

THE RELIGIOUS SENSE OF HUMOUR IN THE ENGLISH MYSTERY PLAYS

In memory of Patricia Shaw's
love's labour leavened with laughter

"O Jesu ungentill, thi joie is in japes."
Pilate's Son in the York Play *Christ Before*
Pilate I: The Dream of Pilate's Wife, line 389

Abstract

Humour is sometimes considered incompatible with religious or spiritual concerns, a modern view which has affected our understanding of medieval drama, considering its use of comic elements as simply a device to sugar the religious pill for secular audiences, or else an alien, subversive interference with the doctrinal message inserted by bold playwrights. On the contrary, a humorous strain existed within Christian narratives from early, which was incorporated along with popular traditions such as proverbs, puns, or comic characters and folktales in the writing and performance of the mystery plays. Satire, parody, irony and sarcasm can be found in many of them, often used in ambiguous, sophisticated ways. The human comedy was at the service of the divine comedy of progression from despair to joy, but also interacted with it playfully. **Keywords:** medieval drama, the mystery cycles, humour, comedy, popular culture, medieval laughter, comic discourse.

Resumen

A veces el humor se considera incompatible con las preocupaciones religiosas o espirituales, una visión moderna que ha afectado nuestro entendimiento del teatro medieval, considerando su uso de elementos cómicos simplemente como una manera de endulzar la píldora religiosa a auditorios seculares, o bien como una interferencia ajena y subversiva del mensaje doctrinal insertada por atrevidos dramaturgos. Por el contrario, dentro de las narrativas cristianas ha existido una vena humorística desde muy temprano, incorporada a la escritura y representación de los misterios junto con tradiciones populares como los proverbios, los juegos de palabras, los personajes cómicos y los cuentos populares. En muchos de ellos se pueden encontrar sátira, parodia, ironía y sarcasmo, con frecuencia usados de manera ambigua y sofisticada. La comedia humana estaba al servicio de la divina comedia de la progresión desde la desesperación a la alegría, pero también interactuaba con ella juguetonamente. **Palabras clave:** teatro medieval, ciclos de misterios, humor, comedia, cultura popular, risa medieval, discurso cómico.

I INTRODUCTION

TO SPEAK OF RELIGIOUS HUMOUR SOUNDS LIKE A CONTRADICTION in terms. All religions are concerned with ultimate human questions, and these are invariably regarded as solemn and grave. An a priori incompatibility between religion and sense of humour has been forcibly argued (Saroglou 2002). The present article aims to

analyse how religious purposes blend with comic elements for dramatic effect in Medieval English theatre, providing humour with a religious sense.

2 THE PRESENCE OF HUMOUR IN CHRISTIAN STORIES

What we may find out about Medieval humour will necessarily depend on textual evidence above all, although there is also precious information of how some texts were performed. As the main textual source for Christianity was (and is) the Bible,¹ we may begin by asking, with Friedman (2002), “Is there humor in the Hebrew Bible?”, and draw an analogy between the reasons why people cannot find witticisms in the Bible and why we might also fail to find it in the Biblical mystery plays: their Middle English idiom (and occasional code-switching into Latin and French); our expectations of not finding facetiousness in religious texts; our lack of knowledge of the cycle context or the Biblical source, preventing us from noticing the humour by comparison and contrast, and the dark quality of some of the wisecracks, which may not be found funny today. Yet even with a scant knowledge of the story context and a glossary, one may smile in complicity when the Demon in the Chester *Adam and Eve* (ll. 187–188) says that “That woman is forbidden to doe / For any thinge she will thereto.”

After the Bible, the other key narrative model for medieval drama was hagiography, both the *passio* (focusing on the saint’s martyrdom) and the *vita* (on the life and miracles). Curtius (1955: 608–9), discussing examples of how pagans, demons, and villains, no matter how threatening they show themselves, are ridiculed, unmasked, and defeated by the saints in Latin hagiographies, concludes that humorous elements were part of the style of saints’ lives in the Middle Ages; they were implicit in the

¹ It should be borne in mind, however, that in the Middle Ages biblical literature included many apocryphal texts that were subsequently excluded from the canon. For example, the cherry-tree episode in the *Ludus Coventriae*, where Joseph’s cuckold complex prompts him to retort to pregnant Mary’s whim for a cherry, “lete hy pluk yow cheryes [that] begatt yow with childe”, is ultimately based on the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which was excluded from the authorized version of the Bible. Yet this did not prevent the story from remaining popular in the oral tradition, especially in the form of the ballad known as “The Cherry-Tree Carol” (F.J. Child’s no. 54).

matter itself, and we may be sure that the public expected them. The genre's comic substance is confirmed by its appearance in Old English saints' lives. Analyses of humour in Old English literature tend to address chiefly its use in the Riddles, probably for the same reason discussions of Middle English humour prefer to focus on Chaucer's fabliaux: it is, in both cases, secular, sexual fun, with few or no religious implications. Every scholarly overview of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the comic, such as Bueno Alonso's (2004), acknowledges the significance of humour in hagiography, implying its faint cultural links with the heroic "hleahorwera", the hearty laughter at the mead-hall that *The Seafarer* (line 20) remembers. Indeed, the focus of such surveys is far more often on secular writing.²

The continuity of humorousness from the Old to the Middle English period was expounded by Patricia Shaw (2000), who discerned the most remarkable ingredients of humour in the mystery plays: its popular basis, its misogyny, its use of sarcasm and grim irony, and its presence even where modern readers might least expect it. For example, in the Brome MS *Abraham and Isaac*, Abraham tells his son to prepare a fire to sacrifice a lamb in thanksgiving when, after a prolonged emotional tension, God has released the old man from the duty to kill his own child: Isaac, on second thoughts, is afraid to turn his back and bend down to blow the fire, in case his father still strikes him down: "But, father, wyll I stowppe down lowe, / Ye wyll not kyll me with yowre sword, I trowe?" (377–78). This is welcome comic relief after mounting dramatic pathos, and a few lines later a Doctor of Divinity will enter and hammer out the forceful doctrinal message. Nonetheless, some readers (especially modern ones) might share the boy's innocent doubt, questioning ironically whether one could ever trust such a God-fearing father. This is, of course, reading against the grain, and the mystery plays as a whole, including the comic elements in them, were ostensibly written to support, not to question, the orthodox meaning, despite the power of humour to create ambivalence and (even unwittingly) challenge orthodoxy.

² For example, in Wilcox (2000), only two out of eight essays deal exclusively with religious humour, particularly hagiographic.

3 THE MEDIEVAL SENSE OF COMEDY

The official Church did not always disapprove of laughter. While the early Church seems to have condemned it,³ by the thirteenth century the University of Paris was celebrating an annual conference on whether Jesus had laughed or not (Le Goff 1997: 43). Folly had begun to be used as a powerful antidote to human pretension (Stott 2005: 47), and religious festivals such as the Feast of Fools were a clear example of “the reconciliation of laughter with religion” (Stott 2005: 130). This ended, according to Bakhtin, in the sixteenth century, with the humanist separation of the serious from the comic (Stott 2005: 132).

Umberto Eco’s best-selling novel *The Name of the Rose* (1983) has contributed a great deal to the myth that medieval official culture persecuted and repressed humour, but it is plausibly based on the fact that medieval culture lacked a critical paradigm for the writing of comedy. Except for the examples of comedies by Terence and Plautus, classical comedy was scarcely known in medieval schools. Chaucer had a distinct idea of tragedy which he defined precisely and then repeated to exhaustion in *The Monk’s Tale*: a story which begins in prosperity and ends in adversity. Comedy, which Chaucer never defined but practised abundantly in his fabliaux, was simply the opposite.⁴ Therefore a sense of literary humour had to be created anew by blending popular traditions with Christian theology. In Dante’s theological sense both the cycles as a whole and the individual plays could be called divine comedies, or, as Jack (1989) prefers to name them, “comic progressions”: “Death has been conquered on the cross. That is the basic reason for a ‘progressive’ rather than a ‘laughter-focused’ definition of comedy dominating in the medieval period” (1989: 11). In this broad sense the Christian mass, the Easter liturgy, and a mystery play such as *Abraham and Isaac* were all comic (Elliott 1972: 165). Laughter is

³ See, for example, Stott (2005: 128–29). However, Guverich (1988: 188–205) provides plenty of evidence of very humorous Latin prose, particularly dealing with the ambivalence of demons.

⁴ In Dante’s writing, “comedy begins with sundry adverse conditions, but ends happily” (Minnis & Scott eds. 1988: 461), a definition possibly derived from William of Conches’ (c. 1125) commentary on Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and ultimately from St Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*. The doctrinal basis for such progression is in the *Gospel of St Luke*, 6.21: “Blessed are ye that weep now; for ye shall laugh.”

“inessential” (Jack 1989: 53), so that “comic characters and situations in the Miracle Cycles remain simple” (71). The sophistication lay in embedding the temporal laughter within the eternal comedy without allowing Satan to steal the show from God (14).

As medieval playwrights had few theoretical models to follow, humour would arrive rather spontaneously, from the experience of performance and from popular forms of entertainment, the rich cultural layer of laughter that Bakhtin described so compellingly. They were eventually able to combine, often as successfully as in the Wakefield Master’s *Secunda Pastorum*, the antinomies of the comic progression of providential history and earthly humour: “the religious *commedia* becomes comedy by being modulated in the course of assimilating to itself ‘the other’ comic spirit springing from the substantial earth of moral limitation” (Ross 1972: 211). The earthly comedy of chance might temporarily jar the order of the divine comedy, “but it is never permitted to disintegrate the rule of a provident God” (Garvie 2007: 62). If, as Bakhtin pointed out, the Church tolerated the comic in daily life to compensate for the official seriousness (Bajtin 1987: 70–71), the role of humour in the mystery plays may have been partly similar. However, the devilish ambivalence of laughter, which Bakhtin celebrated, was not always so easy to control on stage.

Bakhtin’s view is very plausible in a general, cultural sense, but it may be somewhat flawed when applied to particular texts, as well as when it comes to defining more exactly what we mean by “popular.” Hans-Jürgen Diller notes the shortcomings of “any “participatory” or “Carnavalesque” interpretation of the Passion plays to describe their complex sense of humour (1988: 58). In a later article Diller, like Levey had done long before implicitly (1981: 88), uses Kolve’s arguments against the “Bakhtinite” case. Kolve distinguished the rigorous view which regarded laughter as entirely unacceptable from a “realist” view which supported man’s right to honest, measured merry-making (Diller 2002: 3–4). From this perspective Kolve discusses the well-known petition of the Masons in the York civic records asking the authorities to relieve them of the play of *Fergus*, where the dismembering of a Jew was so literally horrible that it became ludicrous, because it occasioned unseemly laughter rather than piety (Kolve 1966: 131). He contrasts this with the “horror of the Passion” plays, where the deeply shocking action does not become intolerable because it “is

controlled by constantly breaking the flow of its action” with the jokes played by Christ’s executioners (Kolve 1966: 199–200). Kolve’s approach, though often speculative in trying to ascertain the complex ways in which humour actually worked in performance, is probably the only one capable of finding out what medieval audiences thought comic or offensive, as distinct from modern readers’ interpretations. In a ground-breaking study which does not accept the tacit assumption that medieval plays were understood in the same way by every member of their audiences, Forest-Hill argues that “audience reaction would not have been consistent” when confronted with a play like the Chester *Innocents*, with its dark sense of humour (2000: 61). In becoming popular, drama opened itself to a broad audience, allowing variegated responses to the sense of comedy, and therefore to the doctrine within the text. The Church would probably have preferred a more univocal sense of merriment, but once the religious gates were open to drama, the flood of humour would only be stopped by the Reformers’ ban on mystery plays.

4 SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

If only the rigorous view of the Church forbidding laughter were considered, it would not be possible to explain how comedy actually originated in liturgical drama. Even Bakhtin admitted that laughter was occasionally encouraged within the liturgical context: the *risus paschalis* (Bajtín 76–9). Moreover, Christianity counted on a model of comic performance staged by Christ Himself “as a mock-king, riding into Jerusalem on an ass, to be displayed in purple, beaten and laughed at” (Jacobson 1997: 167).⁵ From very early the ecclesiastical institution had an ambivalent attitude towards drama, disapproving of the “miracula” while gradually encouraging the incorporation of tropes and some dramatic movement in the Eastern liturgy. It was the presence of the Devil that first allowed some comic situation and realistic dialogue, e.g. in his dealings with Mary Magdalene in the Easter play of the *Carmina Burana*, or even the courtly Devil

⁵ *Matthew* 21.5 and *John* 12.15 report Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem riding on an ass, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy in *Zechariah* 9.9, where the sense of rejoicing is more explicit: “Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, Meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.” Many thanks are due to an anonymous reviewer for this learned reference.

seducing Eve in the Anglo-Norman *Jeu d'Adam*. Indeed, "hell remained a locus for hilarity" (Jacobson, 1997: 151). As the mystery plays began to be staged in cycles, some biblical episodes lent themselves readily to humorous treatment (see Auerbach 1950: 152–55).

In the transition from *officium* to *ludus*, the staging of Divine drama naturally involved also its opposite, a dramatization of evil, and the exhibition and public denunciation of un-Christian behavior demanded that it should be held up to ridicule (Wickham 1988: 48–50). This happened particularly with Herod, whose exaggerated, indecorous manners probably tempted performers to draw upon the techniques of popular entertainment (Wickham 1988: 52). Nonetheless, the appearance of stage devils, which after all derived from liturgical drama, involved social satire, but not necessarily humour: devils, and the personifications of their morals, the vices, were rather serious (Cox 2000: 23, 77). Vices provided plenty of opportunities for farcical humour, as they do in the morality play *Mankind* (c. 1470), for example, but they become increasingly menacing and sinister, and therefore not funny, as the play progresses towards its moral end.

The kind of humour that first surfaces in the cycles is satirical. Satirical humour rests on a moral norm, and the brazen deviation from it on the part of a character produces a feeling of mirthful self-righteousness. An audience with even the most elemental discernment between good and evil—between God and the Devil—would be amused by Lucifer's presumptuous vanity in the York *Fall of Angels*: as this "Primus Angelus Deficiens" says in his very first lines, "All the myrth þar es made es markide in me! / þe bemes of my brighthode ar bymande so bryghte" (Walker ed. 2000: 13, ll. 51–52). In his pride, Lucifer mistakes the reflection of God's light for his own creation, and his self-worship is his downfall. It is the rebellious angels' foolish fantasies about their own beauty (and beatitude) that makes them fall, as Deus finally proclaims: "Those foles for þaire fayrehede in fantasies fell" (131). The Chester *Fall of Lucifer* makes the anti-hero bolder, being encouraged by his crony Lightborne (whose name, suggesting that he is a mere light-bearer rather than a Divine light-maker, is a variation of Lucifer's). They proudly and foolishly ignore the warnings not only of Cherubyn, but also of various moral characters such as Vertutes, Dominaciones, Principates and Potestates, and they go as far

as to sit on God's Throne. The audience can enjoy the irony when Lucifer pretends to listen to God's warning and assures Him he will not trespass, in feigned humble words (ll. 94–101). There is a similar irony in the York *Fall of Man* when Satan assures Eva he will tell her nothing but the truth (ll. 76–77). It can easily be inferred from such episodes that the Christian public, from a safe distance of moral certainty, found amusement in the Biblical Devil's amazing impudence.

The popularity of brazen devils and vices might have led to the introduction of picaresque characters in plays like the Towneley *Killing of Abel*, where Cayn's "garcio" (shepherd-boy), Pikeharnes ("Armour-Stealer", i.e., battlefield looter), adds an unexpected sense of fun. Pikeharnes is a "mery lad" (l. 2) whose grotesque obscenities (ll. 2, 59, 63–4, 88, 238, 287), like Cayn's (e.g., ll. 59–65), might indeed "indicate corruption" (Happé 1975: 654, note 1), but they do liven up the essentially tragic story.⁶ They also introduce a popular element that may be compared to Cayn's humorous use of proverbs (e.g. in l. 88, "let furth youre geyse, the fox will preche"), which undoubtedly led many in the audience to recognize something like their own speech and manners on stage, whether the playwrights wanted the audience to identify with Cayn and then realise their own sinfulness, or to associate humour with blasphemy and so detach themselves from it. The question also applies to the comic passages in the various Shepherds' plays. The two Wakefield plays show the shepherds' hardships, and also their folly (leading them to quarrel), both of which will be ended by the miracle of Christ's birth. In the Wakefield *First Shepherds' Play* one shepherd imagines he has a flock of sheep of his own and, as the second shepherd tries to stop him from driving this imaginary flock into his pasture, they quarrel and end up coming to blows—their lad, Jack Garcio, alludes to the folk-tale of the Fools of Gotham to point out to them their stupidity (Happé 1975: 667, notes 17 and 18). In the Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Play* another folk-tale motif takes up most of the action in the story of Mak the sheep-stealer. But here, beyond the overall meaning

⁶ This is not to say that the Garcio-type servants symbolize the devil or evil in any univocal way. On the contrary, as Kolve suggested (1966: 156), their ritual and comic challenging their masters is related to the "notion of youth overcoming age, [...] a theme pervasive in the religious life of the Middle Ages" and which in the Shepherds' plays evokes in a comic way the impending birth of a Child who would overcome the mighty.

of Jesus' eventual redemption of the shepherds' hardship and folly, the episode in which Mak and Gyll try to make a stolen lamb pass for their newborn child parodies the subsequent Nativity in an uncanny way. Mak's stolen lamb is a Carnavalesque prefiguration of the Lamb of God, and the trickster is cheerfully tossed in a blanket for his shamelessness.⁷

5 THE WISDOM OF ASSES AND THE FOOLISHNESS OF WOMEN

Not all humorous characters can be directly linked with the Devil as trickster. Some plays focus their humour more particularly on foolishness, and the paradoxical wisdom of asses. The Chester play of *Balaam, Balak and the Prophets* has been considered perhaps "a counter, in its liturgical form, to the Feast of Fools" (Happé 1975: 188): it is a transitional play between the Old and New Testaments and leads to the Prophets' Play, yet maintaining the humorous ambivalence that made the solemn play of the Prophets also known as "Processio Asinorum" on the Continent. The *Balaam* play is set after Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, only to find Israel has fallen into idolatry. Balaam, a roguish priest, is lucky to be forgiven by God and allowed to ride away on his ass. As an Angel stops the ass on its way, Balaam threatens to strike it for not walking, but the ass itself speaks in its own defence (with more sense than its master) saying he is not to blame (ll. 215–224). As the Angel later explains, "And the ass had not downe gone, / I wold have slayne the

⁷ The Chester *Shepherds Play* shares with corresponding plays in other cycles the wedded shepherds' complains about their wives (ll. 85–90), but there is no direct social criticism of abuses from their lords like in the Wakefield pageant. The mood is cheerful, the shepherds have a large meal, they sing, and they are entertained by their witty, unruly 'garcus', Trowle (ll. 180–198). Trowle alludes to the Devil in his speeches, being somewhat devil-like himself. He stages a comic wrestle match and throws the three shepherds (ll. 235–288), tiring them so that they hope God will amend it with his providence (ll. 297–300): just then they see the star announcing the Nativity. A new source of humour is then introduced through the shepherds' comic attempts to understand the Angel's Latin (ll. 362–428), then the Third Shepherd and Trowle suspect the Angel of being a thief (ll. 395–400), and later the Third Shepherd mistakes the Latin words for women's names (ll. 409–412), probably from popular songs. They sing a popular song themselves before heading for Bethlehem (ll. 448ff). All in all, the plays exhibits a characteristic movement: a humorous deviation, a popular element, and the back to orthodox sense (with a brief return to humour as they joke about Joseph's beard (ll. 496–505)—as if playwrights could not help it on presenting this stock humorous character).

here anone" (ll. 233–234). Another comic episode occurs when King Balak orders Balaam to curse the Jews. King Balak is infuriated at Balaam's refusal to do so, as he knows the priest is a perfect hypocrite ("poplar"): "What the devilles eyles the, poplar? / Thy speech is not worth a fart" (ll. 281–282). Eventually, however, Balaam raises his eyes to heaven and begins the prophecies (ll. 336ff). Interestingly, the plot fails to build on the allegory of the ass symbolizing the material part of man that has to be rejected before looking up to heaven. Balaam would not have survived God's wrath if it were not for his down-to-earth ass. Thus the play lends itself to the an ironic reading, suggesting that one should be practical like the ass and change religion like Balaam in time to be saved. This is not the only possible interpretation, certainly not the preferred orthodox reading, but a side-effect of the play's humour.

In other plays there is a great deal of satire at the expense of women, often departing from the Biblical sources. In the Chester *Adam and Eve* the Demon cracks misogynist jokes about her: whatever women are forbidden to do is precisely what they will do (ll. 187–188, quoted above), and they are always helplessly eager for pleasure: "For wemen they be full licourouse: / That will shee not forsake" (ll. 201–202). Such commonplace views of women are also echoed in the Chester *Noah's* complaint about women's "crabbedness" (bad-temper) and lack of meekness (Happé ed. 1975: 122, ll. 105–106), and in Mak's criticism of his wife Gyll in the Wakefield *Second Shepherd's Play* (236–252). Mrs Noah's stubborn refusal to enter the Ark, a wifely strife which develops "a boisterous domestic comedy" (Axton 1982: 248), is a negative moral example of lack of collaboration with God (Purdon 2003: 53). In the York *Joseph's Trouble about Mary* the humour is based on common assumptions about women and a worldly suspicion about Maria's mysterious pregnancy. When she plainly tells her husband that the child is his "and the King of Bliss's" (l. 159), he replies sarcastically "Ye, and hoo þan? / Na, selcouthe tythandis than is þis, / Excuse þam wele these women can" (160–162). The butt of the joke, however, is not chiefly women, but old Joseph's cynical ignorance. His reactions are those of a jealous old husband in a fabliau. In the Coventry *Joseph's Return*, according to Jack (1989: 122–125), "[I]t is not [...] simply that Joseph sounds like a fabliau character, the whole story follows the logic of that mode", particularly those fabliaux like Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* in

which the Senex is blind to his wife's behaviour: in the end the play tests Joseph's faith and brings him from doubt to firm belief, as a moral model to the audience, but "his coarse asides, his very human doubts [...] also serve to link him with the audience" in more mundane ways.

The rebellion of Noah's wife (in all known Noah plays except in the N-Town version), as in the two Wakefield Shepherds' plays, leads to "a catharsis of comic violence", as she slaps the patriarch and is finally pushed into the Ark by their sons, preparing the audience "to contemplate the more sober but wonderful reality of 'God's high miracle'" (Axton 1982: 287). The fact that Mrs Noah is saved by force is generally interpreted as a joke on women's ignorance and irresponsibility, but it remains a funny contradiction of the doctrine of free will, forcibly correcting Eve's liability to err and sin. A modern audience is more likely to sympathize with the bold rebelliousness of Noah's wife, rather than laugh at her foolish stubbornness, and we should not dismiss the possibility that some medieval spectators would share this sympathy. If we simply accept a rough gender divide, "the defiant language of Noah's wife would have been received with pleasure and approval by those women [...] who did not accept the patriarchal ideal of subservient womanhood [...]. Men [...] might have found pleasure in the comic representation of the arch-wife" (Forest-Hill 2000: 65). Assuming a sweeping uniformity in medieval audiences would preclude the deep ambivalence of humour in some of the plays.

An alternative way of looking at the significance of the comic character of Noah's wife would be to analyse it through its possible levels of meaning according to medieval exegesis and modern speech act theory. It is possible to combine Dante's explanation of the four scriptural senses in *Il Convivio* (ed. and trans. Minnis & Scott 1988: 396) with Austin's pragmatics (1962). Dante's first level of interpretation of the Scriptures, the literal, does not go beyond the enunciation, like Austin's locution. For example, in Noah's story it would amount to the statement of it as a historical fact: God decided to punish mankind with a deluge and save only Noah and his family. Why God should also want to save an unruly, unrepentant sinner such as Noah's wife is quite beside the point. The Bible offers no clue, simply because she is not represented as such a sinner there. The second level of interpretation, the allegorical, may be said to correspond to the illocutionary act: the act performed in telling Noah's story is to illustrate

how the wise man provides for his people by following God's commands and acting accordingly—while the unwise woman disobeys. Finally, the perlocution, that is, the overall aim of the discourse and the act performed by saying it, would match Dante's moral and spiritual meanings: morally, the story advises man to be on the side of God, not of mankind, unlike Mrs Noah, who in the Chester *Noah* (ll. 225–244) seems to have preferred to stay drinking with her friend, the Gossip; spiritually, the story hammers the anagogical lesson that only by obeying God can we save our souls. All these meanings are challenged by Noah's wife, whose comic resistance to the doctrinal message is the more remarkable for it.

6 FUNNY GAMES OF VIOLENCE

It has been necessary in the previous paragraphs to exemplify the multiplicity of points of view which were available to medieval audiences, before coming to assess the sense of humour in the Passion pieces, probably the most complex in that respect. That complexity is particularly related to their blend of violence and humour, which is not unique to the plays on episodes leading to the Crucifixion. It is also evident in the ones dealing with Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents. Forest-Hill notes how in these, "where the mothers' language becomes comic in its extravagance it may have contributed to a sense of 'game' which distances the horrific action from reality [...]. That sense of 'game' nevertheless conflicts with the known theme of the play, intensifying the violence by apparently making light of it" (2000: 60). Therefore Forest-Hill (62) has to conclude that "laughter itself could be problematic and may have served a didactic purpose by illustrating through laughter a lack of compassion which leads to people standing aside while others are victimized." Problematic humour of a different kind is also present in a non-cycle play such as the *Play of the Sacrament*, where the Jews' grotesque torturing of the Host has been compared to 'burlesque version of terror': the overblown Jews' threats, like Herod's, were "not without the power to frighten", though they might appear simply laughable or ludicrous today (Homan 1986: 330–31). This blend of horror and fun, seriousness and ridicule, pathos and bathos, is most characteristic of the comedy in the Passion plays.

Humour darkens significantly when it focuses on the torturing of Christ. Thus, *The Conspiracy* in the York Cycle, an episode preceding

the Passion plays, has more in common with the satirical farce in *Fall of Angels* than with the black humour in subsequent pieces. Pilate's initial speech in the York *Conspiracy* stages a usurpation of divine power recalling Lucifer's. We may also share some righteous mirth when the Janitor (a representative of common humanity) insults Judas (ll. 156 ff). There is deep irony in Pilatus' calling Judas "a juste man / That will Jesus be justified by oure jugement" (ll. 226–27), and also when he *trusts* ("we trewly þe[e] trast") Judas to hand them the villain ("losell"), i.e., Jesus (ll. 253–55). Humour turns acid, however, the moment Christ is brought to court in the next York play *Christ Before Annas and Caiaphas*. Caiaphas' asking the soldiers whether Jesus has told them any joke involves a rich sarcasm which modern scholarship can easily connect with the old theological debate on whether Christ ever laughed. The soldiers' answer is no less intriguing: "The Devell have þe worde, lorde, he wolde telle us" (ll. 385–86). Jesus becomes the passive, silent recipient of dramatic speech, torture and sarcasm, as if only evil could act and speak in the plays, leading to the return of Satan in the next York play.

Christ Before Pilate I: The Dream of Pilate's Wife might be regarded as a comic interlude within the sequence of passion plays. Pilate's wife, Percula, is as much an unbiblical humorous character as Noah's wife was,⁸ another scold (not scolding her husband, but the Beadle, a follower of Christ), now incorporating the Eve-like dimension of the sensual temptress and the self-regarding vanity she shares with her husband Pilate and with Lucifer. Her threat to the Divine Plan is far more serious than Mrs Noah's rebellion, because Percula becomes the Devil's direct instrument in attempting to prevent the execution of the Son of God, and therefore the Resurrection and the Harrowing of Hell that will deprive evil of much of its power. There is a great comic inversion of the Salvation scheme in that Satan now becomes Christ's would-be savior aided by a sinful woman.⁹ She then sends her son to Pilate, to inform him of her dream and ask him to save

⁸ In the Bible Percula, also spelled "Procula", remains as nameless as Noah's wife. Pilate's wife is mentioned only once, in *Matthew* (27:19), where she advises her husband to "have nothing to do with that innocent man," because in a dream last night she had "suffered much on account of him."

⁹ Percula is, however, a saint in some legendary traditions, especially in Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

“that symple” (fool), Jesus (ll. 284–290). But Cayphas warns Pilate that his wife’s dream was probably a wile which Jesus wrought with witchcraft: a devil that He sent to his wife with the message that He should be saved. The comic inversion continues, since here Cayphas mixes up Jesus and the Devil, the sort of confusion which Cayphas and his fellow high priest Annas will pursue in his devious argumentations throughout the play to prove Jesus a dangerous usurper. Pilate’s son, on his part, makes one more attempt in his mother’s interest trying to persuade Jesus directly to seek His own salvation in Pilate’s mercy (ll. 389–397): he finds it funny (“O Jesu ungentill, þi joie is in japes”, 389) that Jesus should not be afraid and fall flat at Pilate’s feet. Of course Jesus will seek mercy in His own Father in heaven, not in the boy’s father, Pilate. Maintaining, as in the previous York play, a “powerfully affective silent presence” (Walker 2000: 99), Jesus speaks only once, and it is to confirm Pilate’s accusation of calling Himself the Son of God, and, ironically, to confirm that He is in the world “to work all Pilate’s will”: “þou saiste so þiselve. I am sothly þe same / Here wonnyng in worlde to wirke al þi will. / My Fadir is faithfull to felle all þi fame; / Withouten trespass or tene am I taken þe[e] till.” (ll. 477–480). In his meekness, Jesus is not averse to punning on the circumstantial coincidence between Pilate and God’s power over Him, although adding that His Father will put an end to Pilate’s fame. As Pilate’s son remarked, the Son of God enjoys a good joke.¹⁰

The sense of humour in the plays that deal with the torturing of Christ is more problematic. Diller (1988: 58) even suggests that “the Passion plays may be guilty of pretty exactly that neglect of the victim which psychologists regard as one of the chief sources of brutality in our media.” However, this applies particularly, in Diller’s view (1988:

¹⁰ Lines 477–479 are so striking that a modernization such as that by Chester N. Scoville and Kimberley M. Yates (2003) at <http://www.reed.utoronto.ca/yorkplays/York30.html> (accessed 21/07/2011) translates “I am sothly þe same / Here wonnyng in worlde to wirke al þi will” as “I am truly the same, / Here dwelling in the world to work all my will.” Translating “þi” for “my” assumes a scribal error which is not likely, since Jesus saying that he is here to do his own will is not in character with His humility, to say the least.

62) to the Wakefield play *The Flagellation*,¹¹ whereas the corresponding York play “is not open to the charge” because the author, the so-called York Realist, “goes out of his way to ‘de-carnivalize’ the Torture scenes”, that is, to prevent the audience from simply participating in the fun of ritual torture. If, as contemporaries witnessed, “plays sometimes aroused mirth rather than compassion”, this would “run against the plays’ official, religious purpose” (Diller 1988: 57). Indeed much of the humour is of the bitter, sarcastic kind. In the Wakefield *Buffetting* the torturers complain that their job is hard and they are ill-treated (ll. 46–59), which is an irony about their actual victim, besides recalling, in an odd, perverse way, the complaints of the Shepherds in the Nativity plays, as the torturers even have their own “garcio”, Froward, an apprentice who “adds his own touch of corruption in his indolent cheek and his enjoyment of the torture” (Happé 1975: 465). But the character providing the most sarcastic remarks is probably Cayphas, a bully who delights in the torture. Dark humour prevails, but the spiritual balance is dramatically redressed by Jesus’ silent presence and his only speech in the whole play (251–254), which, as in *Christ Before Pilate I*, is only to confirm cunning Anna’s charges and assert His divine purpose amidst their cruel sarcasm.

Far outdoing Cayphas, the most popular, ridiculous and vicious theatrical tyrant is undoubtedly Herod in the York play *Christ Before Herod*. He and his court try to make some fun of Jesus, testing sarcastically Pilate’s son assertion about Jesus’ sense of humour. Herod’s court, however, actually make fools of themselves through their foppish French manners (see e.g., Walker ed., line 147), mocking Jesus in French, connoting “the blustering manifestation of power” (Diller 1998: 514), after He calls himself King (ll. 240 ff). Herod’s sons shout at Him with cruel humour (310–35), then dress Him in white, the colour of innocence in sharp contrast to the motley coat of the Court Fool (Walker, ed. 2000: 112), but, as He will not speak, they cannot find evidence to convict him (ll. 396–401): thus Jesus’ seriousness triumphs over the court’s villainous humour. Silence is perhaps the ultimate trick of Jesus the Trickster, who

¹¹ In the Wakefield *Flagellation* “[t]he number of blows per line—if this perverse statistic is permitted—seems lower than in other plays, and yet the cruelty is perhaps more depressing, because the men are so uncomfortably ‘normal’ in many ways” (Diller 1988: 64).

is able to outwit Satan by speaking eloquently, for instance in the York plays of the *Temptation* and *The Harrowing of Hell* (Ashley 1982).

In the York *Crucifixion* we encounter once more the involuted dramatic didacticism of *The Buffeting* and *The Flagellation* discussed above, which allows the audience to identify with the torturers, even to enjoy the soldiers' jokes (Walker ed. ll. 61–62, 101, 187, 265–66), so that at least some people finally realize their sinful complicity with those soldiers, when Jesus asks God to forgive them (ll. 260–64). There is some comedy in the lively dialogue of the soldiers doing their work, and a touch of working-class local colour, as it were, and the audience is prompted to share their efforts too, wishing their hard job accomplished, but unaware of the pain and suffering inflicted (ll. 219–26). As they turn the high King of Heaven into a mock king, “anawares, they are paying tribute to Him, while displaying to the full their own sinfulness and spiritual folly” (Jack 1989: 99). The play draws on the tradition of the *Crucifixion* which saw it as a heartless game in which mockery and contempt suggested, by inference, the nature of true suffering and absent compassion. It is not possible to decide whether all members of the audience realized the irony and did not just enjoy the sadistic game.

While *The Crucifixion* satirizes the drudgery of rude workers, and *Christ Before Herod* the offhandedness of rulers, the York play of *The Resurrection* aims its satire at the middle class of administrators, and their corruption (ll. 450–51). The incredible excuses that the soldiers give for not being awake are comic, whether they are pseudo-scientific or magic (ll. 98–106). The soldiers will not admit they were sleeping (ll. 318–23, 358 ff), and Pilate's bribery (98–106) encourages them to lie even more (ll. 420 ff). A comparable sort of corruption, but expressed far more cunningly, is found in the York *Harrowing of Hell*, where Satan is an accomplished comedian changing his tone from rudeness talking to the devils who could not stop Christ by force, to courteous mildness addressing Him as his “fair friend” (l. 213). The central encounter between Satan and Christ is performed in the manner of a court disputation, Satan parodying the astute lawyer who looks for loopholes in the small print of his own covenant with God (ll. 223–24, 281–88, 301–04, 325–38). Thus the key final episodes in the Mystery Cycles containing explicit comic

elements,¹² like the initial ones of Lucifer's rebellion and the Fall, show a predominance of satirical humour. In between we have seen instances of a darker, more carnivalesque, and theologically more challenging kinds of humour.

7 COMIC DISCOURSE IN THE MYSTERY PLAYS

Our review of humorous aspects in the mystery plays can be by no means exhaustive in the present paper, though it is hopefully representative of their various uses of language and narrative for comic purposes. Some final remarks may now be made by looking at the discourse of humour in those plays as a whole. Drawing on Freud's well-known analysis of puns and jokes (1960), which noted their aggressive component, Sherzer (1985: 219) distinguishes two types of victim: first there is the victim in the text of the joke itself, and second there are the listeners "who are suddenly [...] being forced, whether they want to or not, to publicly display knowledge or lack of knowledge about a particular area, perhaps taboo." There is also a kind of psychic release involved in the breaking of taboos, which are most commonly related to sex, excreta or religion (Ross 1998: 63–66, 70–71). Given that the knowledge and taboo being tested in the mystery plays is the Christian religion, what can we make, for example, of the punch line in the York *Crucifixion*, where the Second Soldier encourages the others to go on striking Jesus by saying "Strike on þan harde, for Hym þe[e] boght" (line 101)? The soldiers are torturing Jesus and swearing by Him as their Savior. The first victim is obviously Jesus, the second (according to Sherzer's distinction) the audience, whose religious knowledge is put to the test. The audience would laugh, smile or at least groan in acknowledgment¹³ at such a glaring anachronism, and then turn the soldier into a third, and definitive, victim of the joke: his sarcasm now turns against him, because he is trying to destroy his very Saviour, and therefore condemning himself to eternal damnation for sheer

¹² The plays concerned with the Last Judgement offered no scope for humorous treatment. In addition, it was convenient to live behind any suspicion of revelry and close the cycles with a definite theological note.

¹³ "The groan is the conventional way of showing, for both puns and jokes, that a recipient-listener has understood the point or source of humor and that at the same time is intellectually or socially superior to it" (Sherzer 1985: 219).

ignorance. Most people in the audience would know better and think twice about any instinctive sadism they might have been sharing with the soldiers.

In discussing the discourse of humour, it is also important to consider its relation to power. The superiority theory argues (Ross 1998: 53–56, 59) that the butt of humour is often either those persons or groups who are perceived as inferior and so become the object of public derision, which is what the soldiers are doing with Jesus in the *Crucifixion*, or powerful groups or persons, such as Satan or the tyrants who are satirized in the plays. In fact, “With the exception of the Three Kings, who are after all away from home and without authority, all kings and ‘bishops’ are villains; [...] the pattern is set by Lucifer, whose rebellion is presented as a palace revolt” (Cox 2000: 22–23). If, as Purdie argued, joking involves “a transgression of the Symbolic Law of language” which constitutes jokers as the “masters” of discourse (1993: 5), Mystery plays used humour to establish their power over the audience, so that the name given to the anonymous “Wakefield *master*” would be well-suited indeed. Moreover, Teller and Audience construct their subjective identities as the ‘law-abiding’ masters of discourse against the degraded Butt; the degrading involves some harm befalling the comic object, and the greater its claim to power, the funnier the joke is (Purdie 1993: 59–60, 61). The plays aspired to their popularity by siding with the Christian commoner, their implicit audience, against the powerful, making the most of Jesus as the archetype of the downtrodden, that is, the archetypal butt of tyrants who in abusing the Son of God become the butt themselves, thanks to their vainglorious ignorance. The transgression effected in order to achieve the mastery of discourse involved an inversion of the established social order, and also bold reversals of the textual authority of the Bible. Whether these carnivalesque transgressions actually liberated individuals or just confirmed their social subjections is an old matter of debate. What the structure of the cycles makes very clear is that their overall pattern is that of the divine comedy, culminating in Doomsday solemnity, which aims at making religious orthodoxy prevail.

The fact that the mastery of discourse tends to remain in the hands of religion does not deprive the mystery plays of a powerful sense of humour. It is this combination of religion and humour that remains so remarkable,

particularly in light of Saroglou's analysis of their incompatibility. The results of his analysis are not surprising in our contemporary context, when religion is much more often the butt of jokes than the master of comic discourse. They may not be the same, however, when applied to a medieval (con)text. Saroglou opposes the associated personality traits, cognitive structures and social attitudes of humour and religion in the following ways:

- (1) The enjoyment of incongruity, ambiguity, and nonsense is supposed to be characteristic of humour, not of religion. But we need look no further than the line quoted above, when the soldier tells his workmates, "Strike on þan harde, for Hym þe[e] boght": it is incongruous, because as Jesus had not died He could not have saved ("boght") anyone yet; ambiguous, because it is both common swearing and a reminder of what they are doing, which is to unwittingly contribute to the Salvation through their cruel job, and also nonsense, because it invokes Christ in order to encourage the practice of torture. Yet the joke fulfils its religious mission to call the audience's attention on the strangeness of the miracle to come.
- (2) Playfulness. Humour is supposed to be an end in itself, and "located in an area beyond the distinction of good and evil [...] (This does not mean that laughter and humour have no ethical and socio-ethical consequences)" (Saroglou 2002: 195). The religious aim of the mystery cycles apparently contradicts this feature, but it is no less obvious that this aim is firmly set in the playful, ludic framework of the "ludus." Occasionally the balance seems to be tipped in favour of playfulness, as in the Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play, where the doctrinal, biblical part is a kind of moral coda, about one fifth the length of the previous part of the play based on the comic folktale of Mak the Sheep-Stealer. Saroglou (2002: 194–195) overstates the case against playfulness in religion by resorting, among other such references, to John Chrysostom's famous condemnation of laughter. Here we should recall Bakhtin and Gurevich's discussions of how the persecution of laughter in medieval official culture has been exaggerated. Nevertheless, evidence from concordances of the Wakefield, York and Chester cycles show that the words "laugh" or "laughter" are very infrequent (only the Wakefield master uses

them with any regularity), and “the word is used above all by the evil characters [...] and marks premature triumph and false security” (Diller 2002: 7–8). Humour in the plays is not often of the laugh-out-loud kind.

- (3) Novelty, sensation and risk. It is a foregone conclusion: religious people are regarded as conservative. Yet from their inception mystery plays involved the introduction of new, sensational episodes that risked their orthodoxy, hence the disapproval of them by various preachers and moralists throughout the Middle Ages, and the ban on them during the Reformation period.
- (4) Emotional aspects and self-control: the emotional aspect of surprise, characteristic of both humour and emotion in general, implies a momentary loss of control, whereas religiousness is associated with orderliness and a need-for self-mastery, including a need for univocal meaning. Saroglou mentions once again the mistrust towards the comic in early Christianity; not only negative emotions (fear, sadness, anger) but also positive ones (joy) were viewed with suspicion because of their unpredictable character. Against this line of argumentation we should stress that, as drama, the mystery plays aim at catharsis, that is, at the release of positive and other emotions.
- (5) Finally, tendentious aspects such as aggression (for dominance) and sexuality are seen as characteristic components of humour. Though these two aspects are not central to any of the mystery plays, they are not totally absent from them. Sexual humour is very unusual, but it certainly plays its part in the popular representation of Joseph as a jealous husband afraid of cuckoldry, particularly in the Coventry play of *Joseph*, who suspects the angel Mary is telling him about, “It was sum boy be-gan this game, / That clothyd was clene and gay, / And ye gave hym now an aungel name” (ed. Happé, ll. 76–78). The religious purpose of this unbiblical fabliau-like humour is to make an example of Joseph as a simpleton who doubts the mysteries of faith. It bears comparison to the Coventry play of *The Nativity*, where Salome the incredulous midwife puts in her hand to check on Mary’s virginity and the hand goes dead and dry (l. 254), though it is later cured by Jesus’ first miracle. As for aggressiveness, the issue of violence and humour in the Passion plays has already been

discussed, so we may now conclude by noting how those plays that present violence and punishment, such as those on *The Killing of Abel*, with Cain's verbal aggressiveness and obscenities particularly in the Wakefield version, do so as a means to gaining "the mastery of discourse" to which Purdie alludes. After all, the achievement of a discursive dominance over the audience is the ultimate goal both of the religious preacher and the teller of a joke. Thus Saroglou's attempt to distinguish religion from sense of humour in a definite way is disproved by the effective blending of both in the mystery plays.

8 CONCLUSION

Looking at the mystery cycles as a whole, it is evident that there were some episodes which offered more scope for farce, perhaps because they were traditionally associated with it, though not all cycles exploited the potential or did so in the same way. In general terms the episodes before Christ were more likely to contain some humour, Christ being a totally serious character indeed, with the notable exception of the satire of tyranny and the dark comedy of torture in some of the Passion plays. Such black comedy shows the ambivalence of the medieval grotesque, which both profanes and confirms the sacred (Guverich 1972: 209). The episodes after Christ tend to be more devoid of joking and have a more liturgical emphasis, looking back on the origins of medieval drama. As Jack (1989: 64) summed it up, the divine comedy of joy is structural, whereas the human comedy of laughter is incidental. In all cases, however, humour did enhance the perlocutionary force of drama, though not always in the senses that rigorous orthodoxy demanded, thanks to the enriching ambivalence of laughter.

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