggered verged on idolatry.<sup>6</sup> A year later Baldock articulated his concerns about the *crux horribilis* in formal terms: the cross lacked a proper cross-arm for the gibbet (qtd. in Binski 346); modern scholars conjecture that it must have been a *Gabelkreuz* ('forked crucifix' or *crucifixus dolorosus*), already somewhat familiar in England (346). On Paul Binski's reading of the explication penned in 1306, the prelate's anxiety concerned as much the uncanonical non-cruciform shape of the cross as the *improper devotion* which it elicited (348): such *fascination* (349) was 'appropriate to a true likeness of the cross, but not to a false likeness' whose Y-shape came at odds with 'the cognitive system of Christendom's central sign' (348). Thideman appears to have proposed a 'self-conscious and disturbing departure from norms' and customary reception through *defamiliarisation* and subsequent heightening of (spectatorial) awareness (350).

With the late medieval religious and lay piety articulated on and through the Christic body came the Church's growing suspicion that religious images of the naked crucified body might also elicit *lascivious* (pace Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*: 79-117) rather than exclusively pious thoughts in (some) beholders, as the *Tractatus pro Devotis Simplicibus* ('Tract for Simple Pious People'), possibly penned by Jean Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of Notre-Dame and the University of Paris, warned explicitly

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<sup>6</sup> Binski (355-7) also addresses issues of financial support and religious/social prestige involved in this diocesan conflict.

(cols. 609-610). Such fears – articulated in Latin and aimed at a male religious elite that may have thereafter disseminated the message to the laity via vernacular homiletics – may be symptomatic as much of the high clergy’s awareness of the impossibility to impose and control interpretation of religious messages in diverse mediums (and ‘genres’) as of what David Freedberg calls the *power of images*. Gerson’s tract suggests that the proliferation of devotional images entailing the representation of quasi-nudity may have been tinged with more eroticism (R. Mills; Caviness) than the optical/religious theories of vision and the religious/courtly discourses of the gaze of love (Biernoff) reckoned with.

### **Case study 2. Lay responses to violence in the context of affective devotionism: Margery Kempe**

That religious images and practices sponsored by the Church could also be *poached* (Certeau) for personal purposes becomes apparent in a famous East Anglian lay case, Margery Kempe’s (c. 1373-1438). A crucial case for seeing the tortuous and possibly subversive (re)constructions of pious audience response to devotional discourses and likewise response to the response, hers is a ‘story’ of devotional performance that on Christ’s orders was confessed and dictated to a priest, and thus underwent multiple negotiations and deflections, not least of which linguistic translations, to become the *Book of Margery Kempe* (late 1430s). A member of the merchant class in Bishop’s Lynn, mother of fourteen children, highly devout Christian and committed pilgrim, Kempe earned herself the reputation of indulging in flamboyant piety (Beckwith 78-108), even as this was discursively structured<sup>7</sup> by, and likely destruct(ur)ing, the contemporary devotional practices (*Book of Margery Kempe* 1.1). Witnessing once a Corpus Christi procession (*Book* 1.45, ll. 2524-32), Margery’s devotional performance literalised the premier exhortation of the Church to *imitatio Christi* and thereby stole the clerical show of Eucharistic-related power by demanding special attention to her own embodied response to the memorial procession (Beckwith 94): at being reminded of the Crucifixion, she would have avowedly *die of grief*.

Margery’s is everywhere in her ‘autobiographical’ *text* a body out of mind – the kyriarchal mind (Schüssler Fiorenza 11 n. 28, 14 n. 31) – through seemingly mindless over-embodiment of affect. While a lot of her dismayed contemporaries deprecated

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<sup>7</sup> Margery’s piety and identificatory practices were informed by Nicholas Love’s *Mirroure of the Blessyd Life of Jesu Christ* (Beckwith 79). Her boisterous tears in the face of Crucifixion images in particular must also ‘be viewed ... in the context of the Christic text and the Virgin’s “reader-response” to it’ (Lochrie 189), i.e. as a devotional practice on the late medieval template of Mary’s authorised response – loud lamentation and gestures of despair – to the Crucifixion. Margery’s effluvia of tears, she claimed, were a divine gift whereby she would save souls which, as Beckwith (89) observes, made her the competitor of clerical monopoly over the afterlife. Yet the ‘gift of tears’ of *compunction* was extolled by the Church publicly in a votive mass in the Sarum missal (qtd. in Beckwith 89).

Margery's violent bodily movements, 'boystows' outpour of tears, outbursts of crying and laughing as unbearable clamour, she regarded such effluvia of piety as uncontrollable *com-passio Christi* threatening to burst her heart asunder in a literal version of *compunctio cordis*. She is only feigning piety, Margery's detractors, terrified by the bodily and verbal outpour, accused her on every such occasion (Beckwith 88-91): she is but a modern Pharisee. Margery is nearly the paragon of faked piety as elicited by 'miraculis pleyinge', according to the Wycliffite *Tretise*. Or is she? Can Margery's piety be defined (and contained) by the religious and lay malestream? Margery overflows herself, or rather her *man*-made 'feminine' and Christian 'self', and grounds this self-consciously transgressive behaviour in her special licence from Christ. Margery insistence on *performing* (as both *show* and Butlerian *performance* of) Christian piety was – literally at the limit – an unauthorised performance of gender and body.

Scholarship often avers particularly with reference to drama that medieval images of violence inflicted on Christ's body engendered fears in the spectators of having been shown complicitous in it, thus imperilling their salvation (Beadle 101; cf. Twycross 72-74), but (implicitly) *no* fears that such violence might befall on them too. Medieval sources, however, belie such optimism, as do certain modern commentaries. Affective response to late medieval depictions of the Passion in diverse mediums did not elicit exclusive feelings of *compassio Christi*, but, as Groebner (224-5) notes with respect to devotional images, it could also sound the viewer's *fears* that his/her body might have been the recipient of torture. *The Book of Margery Kempe* corroborates this view of overarching punishment when the 'creatur' weeps at the recollection of Christ's Passion as elicited by witnessing human violence against the weaker party: Margery would contemplate *mentally* the violence inflicted upon Jesus and respond with bodily and spiritual anguish to it not only on beholding the crucifix but also on seeing human or animal wounds as well as scenes of beating. Such physical abuse which she identifies explicitly as one cause of her Christic anguish, 'if a man beat a child before her or smote a horse or another beast with a whip' (Kempe, qtd. in Bynum, 'Violent Imagery' 25), Margery describes in terms that inadvertently invoke the kyriarchal imposition of authority.

### Case study 3. Medieval religious drama and devotionism: two incommensurables?

Late medieval affective spirituality worked by activating mnemonic images so as to stir the affections. Or moving the audience to tears of compassion is precisely what late medieval vindications of religious drama and contemporary antitheatrical tracts alike noted about such performances: 'ben mouyd to compassion and deuocion, wepyng bitere teris' (*Tretise*, ll. 114-15).<sup>8</sup> In *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy* (c. 1449), bishop Reginald Pecock vindicated religious images and thereby endorsed

<sup>8</sup> All references to the *Tretise of Miraculis Pleyinge* use exclusively line numbering.

performances of Passion plays – ‘Whanne a quyk (*living*) man is sett in a pley to be hangid on a cros and to be in semyng woundid and scourgid’ (qtd. in Elliott 243) – in so far as they were better equipped than either carved or painted images of the Crucifixion to stimulate devotion.

Like a number of intra- or extra-dramatic sources, *Dives and Pauper* (c. 1405-1410/25), a treatise on the Ten Commandments, makes a case of the role of images in devotion along the lines established by Gregory the Great in his Epistle XIII to Serenus (c. 600) and evolved after 1100. Images edify the uneducated and trigger pious thoughts of Christ’s Incarnation, ministry and Passion; they thereby spur people to devotion, in an expression of honest mirth that also provides a recreational opportunity, on condition the activities are not ‘ribaude’ or ‘pleyys agens the feith of holy chirche’ (*Dives* 1.293). Aware of the patristic repudiation of ‘pagan’ theatre yet also aligning itself with more recent conditional acceptance of godly recreational activities (Davidson 6-12), *Dives and Pauper* sharply distinguishes between sin-inducing ‘daunsing and pleyng’, on the one hand, and ‘honest dauncis and honest pleyys don in dew (*due*) time and in good maner in the haliday’ (*Dives* 1.293). Intention and manner as well as circumstances thus separate acceptable from sinful entertainment.

Not so with the Wycliffite *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (c. 1380-1425), which proscribes *all* forms of religion-related entertainment, including religious vernacular drama, as evil diversion from active engagement in spiritual pursuits. The *Tretise* systematically dismantles the traditional medieval argument justifying the devotional and didactic import of ‘miraclis pleyinge’ (*Tretise* 162-5) and inveighs against stage spectacle as an ‘illicit form of *pleasurable* experience’ (Davidson 8; his italics) nothing short of sacrilege. Davidson (16-18) and Hill-Vásquez (54-60) have remarked that the *Tretise* is most unaccommodating of late medieval affective piety, which it decries as unreflective and moreover disruptive of the hierarchical structure of order and authority in the Church (*Tretise* 34-81) because of its emotionalism and alleged intimacy with the deity – in fact the Christocentric piety fostered by the Catholic establishment itself. ‘Miraclis pleyinge’ is deplored for its misguided attempt to do Christ’s work, i.e. to bridge the divine and the fleshly, whereby humans reverse the Incarnational logic and teleology, while the space of performance corrupts the miracle at least through its usurpation of the priests’ mediatory investment. A presumptuous claim in vindication of ‘miraclis playinge’ that the *Tretise* rails against is the spectators’ profuse weeping (*Tretise* 162-5): such weeping does not necessarily also engender a change of heart whereby Christians amend their ways. If the divine works have failed to persuade them to righteousness, how could anything else succeed (312-7)? There is an intimation here of concerted attempts at controlling the audience’s affective response: the same response was taught and elicited via preaching on (and was visible in iconography of) *passio Christi* and the need for its *imitatio*; nonetheless, it is suggested, the larger perlocutionary effects – inner reformation and/as social benignity – were largely beyond control. While the *Tretise* argues that watching

plays can distract one away from one's steadfast commitment to the worship of God through appropriate deeds and towards vain idleness (186-92, 373-85), the plays' nefarious influence is bemoaned as intrinsic to their condition as *signs*, viz. as mere discourse divorced from praxis (197-202) which moreover works in the service of the devil (203-211). The extreme danger of the theatrical enterprise resides in its condition as *sign*, which entails perforce taking God's name in vain and therewith His – actually the Church's – word, such as doubting the existence of everlasting pain in hell (251-60).

The crux of the matter in *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* is the drama's duplication of discourse in an ungodly (unlicensed) fashion, in the mode of signs and not of genuine action, which smacks of 'heresie' (297). Ironically, the *Tretise* was itself the product of a heterodox position, Wycliffite/Lollard, at the time deemed heretical and harshly treated. Its iconoclasm, manifest in the strong refutation (179-88) of the Gregorian belief that paintings are able to teach sacred history to the illiterate, anticipated Protestantism's in an age, however, when the gaze was being credited for the exercise of devotion more than ever.

#### **Case study 4. Remembrance of things past, or how Passion plays could impress the audience**

Ironically, the enduring Gregorian belief in the instrumentality of images in teaching Christian doctrine and especially piety to the laity was both corroborated and belied some time after the centuries that sponsored the religious use of images. As late as 1644, a 60-year-old Protestant parishioner ignorant of the basic articles of Christian faith 'responded' to catechism only when preacher John Shaw mentioned that salvation came solely through Christ's shedding of blood on the cross (138-39). This cued the man's prompt recollection of the bloody image put up in a Corpus Christi play he had seen at Kendal in Westmorland (now in Cumbria)<sup>9</sup> as a child – half a century before:

I told him that the way to salvation was by Jesus Christ, God-Man, Who, as He was man, shed His blood for us on the cross, etc. 'Oh sir,' said he, '*I think I heard of that man you spake of, once in a play at Kendall, called Corpus Christi play, where there was a man on a tree, and blood ran down,*' &c. And after that he professed that tho' he was a good churchman, that is, he constantly went to Common-Prayer at their chapel, *yet he could not remember that he ever heard of salvation by Jesus Christ, but in that play.* This very discourse made me the more vigorously go thro' the chappelry, and both publicly and from house to house catechise both old and young. (Shaw 139; my italics)

<sup>9</sup> If Gardiner's (87) sources are correct, then the Corpus Christi plays continued in Kendal until the beginning of James's reign (1603-25), even if already in 1586 the town council placed restrictions on the production.

Janette Dillon suspects that the protracted impression the Passion plays had made on a child who, as an elderly man, could otherwise remember no article of faith despite faithful church attendance, might derive from the fact that ‘the power of the image has overwhelmed the teaching rather than served as a vehicle for it, since the spectator has not retained the lesson inherent in the image’ (182). On the other hand, such reminiscence confirms the long-standing rhetorical advice<sup>10</sup> to create strong mnemonic images by having the important actors engage in bizarre, even violent, movements. Even if the *possibility of an emotional overriding of the religious message* undercuts the validity of the critics’ postulate about the generic force of drama to shape the medieval spectators’ univocal reception of and response to the religious plot, the incident makes it at once significant and useless. It is useless through its quasi-singularity as a recorded response to religious *drama*, all the more so as it is a second-hand report by a biased party who *may* have largely invented the incident. Picture a Protestant clergyman flabbergasted at an old man’s catechetical ineptitude yet vivid reminiscence of the childhood memory of a ‘popish’ remnant in the (not so) early days of Protestantism, and intent thereafter on catechising an entire parish found ignorant.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the incident becomes significant if we regard it in tandem with other recorded responses to *violent images*, like Margery Kempe’s shudder on seeing battering, or specifically to visual representations of the Passion, like the Conyhope cross, all able to *overwhelm the viewer*, in Dillon’s terms.

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<sup>10</sup> In the case of late medieval Christocentric piety, the meaning of the preachers’ exhortation of the laity to associate Christ’s rent body on the cross with redemptive sacrifice may have been corrupted by the equally omnipresent (visual) discourses of violence against the body and retributive action against such transgressors. Preachers taught the laity how to interpret the iconological programme underlying church painting: ‘Notice that the shedding of [Christ’s] blood is a very strong remedy because it leads the sinner to the sorrow of contrition, the shame of confession, and to the labour of [making] satisfaction’ (qtd. in Ross 55). What individuals who heard this time and again would have made of it is hard to tell. However, the Middle English Passion plays presented a complex trial of the truth(s) of Jesus’s body vis-à-vis the ruling power enacted as a series of battering acts escalating in violence both physically and verbally; while making satisfaction was writ large as sheer undoing of the body, salvation was elided. I concur with Sponsler (136) that this is hardly the kind of context able to enhance piety and faith in the viewers on showing them ‘a man on a tree and blood running’.

<sup>11</sup> It is quite amazing that the (anonymous) old man should be able to remember the *Latin name* of the play – this is rather the pastor’s interpolation – yet be so unfamiliar with the *basics* of Christianity as disseminated by pastors through *preaching in the vernacular*. However, other Protestant voices lament the laity’s unrelenting memory of their ‘popish’ past, which may presumably also include the Passion plays, or at least ignorance of their Protestant present in terms of *lack of understanding*; Haigh (29-33) cites countless Protestant preachers’ complaints about the ‘great and gross ... ignorance of many’, in George Webb’s words in 1617. Even as he admits a preacherly compulsion to berate the religiosity of people typical of all religions at all times, Haigh discerns a genuine concern of such pastors that their spiritual endeavours have truly failed (32-34, 48-49), ‘defeated by ignorance and indifference’ (34), yet also because of clerical neglect (35-41).

Dillon cogently factors in the analysis of spectatorial position the ‘wonderfully and desirably spectacular’ dimension of dramatic images proper (188), their intense power to *titillate* (188, 190-91) and their *excess* (205), which have a bearing on all medieval plays that capitalise on spectacular infliction of (punitive) pain. Images of violence and pain ‘also excite and satisfy the audience in and for their own sake’, Dillon (188) maintains in an argument consonant with Robert Mills’s view of the likely sadistic dimension of response (cf. Sponsler 148-50) and with Margaret Owens’s perceptive observation about the inherent ambiguity of audience response (26). To conclude, gory excess of and in the images of religious drama, as well as theatrical reliance on special effects, may hardly be (or be able to promote) the didactic message intended by such plays – as modern scholarship appears to assume. Systematic preaching on how to ‘read’ religious iconography and generic format alike seem *not* to have guaranteed audience reception and response.

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