

OCCUPACION AND YDELNES AND THE AUDIENCE OF THE MORAL COMEDY

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The critical appraisal of the comic aspects of the morality play had two of its low points in J. M. Manly's *Specimens of the Pre-Shakespearean Drama* in which he bowdlerized what he saw as the "vulgar" Christmas song in *Mankind* (328) and in J. Q. Adams' *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*, in which Adams termed the Christmas song and the fleshy joke that follows "unprintable" (311). Likewise, Hardin Craig in his *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* referred to the play as one "of utmost ignorance and crudity" performed by players "whose appeal was to the uneducated and vulgar" (350); and E. K. Chambers in his *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* thought it "an example of the morality in its decadence" (61), "a very degraded type of morality, aiming at entertainment rather than edification" (62).

Fortunately Glynne Wyckham's reconstruction of medieval stagecraft and David Bevington's appreciation for the performative elements in the moralities led to a new understanding of the comic elements of the morality. Bevington saw the audience as those "who had learned to appreciate earthy humor and spectacle of song, dance, and slapstick in the context of a moral tale" (18). He argued that the "bizarre juxtaposition of comic and serious treatment" of religious themes in which the comic was more than just a digression was carried out in such a way that "the obverse and alternating textures" of the plays were integrated "into a single and yet multiform art" (4).

Others have demonstrated the balance between the comic and serious components of the plays. Paula Neuss has argued the Court of Mischief scene in *Mankind* is a parody of the Last Judgement, and Robert Potter has expanded this to include all of the Macro plays. Milla Riggio has shown that the comic language of lust spoken in *Wisdom* by the libidinous Mind, Will, and Understanding is an ironic vision of the divine love so sincerely expressed in the opening section of the play. And Frances Hildahl and Marianne Briscoe have documented the parodic use of penitential and sermon literature in the moral comedies.

Perhaps the most suggestive article to date on the comic effect in the plays has been Anthony Gash's "Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama," in which he uses Bakhtin's novel of Carnival, instead of simply comedy, to show how *Mankind* is

a Janus-faced play in which a stilted, courtly style (aureation) is explicitly associated with the Church as a temporal authority, and set against an "underworld" of festive, tavern, comic infernal and excremental language which parodies the "high" language (82).

He goes on to say that it is more useful to see the play as a hybrid of official and unofficial structures (82).

This same sort of balance between comic and serious language might also be seen in the much-neglected mid-fifteenth century moral comedy *Occupacion and Ydelnes*. The play, which is uniquely preserved in Winchester College MS 33 along with its companion piece, *Lucidus and Dubius*, a public dialogue, and a number of entries from the *South English Legendary*, *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, and Erasmus' *de ratione conscribendi epistolas*, concerns the attempts of Occupacion and Doctrine to convert Ydelnes to a life of cleanness as a clerk. In the opening scene of the play Ydelnes tricks Occupacion out of ten pounds, goes off and spends it, and returns "kuppe-shote" (line 236). His reprimands having failed, Occupacion calls on Doctrine "a maister of dyuynete / of þe vnyuersyte / to tech [Ydelnes] to wex wyse" (297-99). Doctrine's threatening approach meets only with Ydelnes' scorn, and his directive to "sette honde on this book" meets with mock studiousness, while Occupacion's encouragement meets only with the reluctant youth's "Goddis kurse"—a fart (483; also in 729).

Doctrine's further attempts also fall short, and his lessons on holy and clean living, on the examples of the prophets, patriarchs, apostles, martyrs, confessors, and virgins, on God's mercy, and on Judgement Day hold only Occupacion's attention. With the intention of forcing him into a new life, the two seize Ydelnes, who promptly resists and draws a knife. But his dagger is not ground, of course, and the wrestling match which ensues ends with Ydelnes' submission. He is given the "clothe of clennes" (812), his name is changed (to Clennes), and he is taught about the power

of "Oure Lady in heuen" (825). Then Doctrine dismisses the audience with a blessing.

Though there are no records of the performance of the play, it seems very likely that the play was performed at Winchester College. Ian Lancashire has suggested that *Occupacion and Ydelnes* "is undoubtedly a school play, and the appearance of Doctrine, a doctor of divinity of the university, to school-boy Idleness suggests auspices at Winchester College, Oxford, from which every year the warden and two fellows came to the school in visitation" (entry 1499, page 283). I would also add several other bits of evidence. Ydelnes' repeated allusions to knowing the audience members, especially for "thes 3eeris foure or fyve" (line 198), hint perhaps at the length of a student's course of study. Also, the only place name references in the work are "in the hye strete" (66) and "in Brodestrete" (175), both of which border New College, Oxford. (While this does not confirm a specific place, it is corroborating evidence.) And Doctrine's address to the parents in the audience to "settle 3oure children vn-to scole" reaffirms the school's mission in the context of the play. Finally the emphasis on Mary in the play correlates well with the spirit of both Winchester and New College, which were both originally named Seinte Marie College.¹

I would suggest also that the play was performed on the Feast of All Saints, since Doctrine's speech on the virtues of the saints ends with the note, "Al Halowen Day hire day men calle, / and worship hem with myld steuen" (624-25) and since several of Doctrine's speeches are in fact drawn from the Sarum breviary for the Matins of November 1.

We might see the trappings of Carnival in the broad outlines of this play in the emphasis on the body, what Bakhtin refers to as the "grotesque image of the body" (26), in the drunkenness of Ydelnes, in the physical threats, the wrestling match, the scatological humor. In Ydelnes' addressing specific members of the audience, in his physical contact with them as he pushes through them, in (what seems to be) his taking his place in the audience, we can also see the breakdown of the separation of the actor and spectator, an essential feature of Carnival².

We might also see in the play's specific uses of *parodia sacra*, usually parody of Judgement Day, the sort of balance between the comic and serious which Gash and the others have described. *Occupacion* and *Ydelnes* are in general terms types of the Wise and Foolish Virgins;³ while *Occupacion* prudently declares "[T]o my

labour wyl y go, / tylle *and* trauayle in moche wo, / my lyfode to gete" (216-18), Ydelnes' carelessly remarks, "While Y haue aught y wyl spende; whan I haue non God wyl sende" (67-8). This is turned into a parody later when Occupacion asks Ydelnes, who has just returned from the "þe tauerne [and] þe cokes" (192-93), "Wh[o] shal fynde þe mete *and* drynke al day?" and the youth responds, "Be my fay, Jonet and Gyll" (309-10). So not only is his lust for the two prostitutes a travesty of the divine Bridegroom's love, but also his participation at the heavenly banquet has turned into his gluttony at the town tavern. Ydelnes also resembles the prodigal son who returns after spending all his father—or here, master—has given him, but here the mocking of Occupacion takes the place of repentance.

There are small touches that add to the effect. Beyond the fact that on a literal level it refers to Christ's judgement, the repeated "goddis kurse" scatological joke, i.e., the fart, was often associated with the trumpet in the later Middle Ages and thus with the trumpet blast of the angels on Judgement Day. And Ydelnes' deception of the old man takes on a new significance when he says that he will "beset this gold here / on sheepe or lambe" because they are too expensive and will be destroyed anyway (179-80). There seems to be a gentle suggestion here that Ydelnes is a type of Antichrist, the wolf in sheep's clothing. Though there is no evidence for this I would also speculate that there is a sort of performative parody in the play, that is, Ydelnes perhaps mockingly re-enacts some of Doctrine's lessons such as the description of the heavenly court, the martyring of apostles, the lamentation on Doomsday, and possibly Christ's own crucifixion. All are part of the *parodia sacra* of Carnival.

Bakhtin's work, however, goes beyond the description of Carnival; he has carefully studied the language of the novel and the parodic-travesty literary forms that have arisen from Carnival.⁴ In general terms, he shows how "[e]verything means, [and] is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning other [meanings]" (Holquist, in Bakhtin, 426). More specifically, there is a dialogue, an agonistic process, in Carnival literature in that the perceived dominant language is continually informed, called into question, and perhaps undermined by the subordinate language(s) in the work. And most importantly there is a "struggle and determination among languages," a struggle which

is not easily resolved into any final meaning or intention, and an interanimation in which the competing languages are clearly changed (79).

And such is the case for *Occupacion and Ydelnes*. The dominant language spoken by *Occupacion* and *Doctrine* is clearly that of reform; the subordinate language spoken by *Ydelnes*, that of cunning and fraud. From the beginning the playwright is careful to keep these voices separate and parallel; *Occupacion's* opening speech on the woes of this world and the necessity of labor is drawn from the *Piers Plowman* tradition of social protest,

For al the welthe of the world is turned to wranglynge
and frendship is ful faynte now for to fynde;
a3en equyte and ri3t the peple be ianglynge
and ful fewe there be that here-of haue mynde.⁵ (5-8)

This is matched by *Ydelnes's* speech (while *Occupacion* is asleep) on the easy life, a self-description drawn ironically from preaching handbooks,⁶ e.g., *Jacob's Well*, which warn against Sloth:

Y kepe nat to arise to matynes ne messe
ne to non oper werke.
For to no laboure y kaste me,
but euer to slowthe y fast me.⁷ (77-80)

As one would expect in Carnival where there is no line between performer and spectator these speeches implicate the audience: all are subject to the natural and economic forces of the times; and all are susceptible to Sloth, as is implied when *Ydelnes* says when he first enters, "per ben many of 3ow / þat y knowe wel and fyne" (51-2). Throughout their interactions the straight-forward laborer's language is doubled by that of the duplicitous rogue; old age doubled with youth; winter with summer; wynnere with wastoure.

Likewise, in the second half of the play *Doctrine's* catechizing, drawn from the liturgy of the Feast of All Saints, is matched by *Ydelnes's* skepticism. When *Doctrine*, for instance, preaches on the fates of the martyrs,

Some ferro *perempti* heded was,
some flammis exusti brant in tour,
flagellis verberati some forbeten,

hij sunt triumphatores, Goddis frendis an heth.
Here good dedis shal neuer be for3eten,
for hir blissid name in *eternum* manet (586-91),⁸

Ydelnes responds in an aside, "Heere 3e, siris, al þis breth? / A dra3t of ale y had leuer (592-93).

But there is a significant development in Ydelnes; as the play progresses the latter's language becomes abrupt and fearful, debilitated by the compulsion of Doctrine's speech. Indeed his speech becomes so atrophied that it declines into feeble insult and childish prattle, then beyond language into scatological humor and leavetaking. In the course of the play we see Ydelnes go from a fifty-two line speech in which he praises himself, "Queyntly go I, lo, / as prety as a py, lo" (83-4), to short invitations to fighting: "Out vpon þe, stronge thee! / Wylt þo me spille?" (755-56). In the end, after his extra-linguistic conversion, i.e., the wrestling match, Ydelnes, so it seems, adopts the language of clerks, or of Doctrine. The dialogue, it would seem, dissolves into a monologue.

Because Ydelnes is subdued in the end and converted to a life of clennes, one might say that Ydelnes is no more than a straw-man for the author's ideology, or that Doctrine's voice is the only voice in this play, subsuming or negating the others. Thus *Occupacion and Ydelnes* would be, like the average catechism, a monologic text. But I would argue this is not the case. The clowning, upstaging, and close interaction with the audience that are associated with Ydelnes create a set of signs separate from the words in the text. The extra-linguistic features of performance constitute, paradoxically, a language of their own, the language of Carnival, and thus subversively they become, in their immediacy to the audience, the dominant language. To be more exact, the authority of this otherwise subordinate language stems from the context of the performance; that is, the audience closely aligns itself with the comic, physical Carnival spirit because the play is performed within the guidelines of carnival, in which there is no "distinction between actors and spectators" and there is a "suspension of all hierarchical rank" for all within its bounds (1968, 7). Thus they see themselves mirrored in Ydelnes.

The effect of this Carnavalesque dialogue in a "world inside out" (11) can be most fully seen in the primary extra-linguistic focus of the play, the wrestling match. The violence in this climactic scene, though it is on one level simply a standard feature of

medieval university entertainment, would seem to undermine the catechetical project. Ydelnes is converted not through faith, but through force. One way of viewing this violence is as a parody of the suffering of the martyrs and saints whose lives the play celebrates. Paradoxically Ydelnes is persecuted by the same ideology the saints died to maintain. But it is equally important to note that *Occupacion* and *Doctrine* must leave behind their own language and adopt the rollicking, corporeal language of Carnival in order to convert Ydelnes. In a sense, one might say that in order for salvation the word (doctrine) had to become flesh (three wrestling bodies) and dwell among us (become indistinguishable from the audience). Thus there is a true interanimation in the climax of the play.

On another level, the brutality in this scene might be interpreted as more than simply violence. In this type of context, violence, according to René Girard, is "a positive resource...when it is transfigured and reconverted through the mediation of scapegoat effects" (306-7). Ydelnes in this case might be seen as a scapegoat for the members of Winchester College. That is, thanks to carnivalesque regeneration, the spirit of idleness in the academic community is drubbed out of the hall and replaced by the spirit of cleanness.

The community would have known well the perfectionist scholastic compulsiveness of William of Wyckham, the founder of both Winchester and New College. In a characteristic letter he sent to the Priory School in Winchester in 1387 he accused the "co-monks and co-brethren" of "not understanding what they read": in their "walking in the wilderness out of the way, [they] defile and pervert the sound meaning of the scripture." He insisted that they begin again with their grammar and work to cast away "the scales of blindness and the clouds of ignorance" that they might be "better prepared to behold clearly the mysteries of the Scriptures" (Leach 23-4).

As Bakhtin would have it, in the complex and contradictory process of resisting and accepting the word of *Doctrine*, of ridiculing then reverently heeding it, the parody that Ydelnes carries out calls into question the catechetical process which stifles the voice of the convert while at the same time reaffirming the process of conversion necessary for salvation. In the spirit of Wyckham's words, the example of Ydelnes, in defiling and perverting the sound teachings of *Doctrine*, dramatizes how we might become better prepared to

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behold clearly the mysteries of the Scriptures, revealed through the lives of the saints.

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Notes

1. They are named in the school charters Seinte Marie College of Wynchestre, and Seinte Marie College of Wynchestre in Oxenford.
2. In Bakhtin's terms,

carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle to be seen by the people; they live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (7)
3. The play might also be compared to the Limoges *Sponsus*, which is a poignant re-enactment of the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Such a relationship is given force by the fact that the November 1 Matins in the Sarum Rite contains the following rubric:

Ista praecedens Lectio legatur ab uno Puero, ut praedictum est; et interim procedant quinque Pueri de vestario ordinatim in superpelliciis, capitibus velatis amicitibus albis, et cereo ardentibus in manibus tenentes, ad gradum chori accedant. Finita Lectione, simul incipiant ad altare conversi Responsorium.

Responsorium 8. Audivi vocem de caelo venientem: Venite, omnes virgines sapientissimae; oleum recondite in vasis vestris dum sponsus advenerit. V. Media nocte clamor factus est: Ecce sponsus venit. Oleum recondite. (Young II, 496; Sarum f. 165r, 1531 edition)

This preceding reading is read by one Boy, as was described above; and meanwhile five boys proceed dressed/arranged in [literally] over-furs, with heads

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covered with white amices, and holding wax lights [i.e., candles] in their hands, go up the steps to the choir. The reading completed, the same [Boys] begin [to go] towards the altar in a dance [in a circle] with the Response.

Response 8. I heard a voice coming from the heavens [saying]: Come, all you virgins so wise; store up oil in your lamps for when the bridegroom [will have] arrived. V. At midnight there came a cry: Behold the Bridegroom comes. Store up your oil. (Trans., mine.)

4. Though Bakhtin's theory primarily deals with the novel, it might be concluded from his own words that the "appropriation, reworking, and imitation of someone else's property" in medieval Latin literature, and by extension any literature that might be labeled carnivalesque, "so that it is often very difficult to establish precisely where reverence ends and ridicule begins...is exactly like the modern novel" (77).
5. Many parallels can be found both in *Piers* and in the poems collected in Thomas Wright's *Political Songs of England*, for example, the opening of "A Song on the Times":

Whose thenchith up this carful life,
Ni3te and dai that we beth inne,
So moch we seeth of sorrow and strif,
And lite ther is of worldis winne,
Hate and wreth ther is wel rive,
And trew love is ful thinne:
Men that beth in heii3ist live
Mest i-charged beth with sinne. (1-8)

6. I am oversimplifying the case here since these languages overlap at times. Most of Doctrine's early speeches are drawn from preaching handbooks. Since Ydelnes' speeches after he returns from the stews are all of the popular variety and none are drawn from the preaching tradition, one might say that Ydelnes is a clerk whose language is

influenced by the language of preaching until he becomes changed by carnival.

7. There are too many parallels to mention here. In Myrc's *Instructions* we find: "Hast thou be slowe for to here / Goddes serves when tyme were? / Hast thou come to chyrche late?" (1163-65), and "Hast thou spared for hete or colde / To go to chyrche when thou were holde?" (1217-18, Erbe ed.). In Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, we find,

Whan he heryþ a belle ryng
To holy cherche men callynge,
þan may he nat hys bed lete,
But þan behouþ hym lygge & swete,
And take þe mery mornyng slepe
(4259-63, Sullens ed.)

8. This is an abbreviated version of the tortures the apostles suffered. The complete version is more gruesome: *Alii ferro perempti, alii flammis exusti, alii flagris verberati, alii vecibus perforati, alii cruciati patibulo, alii pelagi periculo subiecti, alii vivi decoriati, alii vinculis mancipati, alii linguis privati, alii lapidus obruti, alii frigore afflicti, alii fame cruciati, alii vero, truncatis manibus, sive caeteris caesis membris, spectaculum contumeliae i populus nudi propter nomen Domini portantes.*

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