"WORK:" THE SHIFT FROM EMPATHY TO SYMPATHY IN *THE YORK PLAY OF THE CRUCIFIXION*

Abstract: The raising of the cross in the *The York Play of the Crucifixion* shifts the empathic connection of the audience with the soldiers to a sympathetic bond with Christ. The mirror neuron system and theory of the mind have been used to define and draw a distinction between the concepts of empathy and sympathy. Given that Bacon's theory of perception provides a historical frame of reference for such emotional responses, this paper analyzes the language, the props and the staging of the play to explore the nature of the audience's relationship with the characters. The conclusion reached is that the immediate impact of the raising of the cross has been largely disregarded: it is the end of the soldiers' work that brings about the shift from empathy to sympathy. Work is not only the alienating force that enables the soldiers to carry out the crucifixion with indifference, but also the main connection between the spectators, the characters and the actors. **Keywords:** empathy, sympathy, York, pageant, play, mystery cycle, crucifixion, audience, spectators, affective piety, compassion, work.

Resumen: La elevación de la cruz en *La Obra de la Crucifixión de York* transforma la conexión empática del público con los soldados en un lazo de simpatía con Cristo. El sistema de neuronas espejo y la teoría de la mente nos han servido para definir y distinguir los conceptos de empatía y simpatía. Dado que la teoría de la percepción de Bacon nos proporciona un marco de referencia histórico para tales respuestas emocionales, este artículo analiza la lengua, la escenografía y la puesta en escena de la obra con objeto de explorar la naturaleza de la relación entre el público y los personajes. Se ha llegado a la conclusión de que la consecuencia inmediata de la elevación de la cruz ha pasado en gran medida desapercibida: es la conclusión del trabajo de los soldados lo que comporta la susodicha transformación de la empatía en simpatía. El trabajo no es solo la fuerza alienante que hace posible que los soldados lleven a cabo la crucifixión con indiferencia, sino también la principal conexión entre los espectadores, los personajes y los actores. **Palabras clave:** empatía, simpatía, York, representación, obra de teatro, ciclo de misterios, crucifixión, público, espectadores, piedad afectiva, compasión, trabajo.

HE YORK PLAY OF THE CRUCIFIXION STRIKES THE MODERN reader with its indifferent treatment of violence. The crucifixion of Christ is presented as a typical task in the soldiers' everyday work: they need to fit his body to the holes in the cross. While most critics have explored the audience's response to the play as an act of affective piety, some have pointed out that the depiction of the soldiers as ordinary workingmen might have enabled the public's identification with them. This essay aims to

reconcile both perspectives and draw a distinction between the nature of the spectators' empathy with Christ's torturers and their sympathy for Christ. Since it is difficult to presume the simultaneous coexistence of both affective responses within the audience, some critics have established the raising of the cross as the turning point in the play. The moment has been analyzed as a visual sign for the change in the tone within the scene, but its most immediate implication has been largely disregarded: the raising of the cross represents the end of the soldiers' task. The soldiers' focus on work makes them disregard the brutality of their actions. At the same time, the condition of worker prompts the identification between audience and the soldiers: only when the task is completed does the audience get detached from the soldiers and start feeling sympathy for Christ.

The disturbance caused by the unusual treatment of the crucifixion has probably led most critics to dismiss the possibility of the audience's identification with the soldiers. Thus, most scholars have argued that the public empathizes with the figure of Christ on the cross in an act of affective piety. Specifically, Clifford Davidson in his *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval Britain* claims, "the audience was invited to be sympathetic and to identify with him" (2007: 151). Similarly, Robert S. Sturges argues, "the spectators are to [...] make an empathetic connection between street and stage, between spectator and performer, in an act of affective piety" (1992: 43). In contrast to this general idea of empathy with Christ, Pamela King refers to the audience's conspiracy with the "four local workmen" (2006: 144) and its confrontation with the cross by the end of the play. Greg Walker, another supporter of the identification between the public and the soldiers, goes further by claiming that the audience shares responsibility for the crucifixion and is redeemed by Christ's sacrifice: "so each of [the members of the public] shares also in God's forgiveness, granted freely and unprompted through grace at the redemption" (2005: 376). Finally, Jill Stevenson reconciles both views when she provides an insightful

explanation of the empathetic relationship of the spectators with the soldiers and their sympathetic distance from Christ: "after the cross is raised, the pageant exerts direct control over the empathic relationship between spectator and actor" and "the spectator maintain[s] a safe sympathetic distance from Christ's body on the cross" (2010: 147).

In order to understand the different views proposed by scholars on *The York Play of the Crucifixion* and its audience, it is necessary first to clarify the difference between empathy and sympathy. In his book on visual piety, David Morgan defines these two possible responses of the believers to the image of the divine: "empathy— projecting oneself into the situation of another—and sympathy —the correspondence or harmony of feelings among people— are similar emotional processes, but ultimately quite different in their ethical and social consequences" (1998: 59). Morgan qualifies this general definition by adding that empathy and sympathy are heterogeneous concepts whose configuration and interrelation varies throughout history. By the same token, Bruce McConachie, in his *Cognitive Approach to Spectating in Theatre*, describes in further detail the nature of the cognitive process implied by what colloquial language calls identification with the characters. According to him, in order for the spectators to project themselves into the emotions of the characters, they "must simulate the experiences of actors/characters in their own mind" (2009: 66). Gallese, Morris Eagle, and Paolo Migone hold that this simulation of someone else's behaviour generates empathic understanding. In turn, "rather than stepping into an actor/character's shoes, sympathy involves the spectator in projecting her or his own beliefs and feelings onto the stage figure" (McConachie 2009: 99). Therefore, in the theatrical event, empathy is a simulation of the character's behaviour that predisposes the spectatorship to understand the characters' emotions, whereas sympathy implies feeling with the characters onstage. Even though, as Morgan states, both empathy and sympathy are possible responses of believers to

the figure of the divine, my analysis will show that, in *The York Play of the Crucifixion*, Jesus hinders the empathy of the audience and elicits its sympathy.

Even though the term *empathy* belongs to contemporary cognitive psychology,[1] the medieval discourse already depicts similar emotional responses. Jill Stevenson studies the mirror theory developed by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his group in Parma in conjunction with the most influential ideas on perception in the Middle Ages, most notably Roger Bacon's conceptualization of vision. According to Rizzolatti's theory, the mirror neurons fire both when primates, humans in particular, act and when they observe an action performed by another:

> Mirror neurons are a particular class of visuomotor neurons, originally discovered in area F5 of the monkey premotor cortex, that discharge both when the monkey does a particular action and when it observes another individual (monkey or human) doing a similar action. (2004: 169)

Christian Keysers and Valeria Gazzola show that "in analogy to actions and sensations, also the emotions of other individuals are transformed into a representation of the observer's own emotions" (2009: 23). Stevenson surveys different models that explain how we attribute mental states to others and concludes that "empathy is not an emotion, but is instead a precondition that leads to other emotional responses" (2010: 25). Thus, she follows McConachie's view that empathy is a simulation that allows spectatorship to potentially engage with the characters/actors' experiences onstage.

From antiquity to the Middle Ages, theories on visual perception were based on the physical connection between the object perceived and the perceptive subject via a transparent substance called *species*. The medieval models of vision derive from two main opposing

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[1] According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word empathy comes from the German *Einfühlung*, first used in this sense by Theodor Lipps in his *Leitfaden der Psychologie* (1903).

theories: the intromission schools proposed that the *species* of the object impresses upon the eye, while the extramission theorists hold that it is the light proceeding from the eye that produces vision. In his *Opus Majus*, Bacon subscribes the intromission school as a perceptual model, but, since he claims that every natural thing has to complete its action by its own *species*, it is necessary for vision to exert its power. If the *species* of the object modifies the medium and reaches the eyes, what is the power of vision? Vision "proceeds through the locale of the visual pyramid, altering and ennobling the medium and rendering it incommensurate with sight; and thus it prepares for the approach of the visible object" (Bridges 1897: 49). Even though Bacon is far from defining the nature of the relationship between the object and the subject in the terms of empathy, the fact that the power of eyes consists on "ennobling" the object's species and even distributing one's thoughts and personality (see Stewart 2003) implies an assimilation between the viewing subject, the spectators in this particular case, and the viewed object, the characters on stage. The Baconian synthesis, which combines intromission and extramission theories of perception by granting agency both to the visible object and to the eye, was influencial until the 15th century. According to Stevenson, the impact of understanding perception as a physical exchange is that "many medieval theories maintained that sensation also engaged the soul and had ethical and spiritual consequences" (2010: 26). Stevenson notes that this medieval idea that perception has an effect on the perceiver's body and mind is somehow paralleled by Gallese's claim that the simulation of the actions performed by the observed gives way to an empathic understanding and eventually to an emotional response.

However, this empathic understanding is by no means invariable, but it may depend, among other factors, on the relationship between the spectators and the performers: in 1975, Dennis Krebs conducted an experiment which showed that "perception of similarity facilitates empathic emotional reactions" (1975: 1134). According to Richard

B. Dobson, the fact that "between 1300 and 1350 no less than 75% of York's citizens were given a trade ascription when their names were entered in the great York Freemen's Register" (1997: 98) reveals that from the late 13th century the identity of the majority of York citizens was mostly defined by their trade. Therefore, the majority of the spectatorship most likely shared with the characters the identity of workmen. During the crucifixion, the soldiers engage in a conversation about the practical problems that their task poses in a colloquial register. The dialogue narrates their actions ("that cord full kindly can I knit," 133)[2] while Christ is lying on the stage out of the spectators' sight: they are concerned about the reward they will get from a well done task ("if we schall any worshippe wine," 14), argue ("why carpe ye so? Faste on a cord / and tugge him to, by toppe and taile. / Yea, thou comaundis this lightly as a lorde," 113–115) and complain about the effort the task involves ("for, grete harme I have hente: / My schuldir is in sounder!" 189–190). If the conversation sounds familiar to any modern reader minimally acquainted with the life of a labourer, all the more so to an audience that belongs to a society organized in craft guilds: they are a group of workers struggling to complete their task in the best possible way. Thus, the colloquial register, which was probably similar to the spectators' everyday language and their conversation topics, which characterize them as workmen, trigger a "horizontal relationship" of empathy in the audience.

By contrast, Christ's more formal language originates from the Seven Last Words of the Gospels and the liturgy for Holy Week (Bevington 1975: 569). The first time that He speaks, "Christ, as in the *Meditationes*, makes a solemn offering of Himself to the Father in a sacrificial speech which suddenly puts the action into its divine perspective" (Woolf 1980: 261). On the second occasion, Christ first complains to "al men that walkis, by waye or strete" (253) and then asks his father for forgiveness for "thes men that dois me pine"

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[2] Quotations from the text taken from Bevington 1975.

(1980: 260). According to Rosemary Woolf, "O vos omnes" and the first word from the cross are the sources for this last statement (1980: 262). In Richard Beadle's words, Christ's words "call forth the emotional associations of the medieval liturgy" (1994: 102), even if they are delivered in English rather than in Latin, the language of the church. Thus, the contents of the speech and the solemnity establish a *vertical relationship* with the spectators, who feel devotion and sympathy for the figure of Christ.

While *The York Play of Crucifixion* does not require many props (a cross and a few tools to secure Christ), the power of the play is dependent on them. The deictic references to the tools used ("here is a stubbe," 102 or "that corde," 133) actualize their presence onstage and reinforce the manual nature of the work. Moreover, the narration of the actions may have been accompanied by sounds of hammers and ropes. According to Christian Keysers *et al.*, "'audiovisual mirror neurons' [...] represent actions independently of whether these actions are performed, heard or seen" (2003: 628). Therefore, as pointed out by Stevenson, the sounds must have favoured the audience's simulation of the soldiers' actions and thus their empathy for them. By contrast, Christ is mainly silent before the raising of the cross and most likely out of the audience's sight as He is "effectively invisible beneath the rim of the wagon for much of the action" (Walker 2000: 375). Therefore, the stage is dominated by the soldiers' conversation that refers to Christ simply as one more element of their work. The raising of the cross represents the turning point of the play: when "the physical limits of his body are invaded and broken so that He might conform to the predetermined, emblematic shape" (Sturges 1992: 44), the quotidian scene banishes to leave room for Christ's words. He is no longer the object of the soldiers' work and conversation and becomes the center of the stage and the speaker. The references to the beholders in his final statements ("al men that walkis, by waye or strete," 253 and "thes men that dois me pine," 260) are sufficiently ambiguous to refer both to the fictional attendants

of the crucifixion and to the actual spectators, who merge, for a moment, in the theatrical event.

Thus, the characterization of the soldiers as workmen and the colloquial register of their language triggers a *horizontal relationship* of empathy, as the spectators place themselves in the soldiers' shoes, whereas the solemnity of Christ's speech establishes a *vertical relationship* of sympathy, as the audience suffers for the devotional figure. These metaphoric definitions of the relationship between the characters and the spectators become patent in the staging of the play. Initially the soldiers occupy the center of the stage, as Christ disappears first from the ears and then from the view of the public. When the cross is raised, the visual focus is displaced and Christ becomes the center of attention. However, He does not take the place of his tormentors on the stage, but rather He is situated above them and therefore above the spectators that have so far identified with them. Additionally, Christ appears as a static and mostly silent figure, as an image contrasting with the dynamism implied by the soldiers' task. In Stevenson's words, "this dramatic choice makes spectators conscious that the pageant's primary dramatic action is now their own act of looking, an act understood in the Middle Ages to be alive with dynamic inter-corporeal movement and impact" (2010: 146). From this new position, Christ elicits an "inter-corporeal" response in the spectators that is different from the relationship of identification that had connected the street and the soldiers' stage up to this point.

How does Christ's vertical relationship with the audience hinder empathy and elicit sympathy? The suspension of disbelief, which had drawn the public into the story as conspirers, breaks when they become attendants of the crucifixion. As Sturges has noted, the action of this pageant is both the crucifixion and the creation of a spectacle (1992: 42). The location of the spectators at the foot of the cross, as well as Christ's speech, turns them into the beholders of this spectacle. If the audience performs the role of a spectator within the fictional work, it can no longer simulate the behaviour of

other characters and reach an empathic understanding. Moreover, the solemnity and the contents of Christ's words both distance Him from the audience and establish Him as a figure of devotion. To begin with, by addressing all men that walk by way or street, He affirms the otherness of the public and shifts to traditional ritual language. The monologue continues and Christ asks God to forgive these men that torment Him and let their sins never be visited upon them. As these lines aid the audience in reflecting upon their own transgressions and the redemptive power of this sacrifice, Christ establishes a special connection with God and becomes a figure of devotion for the spectators.

While distance hinders the empathy of the audience, it does not necessarily prevent a sympathetic response to "the live display of a brutalized (medieval, probably layperson) body on the cross" (Stevenson 2010: 146). After the 13th century, the image of Christ as a triumphant Saviour was progressively replaced by a brutalized human figure. As He loses his hieratic divinity and becomes a vulnerable human, Christ's new resemblance with the believers evokes an emotional response in them. Thus, the rise of compassionate devotion to the suffering of Christ becomes, in Jack A. W. Bennett's words, "one of the greatest revolutions in feeling that Europe has ever witnessed" (1982: 7). *Compassio*, the Latin cognate for the Greek term *sympathy* (συμπάθεια), implies feeling with an individual, but the sharing of Christ's suffering varies greatly among the different accounts. For instance, in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus,* Nicholas Love invites the readers to be witnesses, behold the Lord and feel pity for Him "þat is reuerently to be hade in sorouful compassion" (Sargent 1992: 166); the word "reuerently" reveals that the author encourages a distant compassion for the divine figure. In turn, *The Book of Margery Kempe* describes the speaker's powerful reactions before the crucified body of Christ as follows: "beheldyng the Passyon of owr Lord entryd hir mende, wherthrow sche gan meltyn and al to relentyn þe terys of pyté and compassyown" (46.2607). Stevenson

interprets Kempe's physical manifestations as the consequence of "an imaginative transposition" (2010: 142): the Lord enters her, she simulates his experience and feels compassion for Him. However, as Love's account reveals, the sympathy for the brutalized body of Christ does not necessarily involve the simulation of his experience.

Susan Feagin's explanation of the nature of the sympathetic response in fiction will help us to understand the nature of the audience's sympathy for Christ in *The York Play of the Crucifixion*:

> The degree to which one empathizes depends on the depth of the simulation. A sympathetic response, however, does not involve simulating the mental activity and processes of the protagonist; it instead requires having feelings or emotions that are in concert with the interests or desires the sympathizer (justifiably) attributes to the protagonist. (1996: 114)

Since sympathy is not necessarily preceded by simulation and empathic understanding, the audience of the play might have had emotions and feelings for Christ without projecting themselves onto Him. If Aronson-Lehavi is right in encouraging a contextual reading of the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* and the mystery cycles, the tract would confirm our conclusions about the public's devotion and sympathy for Christ in *The York Crucifixion*. The tract addresses numerous arguments advocated by the defenders of the play, one of which is that "men and wymen seinge the passioun of Crist and of his seintis, ben movyd to compassion and devocion, wepinge biter teris, thanne they ben not scorninge of God but worschiping" (Davidson 1981: 98). Aronson-Lehavi's main support for the link between the treatise and the mystery plays is the evident application of this argument to the Passion plays. The compassion of the audience for the passion of Christ results in their worship: the audience feels sympathy for Christ as a figure of devotion.

The raising of the cross has been repeatedly identified as the play's turning point and the religious implications of the shift from empathy to sympathy have been convincingly interpreted by critics as a way of enhancing the believer's responsibility in the crucifixion.

Nevertheless, this significant moment also leads to an immediate consequence that has been largely disregarded by scholars: the raising of the cross implies the completion of the soldiers' work, the activity that has been the center of the action up to this point, as the sixteen appearances of the word "work" demonstrate. Not only does the shared identity of worker elicit the empathy with the soldiers, but the presence of work is also the alienating force that allows the soldiers' apathetic exercise of violence. The torturers' focus on their work detaches them from the brutality of their actions, as empathy momentarily blinds the audience to the significance of Christ's sacrifice for their redemption. Only when the work is completed and the cross is raised is the soldiers' conversation reduced to mockery:

> 1 *Miles.* We, harke! He jangelis like a jay.
> 2 *Miles.* Me thinke he pratis like a py.
> 3 *Miles.* He has been doand all this day, doing so
> And made grete meving of mercy. (265–268)

As Walker explains, the soldiers' inability to acknowledge the significance of Christ's sacrifice characterizes them as "unredeemable sinners" (2005: 376). The conclusion of the task breaks the audience's main link to Christ's torturers, whose scornful words do not evidence any kind of sympathy for Christ's brutalized body.

The York plays were staged by guilds whose craft usually had some form of a relationship with the plays they performed; for example, the play of *The Crucifixion* is put up by the pinners and, according to Walker, the tilethatchers, who were "responsible for roof-building," perform *The Nativity* as they would probably display their work in the representation of the stable (2000: 38). Therefore, the concept of work establishes one final significant connection between the characters and the actors. To begin with, the fact that the actors were actually local workmen reinforces the empathy between the spectators and the soldiers, but the relation between the pinners (the actors) and the soldiers (the characters) has further significance. Martin Stevens claims that the pinners were "makers

of pins, fishhooks, mousetraps and other small metallic objects"
and because "clearly, they were associated in some way with the
nailing process itself" (1987: 30), their trade was not favoured by
the connection. According to him, the direct association between
the pinners and the soldiers is a way of reminding the audience that
every man is blameworthy for the death of Christ.

Furthermore, the presentation of Christ's torturers as dedicated
workmen capable of carrying out such brutal task apathetically
conveys a negative view of work in general. In this regard, Kathleen
Ashley proposes that by displacing "the concern of craftsmanship"
(1998: 21) from the guild society to the history of salvation, the
play becomes a popularization that allows the audience to explore
the idea of work:

> When the skills specific to the pinners are taken out of the
> normal and everyday world, when a dedication to craft is taken
> out of the mundane and put into the perspective of sacred
> history, the skills and craft commitment can be examined in
> the abstract. (1998: 21)

According to her, dramatization allows the York audience to reflect
on their socioeconomic situation.

My subsequent analysis aims to explore the context of the
play in order to find a possible source for this implicit judgment
of work ethics. The fact that the crucifixion was put up by a
professional guild (i.e., an association united precisely by work)
does not undermine the possibility that the play might be indirectly
reflecting remnants of the Church's centuries-old negative view of
work. In his book *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*,
Jacques Le Goff wonders "how often the Middle Ages must have
witnessed the inner drama of men anxiously wondering whether
they were really hastening towards damnation because they were
engaging in a trade suspect in the eyes of the Church" (1980: 111).
The socioeconomic revolution that took place between the 9th and
the 13th century brought a tension between the decaying tripartite
system of *oratores* (clergy), *bellatores* (knights) and *laboratores*

(workmen), and the emerging urban and professional world. Le Goff explains that the association between toil and the lower stratum led the Church, which occupied a high position in this hierarchical division, to discredit physical labour. Thus, the church channels the negative view of work in two main ways during the Middle Ages. On the one hand, as defenders of the *justum pretium*, they rejected the guild system because it established monopoly and eliminated competition. On the other hand, the church had harboured suspicion for professional trades for a good number of centuries, as Charlemagne's list of illicit professions in his *De Admonitio generalis* evidences (Mordek, Zechiel-Eckes & Glatthaar 2012: 230–233).

Even though the economic and social revolution between the 9th and the 13th centuries eventually changed the church's ideas on physical labour and our extant text of *The York Crucifixion* dates probably from 1422 (Beadle 1994: 101), the transition from the tripartite schema to a world of professions must have been a gradual one. According to Le Goff, there is one development from the 10th and the 13th century that has not been conscientiously studied: the advance of nones has usually been explained as a consequence of the monk's impatience for meal time. However, he postulates that noon was advanced because it was the time for the urban worker to have the midday rest. In *The York Play of the Crucifixion*, the soldier's claim that "He muste be dede nedelingis by none" (15) indicates the incorporation of the subdivision of labour time of a professional world. Only when a socioeconomic change has already taken place, can people really notice the consequences in their quotidian life and become aware of the transformation. Even if, as Dobson notes, the York cycle was organized by the local authorities of the city, the representatives of the new urban lifestyle, the pageants were put up by craft guilds. By portraying their everyday life, they (probably unconsciously) show work on a negative light. It is impossible to know for sure whether the Church's ideas against work were still relevant at the time of the York cycle, but it is not unreasonable

to suppose that the play might be reflecting a concern about the developing urban and professional lifestyle.

Therefore, work plays a fundamental role in establishing a connection between the world of the audience and the world of the characters. On the one hand, the fictional piece presents a negative view of work in general by portraying it as the alienating force that enables the soldiers' indifferent exercise of violence. On the other hand, by being the center of the action and conversation, work prompts an empathic relationship between the spectators and Christ's tormenters. Thus, the play skilfully manages to make the audience share responsibility for Christ's sacrifice. However, when the work is completed and the cross is raised, the public realizes their fault and detaches from the soldiers, who remain sinful, to be redeemed by Christ. Work triggers a shift from empathy to sympathy in *The York Play of the Crucifixion* that serves as a powerful device for the indoctrination of the audience in the Christian religion.

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