"Mysse-masche, dryff-draff": Wittgenstein's language-games, nonsense, and the grammar of the soul in *Mankind*[1]

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In this essay, I explore the fifteenth-century English morality play *Mankind* through a Wittgensteinian lens. The play's remarkable emphasis on and play with language, the fact that the vices' manipulation and degradation of grammar proves to be the hinge into Mankind's soul, aligns with and is illuminated by ideas central to Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy of language. In particular, I apply his key ideas of language-games, nonsense, and forms of life to an analysis of how the play's vices under the rule of the devil, Titivillus, mangle grammar and words in order to sever Mankind from his essential human nature. The central argument is that the vices distort language because it is constitutive of human nature. By drawing Mankind into the nonsense of their perverse, topsy-turvy language-games, the vices lure him from a human form of life to that of an inarticulate beast, lost and on the brink of damnation.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; language-game; form of life; human nature; nonsense; grammar

1. Introduction

> "Don't *for heavens sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don't fail to pay attention to your nonsense". — Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*[2]

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"Stow, statt, stow!" In these harsh, monosyllabic cries, Mankind —the title character of the late-medieval morality play *Mankind* (*c.* 1465–1470) —stands degraded.[3] In a local tavern, which ought to be a space of communal goodwill, the collapse of the human form of life is staged in disturbing aspect. What should be Mankind's noblest faculty, language, is reduced to the most basic articulations of insult and imperative. The former diminishes the value of the ethical other, who is, in this case, a barmaid; the latter exacerbates the former by treating her as a mere functionary, which is simply an instrument for the satisfaction of Mankind's desires. How did the universal representative of humankind come to such a pass? The answer lies in the play's implied account of the grammar of the human soul.

While *Mankind*'s overt principal vice and virtue are sloth and labor, respectively, there is an additional subtle discourse, operating at a level accessible to a contemporary *lered* or clerkly spectator, which is focused on the

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[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, ed. G. H. von Wright, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 64e.

[3] All quotations from *Mankind* are taken from *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000; repr. 2004), 258–279. Thorn and yogh have been converted throughout. In writing this essay, I have consulted also the Arden edition of the play in *Everyman and Mankind*, ed. Douglas Bruster and Eric Rasmussen (London: Methuen, 2009) and the TEAMS Online edition, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley and Gerard NeCastro (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010). *Mankind*, along with the *Castle of Perseverance* and *Wisdom*, survives in one manuscript of likely East Anglian provenance, the so-called Macro manuscript (because once owned by an eighteenth-century antiquarian book collector, the Reverend Cox Macro), which is today housed in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC, as MS V.a.354. From internal evidence (in particular, the references to new coins and King Edward at lines 465–466 and 690–694), the play has been dated to the reign of Edward IV, sometime between 1465–1470. For more on this, see Donald C. Baker, "The Date of *Mankind*", *Philological Quarterly* 42 (1963): 90–91. However, John Marshall makes a case for precisely dating the play's first performance to Saturday, 23 February 1471, in "'O Ye Souerns *Th*at Sytt and Ye Brothern *Th*at Stonde Ryght Wppe': Addressing the Audience of *Mankind*", *European Medieval Drama* 1 (1997): 189-202. See also Jessica Brantley and Thomas Fulton, "*Mankind* in a Year without Kings", *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 (Spring 2006): 321–354, who argue that the play was produced during the period of Edward IV's dethronement, 1469–1471, at 327–331.

centrality of language to the human being.[4] However, Mankind himself is no philosopher; indeed, he has been described with some justice as something of an "earnest dullard".[5] For this reason, Titivillus —the medieval devil whose special office is to record corruptions of language— and his band of vices eschew argument and the smooth manipulations of rhetoric. Instead, they sport with the texture of language and send their uncouth words out on a spree. The target of their attack is the very ground of communication, namely, grammar. In this way, *Mankind* stages a decidedly linguistic route to the damnation of its eponymous lead character.

Although there exists already a number of critical essays on some aspects of the treatment of language in *Mankind*,[6] none so far has developed a reading that considers exclusively the philosophical dimension of corrupted words. In this essay, I shall show how Mankind's fall is tracked through his gradual conversion to perverse language-games and immoral forms of life, the chaos of which drives him ultimately to despair and attempted suicide. My use of the terms 'language-game' and 'form of life' are taken from the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In what follows, I will situate my reading of the play in relation to his late philosophical work, specifically his thinking concerning language, which he termed his grammatical investigations.[7] There is, I believe,

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[4] For a classic reading of *Mankind* as a morality play that explores the vice of *acedia* or sloth, see Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Carolina Press, 1967), 149–154. See also Pamela M. King, "Morality plays", in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 235–262, at 244–245, who makes the point that "[t]he play's use of Latin, not just as translated tags but exploited wittily and dynamically within the text, also suggests that the play was written for a sophisticated audience" (245).

[5] King, "Morality plays", 243.

[6] Such studies include Paula Neuss, "Active and Idle Language: Dramatic Images in Mankind", in *Medieval Drama*, ed. Neville Denny (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 41–67; Kathleen M. Ashley, "Titivillus and the Battle of Words in *Mankind*", *Annuale Mediaevale* 16 (1975): 128–150; Lynn Forest-Hill, *Transgressive Language in Medieval English Drama: Signs of Challenge and Change* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2000), 85–107; and Janette Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51–69.

[7] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), I, § 90. In

an illuminating affinity between his descriptions of how language works and the ideas about language implicit in the play. In other words, both medieval playwright and modern philosopher have hit on equivalent insights regarding the complex interrelationships between our language, our world, and our lives lived through and in both. Moreover, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is neither synchronic nor diachronic. What counts is the specific form of life underpinning this or that use of language, and that form of life may be, for instance, present-day or medieval. For this reason, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is, by its own lights, readily applicable to the study of medieval texts, such as *Mankind*.

2. Grammatical investigations

Anne Middleton writes of the medieval conception of grammar that "[it] reflects the structure of the mind, but, more important, the relation of concepts in the human mind corresponds to relationships of real entities in the universe, to what eternally is".[8] Before moving on to discuss general and specific features of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language relevant to this essay, I sketch briefly here the broad outlines of the tradition of language study that underpins both Middleton's statement and the *Mankind* playwright's sensitivity to the importance of grammar. In the Middle Ages, *studia grammatica*, the first art of the *trivium*, was fundamental to education.[9] The division of the seven liberal arts into the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy) dates back to Martianus Cappella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* at the beginning of the fifth century and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* in the early seventh, with the latter devoting the first books of his encyclopedic work to them. In the twelfth century, John of Salisbury writes the *Metalogicon* (1159) as a defense of the *trivium*. In it, he asserts boldly that

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this essay, all quotations from *Philosophical Investigations* are taken from this edition and designate numbered sections.

[8] Anne Middleton, "Two Infinities: Grammatical Metaphor in *Piers Plowman*", *ELH* (1972): 185, quoted in John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43.

[9] See Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools: From Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 86–127, esp. 105–118.

> grammar, which is the basis and root of scientific knowledge, implants, as it were, the seed [of virtue] in nature's furrow after grace has readied the ground. This seed, provided again that cooperating grace is present, increases in substance and strength until it becomes solid virtue, and it grows in manifold respects until it fructifies in good works, wherefore men are called and actually are 'good'.[10]

In other words, grammar is the bedrock of the perfection of human nature. From the thirteenth century, students in medieval grammar schools furthered their studies in Latin via the *Liber Catonianus*, which compiled a number of different texts, including the first one, the *Disticha Catonis*, after which the whole collection is named.[11] On the whole, then, the anonymous author of *Mankind*, who was almost certainly university educated, conceived and composed his play as heir to a rich cultural encyclopedia that dwelt critically on the relation of language to world, and which emphasized the fundamental role of grammar in mediating or capturing that relation.

In the twentieth century, Wittgenstein settled on language as the proper object of philosophical investigation because of a conviction that attention paid to language and its uses clears up the kinds of confusions we are liable to fall prey to about both ourselves and the world when we become curious about what lies beneath or beyond the surface of our words. For instance, we may say, "she's a good friend"; "what's the *good* of complaining"; or "we're making good time on this bus". Reviewing these different uses of the word "good", we may wonder what underpins or unites them, and this may lead us to ask the question, what is *the* good? This Wittgenstein considers an error, which leads invariably to nonsense metaphysics. For this reason, he contends, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language" (I.109). In the case of *Mankind*, Titivillus and the vices precisely endeavor to bewitch Mankind's wit by means of nonsensical language-games.

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[10] John of Salibury, *The Metalogicon*, Book I, Chapter 23, in *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 65. See Book I, chapters 13–25 for the account and defense of grammar.

[11] For an account of the *Liber Catonianus*, see Marjorie Curry and Rita Copeland, "Classroom and Confession", in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 376–406, at 380–385. For the Distichs, see Cato, *Disticha Catonis*, ed. Marcus Boas and Henricus Johannes Botschuyer (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1952).

Their attack on the purity of language is not casual; rather, it opens up a dangerous cleavage within Mankind's soul, between his specifically human and basely animal natures.[12]

Wittgenstein's various grammatical investigations do not offer an ordered or structuralist theory of language like, for instance, that of Saussurean linguistics, but, rather, a description of dynamic language. In other words, he aims to show how we actually use language. In this connection, he writes: "Philosophy [and by this, Wittgenstein means his grammatical investigations] may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is" (I.122–224). To use a terminology not his own, his functional linguistics offers a pragmatic and/or sociolinguistic account of language.

At this point, I want to focus particularly on the idea of the language-game because this is key in my analysis of the vices' operations in the play. Wittgenstein considers language to be the vehicle of thought (I.329), so he turns his critical attention to the "use of language [...] and the whole process of using words", which he calls "language-games" (I.7). By doing so, he seeks to show both the diverse uses we put our words to, and how such uses are indivisibly bound to our particular forms of life —our forms of life being those activities proper to human beings. As he puts it, "to imagine a language means to imagine a life-form" (I.19). Hence, our form of life and language-games are inextricably linked. In this view, the meaning of a word is not some thing it refers to or names; instead, the meaning of a word is its *use*, and the uses of words are multiple:

> But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? —There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten [...] Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form. (I.23)

[12] In Aristotelian philosophical anthropology, human nature is an animal nature, but it is distinguished from all other animal natures by the addition and exercise of those distinctly human activities that are made possible by the faculty of reason.

Thus, language-games are performed by communities of users who play them according to agreed rules. In other words, language-games are a natural, and not merely or only cultural, form of life of human beings. This means that the ground of language, which is the answer to the question, "what is language?", is just that the speaking of language is a proper activity of human beings, used for all kinds of different purposes. Some of these are outlined in the list Wittgenstein provides in *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Giving orders, and obeying them —
> Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements —
> Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) —
> Reporting an event —
> Speculating about the event —
> Forming and testing a hypothesis —
> Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams —
> Making up a story; and reading it —
> Play-acting —
> Singing catches —
> Guessing riddles —
> Making a joke; telling it —
> Solving a problem in practical arithmetic —
> Translating from one language to into another —
> Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. (I.23)

To be understood, therefore, is to share a form of life with someone else —to be related to another and so to belong. As Herbert McCabe, following Wittgenstein, puts it: "Meanings [...] are ways of entering into social life, ways of being with each other. The kind of meanings available in the language of a society —taking 'language' in its widest extent to include all conventionally determined signs and symbols— constitute the way in which people are with each other in that community".[13] In order to play the multiplicity of language-games well, one must play them according to the rules and therefore be, so to speak, a team player. And what happens if one does not play according to the agreed rules? In this case, Wittgenstein imagines a ball game: "It is as though there were a custom among certain people to throw someone a ball, which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but certain people might not throw it

[13] Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (London: Continuum, 2003), 84.

back, but put it in their pocket instead".[14] I will return to this analogy in the discussion of the vices' grammatical tactics in *Mankind*. Indeed, I wish to apply now Wittgenstein's ideas concerning language outlined above to an examination of the play.

3. Sin and solecism

On the subject of language in medieval morality plays, Janette Dillon observes, "Most [...] tend [...] to set up a dialectic between a relatively formal, Latinate dialect for [...] holy speakers and a colloquial, sometimes obscene or nonsensical, vernacular dialect for the figure of the Vice and his counterparts".[15] In *Mankind*, Mischief and the other vices work assiduously to uproot Mankind from the ground of his essential human being. To achieve this they launch a concerted attack on the purity of his language, by breaking his and the audience's agreed rules of grammar. In Wittgenstein's terms, they corrupt the conventional uses of language-games. The vices' first target is Mercy himself, whose dignified form of speech provides the paradigm for Mankind's own initial fluent and ordered use of language (in lines 186–216). Mercy represents allegorically God's mercy, but the details of his personification imply that he is also a priest with the requisite learning and authority to teach sound doctrine. When he opens the play, Mercy employs the devices and schemes of rhetoric to persuade the audience of his teaching. His eloquence is magisterial because his smooth manipulation of language is allied to propositions that are true. He appeals directly to the audience in high style, which is rich in Latinate vocabulary. It is worth quoting the peroration of his speech in full in order to appreciate its mouth-filling grandiloquence:

> O ye soverens that sytt and ye brothern that stoned ryght uppe,
> Pryke not yowr felycytes in thyngys transytorye.
> Beholde not the Erth, but lyfte yowr ey wppe.
> Se how the hede the members dayly do magnyfye,
> Who ys the hede forsoth I xall yow certyfye:
> I mene owr Savyowr, that was lykynnyde to a lambe;

[14] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 95e. For more on Wittgenstein's language-games, see Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 126–140.
[15] Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England*, 51.

> And Hys sayntys be the members that dayly He doth satysfye
> Wyth the precyose rever that runnyth from Hys wombe.
>
> Ther ys non such foode, be water nor by londe,
> So precyouse, so gloryouse, so nedefull to owr entent,
> For yt hath dyssolvyde mankynde from the bytter bonde
> Of the mortall enmye, that vemynousse serpente,
> From the wyche Gode preserve yow all at the Last Judgment!
> For sekyrly ther xall be a streyt examynacyon,
> The corn xall be savyde, the chaffe xall be brente.
> I besech yow hertyly, have this premedytacyon. (29–44)

How are the vices to tackle such a euphonious and sententious speech? Mankind, when he first speaks with Mercy, says, "O, yowr lovely wordys to my soull are swetere then hony" (225), referring also to its "mellyfluose doctrine" (313). The vices know that they cannot match the artful oratory of one whom they acknowledge to be a "stronge cunnyng clerke" (128). They will not present Mercy, Mankind, or the audience with clear arguments in favor of their form of life. (For the sake of contrast, think of Mephistopheles, in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (*c.* 1589), who employs rhetoric to persuade Faustus of his position; in effect, Mephistopheles *argues* with Faustus.) Instead, the vices ask a series of impudent questions, but they do not argue with either Mercy or Mankind (in, for instance, lines 129–138). Their verbal attacks are unexpected, oblique, indirect, and subtle; by them, they prize open and burst the very words that constitute the audience's and Mankind's world and, what Mercy calls, their "goode condycyons" (28). In this way, they remove the possibility of reasonable discussion, by turning the medium of such, which is the proper use of words according to agreed rules, into a mishmash of nonsense and non sequiturs.

Furthermore, they cannot hope to utter words as aureate, sweet, or true as Mercy's, and so they attack the structure of his verbal medium through its foundation, namely, grammar. By interrupting the flow of his "talkyng delectable" (65), and by breaking apart its rhetoric and transmuting its golden, honeyed *sentence* into base babbling, they introduce confusion —linguistic and moral— into the play. At this point, Wittgenstein's analogy of the ball game is relevant when, in effect, Mischief catches Mercy's ball, puts it in his pocket, and walks off with it:

I beseche yow hertyly, leve yowr calcacyon.
Leve yowr chaffe, leve yowr corn, leve yowr dalyacyon.
Yowr wytt ys lytyll, yowr hede ys mekyll, ye are full of predycacyon.
But, ser, I prey this questyon to claryfye:
Mysse-masche, dryff-draff.
Sume was corn and sum was chaffe,
My dame seyde my name was Raffe;
Onschett yowr lokke and taken an halpenye. (45–52)

Note how Mischief's first line of verse parallels Mercy's last by the anaphora of the phrase, "I besech yow hertyly", and through the rhyming of "premedytacyon" and "calcacyon". Mischief appropriates and echoes the diction, structure, and meter of Mercy's speech only to swerve and hammer home his rejection of it by some further anaphora of his own: "Leve yowr chaffe, leve yowr corn, leve yowr dalyacyon". In fact, "dalyacyon" is itself an ambiguous term that means both "serious discourse" and "idle chattering", depending on context and, of course, use.[16] The oxymoronic dual senses of "dalyacyon" — at once reasonable discussion and idle chatter —guide the vices in their flip-flopping grammatical assaults on meaning. Mischief happily exploits this ambiguity in order to conflate both senses in a comic and scornful dismissal of what he caricatures as Mercy's witless, big-headed preaching. When he then asks Mercy to resolve his quodlibetal puzzle —the diction, structure, and meter of which is suddenly and wholly opposed to Mercy's— it turns out to be the key illustration of his method:

Mysse-masche, dryff-draff.
Sume was corn and sume was chafe,
My dame seyde my name was Raffe;
Onschett yowr lokke and taken an halpenye.

By what rules is Mischief using words here? Moreover, what form of life do such uses presuppose? According to Wittgenstein, "The rules of grammar may be called 'arbitrary', if that is to mean that the *aim* of the grammar is nothing but that of language" (I.497). But the aim of language is necessarily human. That is, it is human agents who agree on the rules of grammar with respect to

[16] *MED*, s.v. *dalien* (v.), 1. (a): "To converse politely, leisurely or intimately; talk, chat, jest [...] (b) to speak in a serious, edifying, or solemn manner".

human aims. By contrast, the vices' arbitrary "rules" of grammar are inherently non-human and, thus, disturb the human form of life.

When the minor vices, New Gyse, Nowadays, and Nought, enter the scene, they dance rings around, trip up, and jostle Mercy; and they do so too by their play with and on words. They interrupt him and deliberately do not co-operate with his proper use of words, drowning him out with the rapid-fire assaults of their "ydyll language" (147). In frustration, Mercy pleads for: "Few wordys, few and well sett!" (102). But he is roundly opposed by New Gyse who stipulates new rules for language:

> Ser, yt ys the new gyse and the new jett,
> Many wordys and schortely sett,
> Thys ys the new gyse, every-dele. (103–105)

On one level, New Gyse refers here to the vulgar register of demotic vocabulary and speedy delivery that is characteristic of the vices' speech pattern. On the other hand, his rejection of "well sett" words implies the concerted attack on grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, which underpins the vices' most memorable, humorous and perplexing speeches.[17] In addition, his insistence on the "new gyse and the new jett" points the vices' overturning of the customs, conventions, and agreed rules of language. While Mercy castigates them for their "ydyll language", they invert his diction and judgment, by referring to their own "eloquence" (150). These reversals are the hallmark of their all-out assault on meaning; such is the "new gyse" of their topsy-turvy language-games.

4. Implicating the audience

In his early philosophy, Wittgenstein wrote, "*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world",[18] a position that he continued to maintain in his later thinking. In other words, the number and extent of one's language-games define the scope of one's world. The vices' assault on language, through their

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[17] See John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, I, 18, for John's emphasis on and account of the key principles of writing and speaking in a correct manner.

[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), 5.6.

idle and sing-song speech, is effectively an attack on the audience's world. Their bamboozling tactics are designed to destabilize the audience's worldview and to insert confusion and chaos into their proper form of life. While it is true that audience expectations at the time would have been conditioned —via vernacular sermons, mystery plays, mummers' plays, and, above all, other morality plays— to expect and even demand lewd, scatological, and profane activities from the vices, nonetheless, such activities are, of course, from the vantage point of Christian morality and theology potentially deadly to the soul. Indeed, as some members of the original audience would have been aware, there is scriptural admonition regarding the vices' verbal project: "*profana autem inaniloquia devita multum enim proficient ad impietatem / et sermo eorum ut cancer serpit*" ("But shun profane and vain babblings: for they grow much towards ungodliness. / And their speech spreadeth like a canker").[19] In bastardizing and perverting Mercy and Mankind's use of language, which is the vernacular shared by the multi-tiered audience, the vices throw human life itself into confusion. Furthermore, by their grammatical caperings, they aim to disturb the members of the audience from their habitual use of words, by delighting them in the distortion and destruction of Mercy's words in order to drive a wedge between them and his message.[20]

In Wittgenstein's view, to understand a language is to grasp a form of life. The vices endeavor to corrupt language in order to pervert life. When they target Mercy's high style, they fasten on his Latinate vocabulary, which New Guise disparagingly calls "Englysch Laten" (124). To attack it they produce their own rival low style of barbarism and soraismus, in which English words are yoked to Latin case endings: *bredibus*, *horsibus*, *fyrybusque*, etc. (57). The result is an adulteration of the prestige vocabulary of high style, which travesties the ethical poetic of deploying language for the purpose of moral development. Moreover, the vices' conflation of English words and Latin case endings parodies by reversal the appropriation of Latin words into English, a

[19] 2 Timothy 2:16–17, quoted from the Vulgate and Douay-Rheims translation, online editions, www.drbo.org.

[20] Neuss maintains in "Active and Idle Language" that the audience loses interest in Mercy's opening sermon-like speech just in time for the arrival of distraction in the form of Mischief, only to learn the lesson of the value of Mercy's words by the end of the play, and so listen more intently to his longer closing speech.

process that gathered steam in the fifteenth century.[21] In lines 129–134, Nowadays parodies grammar schoolroom translation exercises, such as those done in connection with the *Liber Catonianus*, by asking Mercy to translate an obscene English rhyme into Latin. However, the vices' true target is neither Latin nor English, but language itself. They blur boundaries between languages in order to reduce all articulate speech to babbling. Mercy says of the vices, "in language thei be large" (296), and the extent of their fast-and-loose language-games serves to stretch and destabilize the limits of coherent speech. In this vein, the vices teach the audience new, impure language-games such as the scatological Christmas song that concludes with the suggestive chorus: "Holyke, holyke, holyke, etc." (344) in parody of "Holy, holy holy".[22] Thus, by profaning the sacred through the degradation of grammar, the vices strive to loosen the audience —or a suggestible portion of it— from both its customary and ideal forms of life.

As Stanton B. Garner Jr writes, "To an extent unusual even for the moralities, the play has drawn the audience into its entertaining middle and implicated them in its action".[23] In particular, the audience becomes implicated in raising the devil, Titivillus, by paying for him to appear and destroy Mankind, its stand-in on stage: "Gyf ws rede reyallys yf Ye wyll se hys abhomynabull presens" (466). On the one hand, the shrewd playwright and players profit from the audience's appetite for spectacle. On the other, the invitation to participate in the play's performance constructs an audience that does not feel stupid or passive but knowing and superior —for they are in on the joke of Mankind's being bamboozled by Titivillus and the vices. Indeed, Titivillus especially invites and involves them in the attack on Mankind.[24] They collude in the attack by keeping quiet for him while he works invisibly

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[21] See Philip Durkin, *Borrowed Words: A History of Loanwords in English* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 223–297.

[22] See Revelation 4.8. This Christmas song, together with allusions to the Ash Wednesday liturgy at lines 320–323, has prompted critics to identify Mankind as a Shrovetide play. See King, "Morality plays", 245 and Thomas Pettitt, "*Mankind*: An English *Fastnachtspiel*?", in *Festive Drama*, ed. Meg Twycross (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 190–202.

[23] Stanton B. Garner Jr, "Theatricality in *Mankind* and *Everyman*", *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987): 279–280.

[24] See Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002), 253.

on his mark: "for me kepe now your silence; / Not a worde, I charge yow" (589-90). This metatheatrical device is designed to defuse the prospect of moral opposition by the audience as Titivillus and the other vices feign ironic self-mockery. They feign, however, because they do have a serious goal: the damnation of Mankind. In these ways, Titivillus and his troupe of vices play on the audience's appetite for spectacle and entertainment, maneuvering it into paying for its own vicarious temptation and damnation: such are the confusions opened up by attacking the ground of human being, our language and the rules of its games.

While *Mankind* was written in the vernacular, which implies its accessibility to a *lewed* or unlearned audience, as was discussed above the vices do make use of Latin, by parodying and distorting its forms and sounds, and sometimes blending it with English. This raises a question: Does this complex linguistic play not imply a section of the audience that would share the learning of the playwright and so appreciate his sophisticated linguistic play? In some cases, such as the line, "*Vita hominis est milicia super terram*" (228), the Latin is not subsequently translated. It seems reasonable to infer, then, that the play was presented at some point in its production history before a university audience[25] —and maybe even a Cambridge one given its likely provenance.[26] Thus, while the playtext addresses a broad audience and was likely staged before all kinds of empirical audiences,[27] its sophisticated play with grammar would have been particularly appropriate for a university audience. Such spectators would have relished first and foremost the English-Latin grammatical jokes. Second, they would enjoy the humor of condescension in relation to an uncultured and laboring peasant such as Mankind. Nevertheless, some educated spectators likely would recognize that Horace's question and answer, "*Quid rides? Mutato nomine de te / fabula*

[25] Pettitt argues that references in the play imply an "indoor performance, perhaps in the great Hall of a domestic or institutional residence", in "*Mankind*: An English *Fastnachtspiel*?", 191.

[26] Dillon argues for a clerical audience of the play in *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England*, 57–59.

[27] According to David M. Bevington, *Mankind* constitutes the most exemplary portable morality play, ideal for the repertory of a travelling troupe of players and staging before all kinds of audiences, in *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1962), 8–25.

narratur", would apply to them, for Mankind with his spade is also a type of Adam, who after the Fall dug the earth for his living.[28] Hence, in respect of one aspect of Mankind's character, educated members of the audience could enjoy a sense of superiority, but in another they would recognize themselves to be equally skewered.

Of course, the late-medieval society addressed by such a subversive morality play was a highly codified one, alert to a host of complex and carefully defined social conventions —or in Wittgenstein's terms, forms of life. On special licensed occasions, such as Shrove Tuesday, this would make it almost necessary to entertain the opposite of everyday social norms and morality. In this way, Mischief and the other vices represent the upturning of order that is the essence of play and carnival.[29] Indeed, *Mankind* brilliantly stages diametrically opposed viewpoints: confirmation of religious authority and its subversion and parody. The crux of such a delicately poised balance between the two, the spiritual and the corporeal, comes when Mankind kneels on stage praying, and Titivillus makes him need to "shit" (568). Yet the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane is itself contained by the restitution of the sacred and the comic triumph of divine grace at the play's conclusion.[30] Bearing this in mind, it seems that by its formal structure —Mercy's last-minute rescue of Mankind and the concluding didactic speech— the play does not endorse its subversions beyond the bounds of its performance. Even so, the formal

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[28] See Horace, *Satires*, I.1.69, in Horace, *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, rev. ed. (London: William Heinemann, 1929), 8–10. In medieval art, Adam was often portrayed with a spade; for more on this, see Michael Camille, "'When Adam Delved': Laboring on the Land in English Medieval Art", in *Agriculture in the Middle Ages: Technology, Practice, and Representation*, ed. Del Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 247–276. Mark Chambers argues that Mankind's spade should be read as a symbolic link to Adam in "Weapons of Conversion: *Mankind* and Medieval Stage Properties", *Philological Quarterly* 83 (2004): 1–11, at 2.

[29] For more on this, see Anthony Gash, "Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama", in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (New York: St. Martins Press, 1986), 74–98, and Victor I. Scherb, *Staging Faith: East Anglian Drama in the Later Middle Ages* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), 109–111.

[30] Compare the practice of the Wakefield-master who similarly produces a parody of a sacred event, the Nativity, in the story of Mak and Gil and the stolen sheep, but who concludes the play with a staging of the authentic Nativity.

structure does not guarantee what the audience takes away from the performance. For when the play has concluded, individual audience members are free to recall its many scenes of staged transgression and, perhaps, repeat to themselves some of its catchiest subversive lines.[31] Joerg O. Fichte writes, "the unity of actors, play and audience was much more strongly realized in the staging of the moral interludes than is true for the other medieval dramatic genres. The physicality of the theater as well as the medium's close proximity to the audience generally reduced the aesthetic distance between performance and reception".[32] Hence, there is inherent and dynamic tension between the play's form and content and, moreover, between its form and the individual playgoer's reception of the performance.

5. Language and the devil

Titivillus is an appropriate figure to oversee the grammatical attack on Mankind, for in medieval lore, he is the devil tasked with, on the one hand, collecting instances of idle chattering in church by inattentive Mass-goers and, on the other, any mangling of the Latin liturgy by the officiating priest. He was supposed to gather such instances in a sack that he would open again in evidence against souls at the Last Judgment, and this indeed is his function in the Towneley cycle play on that subject.[33] He is a demonic prescriptive

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[31] Laura Kendrick, in "'In bourde and in pleye': *Mankind* and the Problem of Comic Derision in Medieval English Religious Plays", *Études Anglaises* 58 (2005): 261–275, argues that the comic derisions and diversions of the play are finally curtailed by Mercy's closing sermon. In his reading of the play, Michael T. Peterson argues that it fails to authorize any of its competing discourses, including Mercy's, and so ultimately God's authority as secure guarantor of meaning is undermined, in "*Fragmina Verborum*: The Vices' Use of Language in the Macro Plays", *Florilegium* 9 (1987): 155–167.

[32] Joerg O. Fichte, "The Presentation of Sin as Verbal Action in the Moral Interludes", *Anglia* 103 (1985): 31.

[33] For more on this, see the Towneley *Judicum* or Play XXX, ll. 249–252. Titivillus also features in a series of *exempla* in the sermon collection *Jacob's Well*. For a history of this devil in literature, see Margaret M. Jennings, "Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon", *Studies in Philology* 74 (1977): 1–95. See also Neuss, "Active and Idle Language", 55–64, and Paula L. Presley, "The Revenge of Titivillus", in *Books Have Their Own Destiny: Essays in Honor of Robert V. Schnucker*, ed. Robin

grammarian of correct language use, who is eager to fasten on barbarism and corruption of language as the index of a corrupt soul. For all intents and purposes, then, he is the patron devil of solecisms, a perverse philologist —a kakologist.[34]

In *The Tempter's Voice*, Eric Jager explores Saint Augustine's idea that it was the Devil who asked the first question, and by it he sowed the seeds of semiotic difference in Eve's mind and then Adam's.[35] For Augustine, the origin of the Fall is rooted in the introduction of a new grammatical mood into the perfect Adamic language of Eden, namely, the interrogative mood. By this device, the Devil creates the conditions by which the divinely instituted order of things may be doubted, and thereby a gap is opened between the signifier and signified. First Eve and then Adam no longer understand God's injunction against eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In other words, error creeps into their hermeneutics. In Augustine's view, the Fall is semiotic, and its consequences pervade human nature because human beings are, by their rational nature, language-using creatures.[36] Further, he asserts, "Spirits who wish to deceive someone devise appropriate signs for each individual to match those in which they see him caught up through [...] the conventions he accepts".[37] In other words, grammar is the *via regia* to human damnation. In *Mankind*, Titivillus and the vices exploit the susceptibility of language to breakdown and confusion in order to isolate Mankind and make him question and doubt his nature. Furthermore, they aim to separate him from his home language and community so as to reduce him to silent despair, self-inflicted death, and ultimately damnation.

Bruce Barnes, Robert Kolb, and Paula L. Presley (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 1998), 111–120.

[34] The change in the pronunciation (and so spelling) of the devil's name, from *Tu*tivillus to *Ti*tivillus, if deliberate, may be the playwright's own sly joke at the expense of a devil charged with recording mispronunciations of Latin words, such as his own name.

[35] See Eric Jager, *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 3.

[36] See ibid., 51–98.

[37] Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford University Press, 1997), 52.

Wittgenstein was an assiduous and habitual reader of Augustine's *Confessions*,[38] and in *On Certainty*, he investigates the nature of doubt and certainty, including the logical conditions for asking conceptually coherent questions. His analysis both complements and deepens that of Augustine's outlined above, for the Devil's teasing, philosophically skeptical first question was of the nonsensical and destructive kind that Wittgenstein regarded as inimical to a true appreciation of the human form of life in the world. For Wittgenstein, to ask metaphysical questions presupposes or is grounded in shared forms of life, which comprehend just those kinds of activities that are distinctive of language-using human beings. As he writes, "the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which we turn [...] My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things".[39] In addition, he asserts, "You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there —like our life".[40] Thus, our language-games are open to change, but not to just any change. Whatever changes we do make and accept come into play in the context of a shared form of life, which is learned and not open to endless questioning, for as he contends: "A doubt without an end is not even a doubt".[41] If these ideas are applied to the play, then the exigent question for Mankind is: Will his doubts incline him to a vicious form of life, which is essentially inhuman, shared with Mischief and the rest?

After Titivillus whispers in the sleeping Mankind's ear that Mercy is dead, he awakes with the monosyllabic ejaculations of "Whoop! Ho!" (607). These are the cries of a soul losing its hold on reason. When he has fallen fully in the thrall of the vices, he can only repeat his lame acquiescence, "I wyll, ser" (707, 711, 714, and 719), to all the clauses of their profession of vice, which is a value system of the self that embraces lust, greed, sloth, and violent wrath. To be cut off from the community of language-users entails the end of the

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[38] See Brian McGuinness, *Young Ludwig: Wittgenstein's Life 1889–1921* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 224, and Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), 282.

[39] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), §§ 341 and 344.

[40] Ibid., § 559.

[41] Ibid., § 625.

articulate use of words, a use that stretches the limits of one's world while maintaining relation with others. After Mankind's professed alliance to vice, he is reduced further to monosyllabic shouting in the tavern: "A tapster, a tapster! Stow, statt, stow!" (730). These coarse utterances mark the nadir of Mankind's linguistic fall, and this is confirmed and reinforced by the echo and rhyme of New Gyse's "Whoppe whow! Anow, anow, anow, anow!" (734). Now Mankind is one of the devil's party, and the inhuman vices constitute his unsocial linguistic community. In the broken staccato of his repeated imperative, "stow", the other person is addressed in the reductive terms of function, "tapster", and degrading insult, "statt". Mankind has forgotten his own "kind", that is, his nature, the social essence of human being. He is slipping to the level of a brute. At this point, Mercy, who is appalled at Mankind's fall, recognizes that his current state is unnatural. "Man onkynde" (743), he calls him, which recalls his earlier injunction to Mankind to consider and ever keep in mind his nature: "Thynke well in yow hert, yowr name ys Mankynde; / Be not wnkynde to Gode" (279–280). This is the moral challenge highlighted by the play, namely, the necessity of adhering to one's human nature in its relation to others and God. One should recall John of Salisbury's words regarding the moral dimension of grammar: "grammar, which is the basis and root of scientific knowledge, implants, as it were, the seed [of virtue] in nature's furrow after grace has readied the ground. This seed, provided again that cooperating grace is present, increases in substance and strength until it becomes solid virtue, and it grows in manifold respects until it fructifies in good works, wherefore men are called and actually are 'good'". For Mankind to be true to his nature, all his actions must be underpinned by right grammar, which together with Divine Mercy makes a man perfect in nature or good.

The confounding of language and the scattering of human beings over the face of the earth, the story in Genesis 11 (especially, 11:5–8) of the Tower of Babel, that is, of the second fall and rupturing of language is relevant here. As discussed above, in Augustine's eyes, the original Fall was itself, among other things, linguistic. Man was cut off from direct communication with God, having been exiled into a region of dissimilitude, as he termed it in his *Confessions*, the reality of which can only be discussed figuratively.[42] Hence, there is the medieval predilection for allegory and analogy in discussing metaphysics and theology; so, too, the choice of mode for this play. In

[42] See Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, x.

breaking the foundation of language, the vices seek to wholly remove Mankind from his world, throwing him down into the state of total alienation that is Hell. In this connection, one thinks of Dante's conception of a Lucifer whose pride and fall led to silent mindlessness, deformed being, teetering on the brink of non-existence in the icy darkness of the Inferno.[43] The Church Fathers understood the fracturing of humankind at Babel into diverse linguistic communities to be a divinely sanctioned punishment for overweening pride, consisting in a scorn for the limits of human nature.[44] The play implies that it is always narcissism that separates the individual from his or her native form of life, and so from the linguistic community that institutes the rules for the meaningful use of words. Mankind's fall is a kind of grammatical declension into self-annihilating solipsism.

The problem of solipsism was one that exercised Wittgenstein throughout his life.[45] Many readers of *Philosophical Investigations*, such as Anthony Kenny, Lars Hertzberg, and Terry Eagleton, hold that Wittgenstein argues that a private language is impossible because language requires public criteria of use.[46] Terry Eagleton makes the point thus:

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[43] See Dante, *Inferno*, XXXIV.

[44] See Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (London: Fontana Press, 1997), 8–11, and Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, 35–44.

[45] For an interesting essay which gives an account of Wittgenstein's thoughts on solipsism and applies them to readings of autobiographical writing, by Rousseau, Frederick Douglas and Siegfried Sassoon among others, see Garry L. Hagberg, "Autobiographical Consciousness: Wittgenstein, Private Experience, and the 'Inner Picture'", in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, 2004), 228–250.

[46] See Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 141–159, and Lars Hertzberg, "Language-Games and Private Language", in *Wittgenstein: Key Concepts*, ed. Kelly Dean Jolley (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 41–50. For a famous and idiosyncratic book-length study, see Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein: On Rules and Private Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), esp. 107–109.

> Meaning belongs to language, and language distils the sense we collectively make of our world. It is not free-floating. Rather, it is bound up with the ways we go to work on reality — with a society's values, traditions, assumptions, institutions and material conditions. In the end, we speak as we do because of the things we do.[47]

In effect, the very nature of language requires cooperation between language-users, and so it both presupposes community and preserves it.[48] By contrast, Mankind in the tavern, which is ideally a social space, does not wish to converse with others. Instead, he uses the bare minimum of linguistic resources available to him merely to order and insult. Beyond this point, there is no private language by which the socially, and that is to say, the existentially isolated self can speak of or know itself. At the end of the play, indeed, Mankind refers back to himself at this point as having been "bestyally dysposyde" (814). In other words, his disordered actions reduced him to the state of a brute animal, bent on unthinking self-gratification, which is alien to proper human nature. In this way, he became dumb.[49] From that state of inarticulate silence, there remains only the collapse of being, which is the self-abnegation of suicide and perdition. (In Dante's *Inferno*, the suicides forfeit human form and are reduced to an ignoble vegetal nature.)[50] Mankind's final, terse utterance, before Mercy's saving intervention, is: "A rope, a rope, a rope! I am not worthy" (801). After this, he is instructed by New Gyse to imitate his example as the vice shows him what to do: "Lo, Mankynde! do as I do; this is thi new gyse. / Gyff the roppe just to [thy] neke" (805–806). Thus, in despairing silence at the limit and end of language, Mankind is urged to copy the vice's actions and in mute, unthinking imitation damn himself.

At this point, however, Mankind is rescued by the sudden intervention of the representative of divine grace. Where the vices outmaneuvered Mercy earlier in the play, by interrupting him and turning his words to mishmash, he now interrupts them, by scourging their throats with a whip. First, they are reduced to bestial cries and exclamations: "Qweke, qweke, qweke! Alass, my

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[47] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 145.
[48] Augustine holds the same opinion in *On Christian Teaching*, 36–37.
[49] See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I.25.
[50] See Dante, *Inferno*, XIII.

throtт!... / ...Alasse, my wesant!" (809–811).[51] Next, they are silenced, and so, finally, they are thwarted. Here, in the end, Mercy takes up a violent *argumentum ad baculum*, in this case a *flagellum Dei*, and turns it against vice in order to save Mankind's soul.[52] His intervention restores the institution of language to its proper order and end, which is cooperation and community. Hence, Mankind is enabled to rejoin humanity and thereby relate properly to himself, his neighbor, and God.

6. Conclusion

Mankind is a slick and uproarious entertainment, which is a sophisticated mix of sermon and game, verbal wit and bravura. At the same time, it is an existential drama that emphasizes man's moral responsibility in a dangerous, fallen world. Along with John of Salisbury and other medieval thinkers, the *Mankind* playwright recognizes the central role language plays in the proper exercise of human nature. The human being is both a rule-making and rule-following animal, and grammar —the codification of communally agreed rules for the use of words— constitutes the fundamental hinge into the human soul. By looking through the lens of Wittgenstein's late philosophy, in particular, the concepts of the language-game and form of life, I have shown how the medieval playwright describes the grammar of the human soul in the fall and redemption of Mankind. The vices' attack on grammar in the play, which is supervised by the devil of mangled words, Titivillus, thickens and dislocates language. Their verbal exuberance and excess both dazzles and encourages Mankind to follow their example in action and speech. Thereby he is led away from the pure and prestige register of Mercy to the vulgar, monosyllabic ejaculations of the tavern, "Stow, statt, stow!", to the desolate silence of despair, which is the life of a dumb and destroyed beast. Since it is a faculty proper to human beings, language proves both a target for and signifier of vice and so dehumanization. To break the rules of our language-games, that

[51] Compare Chaucer's onomatopoeic imitations of the calls of the goose, cuckoo and duck, respectively, in *The Parliament of Fowls*: "'Kek kek! kokkow! quek! quek!'" (l. 499), in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[52] For a discussion of Mercy's violent attack on the vices and the significance of his *bales* or scourge, see Chambers, "Weapons of Conversion", 2–8.

is, to fall into loose and idle language, is to renounce membership of human community —the bedrock form of life of gregarious human being. By his breaking of those rules, Mankind falls into wordless silence and the brink of both physical and spiritual death. Hence, the philological lesson of the play looms large, and it is one that Wittgenstein would no doubt endorse as the epigraph to this essay makes clear: If you blithely embrace nonsense, and thereby fall into unclarity and confusion, then, as Mercy warns from the very beginning, "Thys idyll language ye xall repent" (147).

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