

Wickedly Devotional Comedy in the York Temptation of Christ¹

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Make rome belyve, and late me gang! [let me pass!]
Who makes here al þis þrang?
High you hense, high myght ou hang
Right with a roppe.
I drede me þat I dwelle to lang [I'm delayed too long]
To do a jape. [mischief, joke] (York Plays 22.1-6)

Satan opens the York *Temptation of Christ*² pageant with these words, employing a complex and subtle rhetorical comedy aimed at moving fifteenth-century spectators toward lives of greater devotion. With “late me gang!” Satan (“Diabolus” in the text) achieves more in these lines than just making a scene; he draws his audience members into the action. Medieval staging in York likely had Satan approach the pageant wagon stage through the audience, addressing them as he enters. As spectators respond, perhaps stepping aside, smiling, or even egging him on, they both submit to and celebrate him. However, the central action of this pageant is Christ’s successful resistance to the devil’s efforts to entice him to sin.³ Theologically and thematically, this victory parallels the pageant of Adam and Eve’s temptation earlier in the cycle⁴ and establishes Christ’s qualification to redeem the fall of mankind with his death, which follows in the series of passion pageants that follow this scene. If the purpose of this pageant is to illustrate Christ’s victory, why does it open with this entertaining portrayal of Satan? Why not portray Jesus in prayer or meditating on the Scriptures he will use to resist Satan’s tactics? Can the pageant provide an orthodox message about the devil after endowing him with such charisma?

The exemplary and biblical nature of the mystery plays in general (whether humorous or not) gives them a homiletic quality that frequently invites the audience to

participate vicariously in the enacted stories and to appropriate the lessons of Scripture. Applying Bakhtinian carnival theory to certain attractive comic rebels such as the various depictions of Noah's wife or the Towneley cycle's Herod, some argue that the humor undermines rather than reinforces the orthodox message of the pageant. However, although this pageant employs carnivalesque comedy that violates the boundary between stage and spectator and appears subversive of orthodox teaching, the comedy ultimately invites audience members to recognize evil in themselves, a necessary step to repentance and obedience. This rhetorical tactic serves the York cycle's broader religious aims of reinforcing orthodox doctrine and encouraging devotion in the audience.⁵ An initial discussion both of the general rhetoric of the mystery plays and of the particular effect of some comic characters will provide some background for my analysis of Satan's seemingly subversive role in this pageant. I follow this analysis with some examples of the approach to "subversive" comedy which my argument counters—Bakhtinian criticism that interprets such comedy as challenging church teachings. I conclude with a brief discussion of two pageants from another well-known biblical cycle, *The Towneley Plays*, to demonstrate a similar rhetorical effect in support of my reading of the York cycle's *Temptation of Christ*.

Modern readers of these biblical plays often recognize them as instructional, as a means of teaching the Bible to medieval townspeople. Inherent in such "instruction," however, for any literature that teaches people what to believe and how to live, is the exhortation and encouragement of the listeners, not merely the transmission of information usually associated with teaching. The instruction of the medieval biblical plays is rhetorical, not merely didactic. Medieval drama had close ties to an even older medieval preaching tradition. G. R. Owst describes the early English drama as "surrounded on every side by a mass of kindred homiletic material, itself bound up with a yet more ancient pulpit tradition, and at least as dramatic, as lively and forceful in the handling as anything to be found in the plays" (525). The dramatic quality of both preaching and drama that Owst mentions points to the fact that preachers and playwrights of religious instruction in the Middle Ages understood the need for such teaching to engage the audience on more than a simply cognitive level.

Part of the rhetoric of the York cycle of plays performed in conjunction with the spring Corpus Christi festival is its subtle but deliberate invitation to spectators to see themselves in the action. The York cycle was performed as early as 1376, and the script was only written down to aid in performance. Actors and directors had separate, working copies that have not survived. The only extant text dates from between 1463 and 1477; it is the city of York's official copy of the plays, called 'the Register,' which an official used to check against the actual performance (Beadle, *York* 89-90).⁶ Thus the text available to contemporary readers, as Richard Beadle observes, is not a text meant for reading: "it repeatedly insists on the presence of an audience, who are thereby drawn to participate almost physically in the illusion, finding themselves implicated in the events portrayed" (86). Many of the York plays create this effect—not always through comedy—and it represents a significant component

of the rhetorical presentation of Christian doctrine in this biblical cycle.

Each of the York plays (and those of the other biblical collections) exemplifies some facet of the Christian story of God's redemption of mankind through Christ. Arnold Williams considers the medieval representation of Christian history as contemporary with the lives of a medieval audience as the "essential purpose" of the large cycles of biblical plays (115). They begin with the start of evil (first in Heaven, then in Eden); they climax with the near—or seeming—defeat of the King, His glorious resurrection, and his setting free of the captives; they conclude by showing final judgment, the eternal destiny of the King's subjects and his enemies. Each pageant within a cycle tells a small chapter of that story. Carol Billman places medieval drama in the broader context of the divinely comic, hopeful vision of Christianity in the Middle Ages: "There was a secure Christian norm ready for every sinner to embrace, and the purpose of the mystery cycles and other kinds of medieval drama was to persuade men of or, more likely, to rekindle strong faith in the wonderful Christian alternative to chaos" (416). The morality plays, such as *Everyman*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, and *Mankind*, while not retelling biblical events, exemplify through allegorical representation the invisible challenges in the life of a Christian to resist temptation and persevere in God's ways in order to be found faithful at the Last Judgment.

This exemplarity of medieval English drama draws the audience into the experience of the characters, a rhetorical process Kenneth Burke calls "identification" (19-27). The audience members or readers associate themselves with what the exemplum is advocating (if the rhetoric is successful); they are more deeply drawn into the didactic message through identifying with the character (or characters) living out the teaching. Sometimes, of course, the identification is negative: audience members see a character doing what they know they should not do. Sometimes the point is achieved through the audience's identification with the sin and then the consequences (in effect scaring them away from such behavior) or through the laughter of "triumphant derision" which identifies the sin with a clearly evil character such as a devil or a Herod (Diller, "Laughter" 2).

The effect of this identification is not as clear, however, when a character appears attractive to the audience through his comically transgressive words and actions. Some scholars have applied a Bakhtinian view of the Middle Ages to their readings of such characters. In his seminal introduction to laughter and play in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes medieval comedy as drawing out and celebrating human impulses that are contrary to those of authority and the dominant culture, subverting the overt message of the text in doing so, giving a Mardi Gras license to those darker passions: "The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety" (7). Bakhtin sees carnival as free from any separation between performance and audience. It is not merely "a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (7).⁷ Bakhtin employs the metaphor of "footlights" for the separation between the primary

and secondary worlds of stage and audience (7). By eliminating these footlights, such plays invite the audience to participate vicariously in the very subversion—the sin—of the characters by laughing with them. This carnival is present in many genres of medieval literature, but theatre, Bakhtin asserts, is “most intimately related” to it (15). While certainly some performances themselves cultivated a carnivalesque spirit, significant textual evidence for a positive relationship between the religious aims and the comic potential suggested by many medieval texts challenges the assumption that the plays deliberately create this effect as an end in itself.⁸ Arousing the anti-structure, anti-authority spirit associated with carnivalesque humor is not the aim of the mystery plays. The anonymous medieval playwrights constructed their works to arouse carnivalesque laughter that works for, not against, their positive rhetoric. Carnivalesque laughter represents a part of the intended and endorsed social effect of several mystery plays revealing to the audience members their own sin and need for grace.

The comic elements of Satan’s temptation of Jesus in this York play employ this rhetorical strategy. The archfiend opens the pageant with a full-blown villain’s rant which, by this point in the entire cycle’s performance, makes Satan freshly reminiscent of Pharaoh and Herod’s ranting in three earlier pageants.⁹ The humor at first simply invites derisive laughter at the devil’s antics. However, in this pageant evoking such laughter is actually a rhetorical device used against the audience by Satan; he is not only the object of their laughter, he is also the one making them laugh. He thus tricks them into lowering their defenses by making spectators simultaneously laugh at him and with him. He gains the audience’s sympathy through comedy, the great potential for which was validated by a modern performance of the play at Syracuse (Lindenbaum 207). As a result, the audience members do not dread or hate Satan as they should, and he begins his rhetorical ploy to win their loyalty prior to his temptation of Jesus. In a parallel scene several pageants earlier in the York cycle, Satan begins *The Fall of Man* with “For woo my witte es in a were / That moffes me mykill in my mynde” (*York* 5.1-2), comically *telling* the audience that he is angry; in this entrance Satan *shows* his anger through boisterous language, probably coming up through the crowd, shoving spectators aside as he makes his way to the pageant wagon. Martin Stevens cites Satan’s entrance as an example of the “self-referential” quality of the York plays, which directs spectators’ attention to the city setting of the performance itself. Satan’s dramatic, tyrannical entrance allows them “to apprehend the spirit of Satan within the crowded street corners of the city and to look with fear at York itself wherein he seemingly has found shelter” (74-5). If Satan makes the audience laugh with his entrance, he slyly wins them over to his side before even unfolding his plot.

This opening address exemplifies Diller’s “histrionic” quality of addresses to the audience in the York cycle, in which no separation exists between the sphere of the players and the audience, an effect characteristic of the carnivalesque according to Bakhtin’s assertion that carnival lacks that barrier (*Middle English* 113). Diller observes that in audience addresses in both the Towneley and York cycles, some plays

invite the audience to take an “imaginative leap into the presence of the Second World characters,” while “[i]n other plays, this change of time and place has to be achieved by the characters” (*Middle English* 124-5). Satan’s address fits the latter description: he not only draws spectators into his sphere, he also invites them to share his very motive as well. And the effect is even more powerful because he is the archenemy of the Christian and of Christ, whom these plays and the feast of Corpus Christi, which was the annual occasion of the performance, celebrated.¹⁰

In spite of the rudeness of his entrance, Satan does not appear utterly despicable as a character. When he tells the audience he has been detained by them “to lang / To do a jape,” what is their reaction? Are they relieved that the devil will practice no mischief on them? Quite the opposite: human fascination with spectacle, particularly in a performance setting, will likely leave them disappointed that Satan can do no evil tricks. The audience may even forget for a few moments that he is the enemy. Here at the beginning of *The Temptation of Christ*, before Jesus even appears, Satan has enticed spectators to wish they might see something sinful, much in the same way the villains in the fifteenth-century morality play *Mankind* goad the audience into paying money to persuade the devil Titivillus to appear, thereby implicating them in his wickedness (455-70). Furthermore, because spectators *expect* him to be evil and hateful, Satan’s humanlike rudeness, though abrasive, makes him a less fearsome villain with whom the audience can identify.

After his opening boisterous comedy has subsided, Satan delivers a monologue, addressing the audience for eight more stanzas before addressing Jesus and employing a subtle rhetoric that seeks to win spectators’ loyalty to his cause. One tactic is to confide a secret to them, inviting sympathy by cultivating a sense of intimacy. Satan seeks to establish a special kind of ethos with the audience, which makes what he has to say more convincing. Immediately after his entrance, Satan explains his motive for the upcoming temptation of Jesus: Ever since Satan’s fall from heaven he has been working among mankind to bring more souls into hell; indeed, “all þat hath ben sithen born / Has comen to me, mydday and morne,” and he has made them eternally miserable (22.13-14). However, Satan confides, he has heard “of a swayne [a commoner]” who is to come and suffer in order to buy these lost souls back; he does not believe it, however, and intends to test him to “garre [compel] hym to sum synne assente / If þat I may” (22.41-2). By taking the audience members into his confidence and explaining his problem, Satan seeks to allay their natural mistrust of him. This tactic is masterful in its irony: Satan endears himself to the audience as he explains his strategy for ensuring that everyone ever born (including, of course, the spectators themselves) remains doomed to misery in Hell.

Another strategy that complements the comedy by strengthening Satan’s persuasive ethos in this opening speech is to identify himself as a fellow victim of the civic strife that was part of the primary world of the spectators. Even a cursory look through the *York* volume of the *Records of Early English Drama* (REED) reveals a common pattern of strife among the craft guilds (who performed the various pageants) in protecting their territory from other guilds that produced and sold similar products.

For example, the Smiths' guild performing this one (with some fellow guildsmen watching to be sure) had a history of strife with other guilds over infringement of trade territory, particularly the Marshalls and other metalworking guilds (Johnston 123-4, 175, 667). Claire Sponsler describes tension and conflict in English fifteenth-century urban life among different social groups. The middle and lower classes felt exploited by the oligarchy; the migrant poor were seen as a potential threat to the citizens' livelihood (24-6). Anne Higgins relates the streets of York closely with the dramatic performance: "Audiences all along the route were constantly brought into the play's action, as nosy neighbors, as crowds screaming for Barabbas, as the saved and the damned" (89). A wealthier member of the audience might have watched from a scaffold built under a lease at this procession station specifically to watch that year's performance (86-7). A spectator watching from the street might have been rubbing shoulders with members of a competing guild who just last week sold some goods that were similar to those made by his own, threatening to lure his customers away. On his other side might have been an "alien" from outside the city.

Satan's strategy capitalizes on these social tensions when he alleges that Jesus is infringing on his territory—"he schall come and suffre payne / And with his dede to blisse agayne / thei schulde be bought" (22.20-2). Although he does not overtly mention York civic strife, surely amidst the number of different competing groups of people, Satan's fear of losing business—souls in hell—to this "swayne" represents a concern with which many might identify. In this case the audience members are drawn in as fellow townspeople of Satan who have surely been cheated by a competitor or even worse, a foreigner (both of which Satan's speech associates with Jesus). Satan's words will not convince them consciously to root for him—they know better than that—but they are certainly not repulsed by his evil, and in as far as they find him entertaining, he wins their emotional approval, though it be inadvertent. Perhaps the great tempter does not seem as wicked and fearsome as the audience members have always imagined.

A final rhetorical strategy for winning the sympathy of the audience comes as Satan begins to explain his plans. He says that Jesus has gone out into the wilderness alone, so he must find him there, "To dere [harm] hym nowe haue I no doute, / Betwyxte vs two" (22.35-36). Satan uses this same intimate phrase with Jesus himself a few stanzas later, during the first of the three temptations (22.58). The Devil invites spectators to trust him, to share in his secret plot, "betwyxte us two." Again, although he may not win their deep loyalty, through his invitation to sympathize with the ultimate villain of all eternity, members of the audience may find themselves not so different from the devil as they would like to think. Their carnivalesque laughter leads to identification with the villain, whereby they find themselves implicated in guilt and in need of the Savior who is the central subject of this pageant and the entire York cycle. As the action of the play moves into the actual temptation of Jesus, the audience is, ideally, far more ready to respond with devotion to seeing Christ not only resist temptation in this place but—a few pageants later—to suffer and die for them as well.

A number of interpretations of Middle English plays in which a villain is made attractive rest on Bakhtinian assumptions and, unlike this essay, conclude that generating carnivalesque laughter necessarily subverts a text's religious aims. For example, Joseph Ricke presents such a reading of Noah's wife, who, in several mystery plays, resists her righteous husband's call to board the ark in a domestic squabble that even becomes comically violent. Ricke asserts that her shrewishness and other "shrew figures serve a parodic, dialogical function, loudly mocking and shocking their audiences into seeing new sides of the authorized discourse concerning the place and space of women" (264). In this view when Noah and his wife ("Uxor") fight, female audience members root for her; she expresses transgressive ideas that Ricke claims are not reconciled to the main religious, didactic thread of the cycles; these ideas lead to "dialogic disunity" in the message of the play (275). Anthony Gash provides a similar reading of Noah's wife in the Chester and Towneley cycles; he also argues for a kind of self-contradiction in *Mankind*, in which the "the festive idiom of reversal and parody is being used both to express and conceal anti-clerical sentiments" (90).¹¹

Such readings of the plays offer some useful insights about the temporary carnivalesque spirit they may have invoked in performance, but these interpretations fall short of identifying the potential of that same spirit to further orthodox aims. Carnivalesque comedy at times may have violated the Christian message of the biblical and morality plays by inspiring distinctly un-Christian behavior; however, such subversive elements of a performance and transgressive responses from the audience were not necessarily required or desired by those creating the text or directing the performances. Interpretations such as Ricke's and Gash's assume an intentionality in performance that detracts from the biblical or Church teaching. Employing Bakhtinian theory to understand the drama, Gash speculates about what may have been happening during performances in response to (or in addition to) certain lines in the text. Diller argues that Gash's reading of *Mankind* "assumes nothing less than a company of heretically minded lay actors who are operating guerrilla-like behind the frontlines of the ecclesiastical and social orthodoxy" (Diller, "Laughter" 7). In a similar critique of these Bakhtinian approaches Bayless points out that Bakhtin's "paradigm is...based on a polarity between the solemn, oppressive upper classes and the merrymaking, rebellious lower classes" (179). Though the plays may induce some carnivalesque laughter, it is an imposition of modern assumptions to interpret the juxtaposition of religious matter with this effect solely in terms of a subversive double-mindedness in the culture.

Admittedly, carnivalesque laughter and even transgressive, violent behavior were present during some performances and related activities. Sponsler discusses the presence of diversity within medieval audiences and argues that not all spectators responded to performances in the same way. Audiences consisted of "a highly volatile mix of social groups always threatening to erupt into revolts and tensions that the ruling elites tried to control and order" (23). The York Corpus Christi procession (an ecclesiastical ceremony separate from the performance of the plays), which ostensibly

celebrated the unity of the body of Christ—the Church—saw ongoing strife between the weavers and cordwainers (makers of leather shoes and gloves) (Petersen 97). Historical records from late-medieval Germany document instances in which either performers or audiences deliberately disrupted performances with malicious acts of violence (Wright 4). In England, too, the carnivalesque spirit progressed to an extreme at times, as in the case with the lost *Fergus* play of the Funeral of the Virgin in the York cycle, in which a combination of slapstick and grotesque, derisive humor mocked unbelieving Jews. The performance generated both an inappropriate level of laughter and even fighting and lawsuits among spectators. Consequently, the play was removed from the cycle (James 28).¹² However, such specific performance incidents do not imply a subversive aim for all performances. If the plays were designed to remove the separation between performance and spectators in order to inspire misrule in the audience—for example, through the very comic rebelliousness of Herod, Noah's wife, or Satan—then they are indeed at odds with their own message, or else they are conveying a larger message that such a spirit is permissible as long as there is an orthodox message alongside it.¹³ Neither of these possibilities, however, treats the potentially subversive elements as a means to an orthodox end.

Other characters in the cycle plays, like the York Satan, appear to threaten the orthodox message by entertaining the audience, yet the spirit of misrule they cultivate becomes itself part of that message when the characters—and the spectators identifying with them—are set in opposition to God and Christ. Herod is one of these characters, famous even into Shakespeare's time for his exaggerated ranting and boasting. In his three appearances in *The York Plays*, Herod opens with long, aureate boasts about his own greatness. In *Herod*, before the three magi enter, he declares his control over all the planets and the thunder (16.1-14). He opens *The Slaughter of the Innocents* by reminding all men to beware of his wrath and power (19.1-16), and in *Christ before Herod* he comically threatens the audience if they do not quiet down and pay attention to him: "Thus shall I britten [hack to pieces] all your bones on brede [all over], / Yea, and lush [strike] all your limbs with lashes," for dragons and giants fear him (*York Mystery Plays* ll.10-14). He is one of the mightiest of comic villains in early English drama, arousing laughter of derision in the audience that reinforces its rejection of the evil he represents. The Herod of the Towneley plays is similarly comic, particularly in *Herod the Great* (the Towneley counterpart to the York *Slaughter of the Innocents*).¹⁴ He expresses in almost juvenile language his ire that a rival king has, according to the magi in an earlier pageant, been born: "Had I that lad in hand, / As I am kyng in land, / I shuld with this steyll brand / Byrkyn all his bonys" (153-6). The playwright makes him ridiculous through such exclamations. Martin Stevens argues that Herod's raving in this play characterizes him as a "common man 'playing' the tyrant" in a carnival inversion of authority (53). Stevens provides a reading of the Herod plays rooted in Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and in Victor Turner's idea of the antistructural "liminoid" activity embodied in festive drama. He observes that much of Herod's language in his comic boasting and ranting parodies the courtly tradition with which the use of royal speech associates him and turns him into "a

parodic figure of ordinary mankind and, at once, of the secular king (with a possible subversive implication that he represents the king best known to his audience, the ruling monarch of England)” (53-4). However, the play does not ridicule civic rulers as though it were merely satire; Herod and his soldiers also represent the “the vicious impulses of the common man” (57). Stevens does not conclude, however, that these opposing voices in the characterization of the villains cause the play to contradict itself; on the contrary, in celebrating misrule, the antistructural in the end reinforces the structural. He recognizes that these opposing forces and visions in the Towneley *Herod* play provide “the spectator with a double vision of the Passion—the carnivalesque and lenten perspectives in dialogic opposition” (61). Through temporarily allowing the opposing voice of the carnivalesque, the play actually supports the teaching of the Church as Herod the Carnival King gives way to Christ the Lenten King and the play “deconstructs its own subversive celebration” (Stevens 61). Stevens’ analysis provides a balanced insight into the relationship between orthodox and potentially subversive elements of religious drama.

Similar rhetorical comedy appears elsewhere in the mystery plays. The Towneley cycle’s *The Murder of Abel* seeks to engage spectators’ sympathy with Cain in order to move them to vicarious participation in his transgression and reveal their need for grace; the villain’s subversive comedy makes the audience emotionally ready to receive and apply the orthodox message. Like the York *Temptation of Christ*, this pageant employs a reverse carnivalesque spirit that subverts subversion itself by inviting the audience to identify temporarily with evil so they may then recognize it in themselves. Before Abel even enters the scene, the play establishes Cain’s cruelty and wickedness through his harsh language and treatment of his servant boy, Garcio (also called Pikeharnes). Carroll notes that Garcio’s opening speech, in which he introduces and warns the audience about Cain, associates the latter with the devil in keeping with an established tradition. However, Carroll observes, Garcio’s fearful warning about his master contrasts with Cain’s actual appearance as a plowman a few moments later (42).¹⁵ Cain enters boisterously, cursing his plow team and taking charge of the audience:¹⁶

Drawes on, God giv you ill to tyme!
Ye stand as ye were fallen in swyme. [swoon]
...
Now yit art thou the warst mare
In plogh that euer I haide. (*Towneley* 2.26-36)

This entrance is comic in two distinct ways: he expresses sentiments surely familiar to many in his audience who have plowed, and his appearance is far less fearsome than Garcio’s description. Furthermore, in performance Cain may actually be addressing audience members with words supposedly aimed at his animals, thereby immediately engaging the audience in the play’s action. This effect, combined with the contrast between the horror Garcio has prepared them for and the simple, mean plowman who has appeared, “serves to involve rather than alienate the spectators,” even though Cain is clearly an evil character from the start (Carroll 44).

Throughout the play Cain curses repeatedly. His first words to Abel are:

Com kis myne ars! Me list not ban;
 As welcom standys theroute.
 Thou shuld haue bide til thou were cald;
 Com nar, and other drife or hald— [either drive or halt]
 And kys the dwillis toute! [the devil's tail]
 Go grese thi shepe vnder the toute,
 For that is the moste lefe. [pleasing to you] (*Towneley* 2.61-7)

Cain says these things because he is the father of all murder, one of the most wicked men in biblical (and therefore, medieval) history. Throughout the play he grumbles and curses Abel and God, expressing no concern for righteousness or fear of God's wrath. However, he is also lively, comic, and perversely charismatic in his expressed independence. Although audience members may be offended by Cain's words, they may at the same time find him entertaining. After Abel first urges him to make a sacrifice, Cain mocks him, saying, "the fox will preche. / How long wilt thou me appech / With thi sermonyng? / Hold thy tong, yit I say" (2.86-9). In reply to these and additional insults, Abel urges sincerely, "Caym, leife this vayn carpyng, / For God giffys the all thi lifyng" (2.99-100). His words express orthodox sentiments, but this play does not present Abel as an attractive or interesting exemplar. Cain's character is far more entertaining. The dialogue throughout the play, while faithfully depicting Abel as good and Cain as evil, also invites the audience to laugh sympathetically with Cain in spite of his rebelliousness. A few lines later, Cain objects extensively to having to give God a portion of his crops:

When I should saw, and wantyd seyde,
 And of corn had full grete neyde,
 Then gaf he me none of his;
 No more will I gif hym of this. (2.126-9)

Cain responds to realistic struggles by expressing feelings—albeit sinful ones—with which his medieval audience can identify. Davidson notes that medieval English dramatizations of Cain such as this one depict his sins consistently with the iconography of the fourteenth-century *Holkham Bible Picture Book*, which "has attributed to him the deadly sins of Covetousness, Sloth (for not being quick about attending to sacrifice), Envy, and Wrath. To these may be added Pride, which is central to his behavior and stands in direct contrast to Abel's humility" ("Cain" 209-213). Though Cain epitomizes the immorality that the audience should shun, the familiarity, boldness, and very transgressiveness of Cain's sentiments makes his sinfulness comically attractive.

The sympathy for this devil-like character whom the audience traditionally considered "the first person to be fully suffused with evil" (Davidson 204), does not overturn the pious message of the play, however. Edward Uehling observes,

the major thrust of this pageant is not on the hope of salvation but on the revelation of human nature in all its complexity and consequently on the need for salvation....

The Wakefield Master encourages our imaginative participation by thoroughly exploring the sensibility of Cain...in the extremes of his violent individuality we see impulses common to this or any time. (61-2)

The action turns more serious when Cain murders Abel and receives God's judgment. In response to Abel's final words "Veniance, veniance, Lord, I cry! / For I am slain and not guilty," Cain says, "Yei, ly ther, old shrew! ly ther, ly!" He then presumably addresses the audience with, "And if any of you think I did amys, / I shal it amend wars [worse] then it is" (2.330-4). He acknowledges his evil, expresses some fear for the consequences, but does not repent. At this point he ceases to be comic as he continues boisterously cursing God in response to God's pronouncing of judgment. The comedy becomes more distancing than uniting, inviting more derisive—rather than sympathetic—laughter at Cain as the audience sees his evil more clearly. As he leaves, Cain bids the audience farewell, calling them "fellows all" (2.465). He reminds the audience of their earlier identification with him, of the humanity they share. The carnivalesque, transgressive comedy thus draws the audience temporarily to identify with evil in order to see it in themselves more clearly.

In her study of "transgressive language" in medieval drama, Lynn Forest-Hill addresses the significant grotesque violence in the passion sequences within the mystery cycles. In the York *Crucifixion*, as the soldiers insult Christ, physically abuse Him, and crucify Him, much of their action includes laughter among themselves and even invites it from the audience. This grotesque comedy may at first appear subversive of the sacred purpose of the plays; however, as Forest-Hill observes, "when historical villains name Christ they cannot alter His status, but rather draw the audience's attention to His passive innocence" (81). She points out, for instance, that in the first York pageant showing Christ before Pilate, Cayphas tells Pilate that Jesus "lokis like a lambe" (*York* 30.274). For a Christian audience, this insulting suggestion that Christ's innocent appearance is phony will actually remind the audience of Christ's identity as the pure Lamb of God and show the villains to be even more wicked. Throughout the cycle transgressive language (much of it comic) serves to identify villains as evil (80-1). She also explains the intended effect on the audience of such comedy:

Dramatists set out to control audience response by using laughter to condemn behaviour and attitudes which were unacceptable to society, or by demonstrating that spectators were themselves sinning as they enjoyed the entertainment. (79)

This effect begins with the vicarious experience of transgression invited by the comedy; however, this reverse subversion seeks to effect the spectators' procession *through* that vicarious sense of complicity in the transgressive behavior. The rhetorical goal of this process is spectators' recognition of their own guilt and subsequent repentance (or other orthodox response) to the non-comic religious message of a given play. However, contrary to Bakhtinian theory, the plays do so deliberately, not to encourage rebellion but to give the audience first-hand awareness of their own susceptibility to temptation and ultimately draw them into a fuller understanding of

Christ's grace.

Some carnivalesque comedy draws the audience into the subversive, rebellious spirit in order to produce a catharsis in the audience that purges them of those impulses.¹⁷ Carroll explains that through careful control of the comedy, the playwrights shift the audience's emotional involvement arising from the humor to "strong involvement on a spiritual level. As a result, the comedy of the cycle plays is capable of bringing each spectator to a more personal resolution of religious doubts" (18). The catharsis comes through the audience's identification with Cain. He is one of the few true villains in the cycles with whom the audience is invited to identify. Cain is just as wicked as Herod, even more so in the medieval tradition,¹⁸ but the Wakefield Master develops Cain as someone in whom the audience members can see themselves as he struggles with planting crops and offering God his due (45). Carroll observes that spectators' "uneasy stance toward Cain" draws them into emotional identification with him prior to Abel's murder (56). The audience reaches a "comic plateau" through the carnivalesque participation in the comedy; that response leads them to

a point of emotional fatigue from which traditional religious responses once again seem logical and reassuring....Through comedy, the complacent audience is coaxed through a cycle of faith and doubt, ultimately strengthening their belief by playfully granting freedom to consider other choices....their plays, therefore use intense, shocking comedy not to divert the spectators but to bring about acceptance on an emotional level. (97)

Gilbert Lazier recognizes a similar effect in the "brutal comedy" of the passion sequences, applying Freud's comic theory that humor can purge the spectator of the fear of pain as one sees pain acted out. For a medieval spectator who was intimately familiar with the physical suffering of sickness and death, this comedy "provided a pleasant emotional release for the constant inner fear of pain" (45-6).

This catharsis, which purges the negative impulses by indulging them for a brief time may not traditionally fall under the domain of "rhetoric." However, it moves the audience to embrace the religious message of a play in much the same way as more direct persuasive strategies. The medieval understanding of how an individual was moved to action takes into account the affective component of human nature as well as the cognitive. The purgative effect of comedy reveals that medieval persuasion was accomplished on anything but a purely intellectual level, particularly in the popular art form of the drama.

I have contended that festive, carnivalesque laughter and serious religious exhortation are far from mutually exclusive in these plays. In particular, the charismatic, comic boisterousness of Satan as he takes the stage in order to tempt Jesus to sin in the York cycle is part of a carefully calculated rhetorical strategy designed to catch the audience off their guard and tempt *them* to identify with the tempter and enjoy his cunning. Some Bakhtinian readings of mystery plays with similar comic villains, while yielding some useful understanding of the culture, do

not allow for the possibility of an even more complex rhetoric at work through the comedy. In an age so conscious of the dichotomy and tension between the earthly and the heavenly, the sophisticated and deliberate use of this tension to convey and reinforce the institutional position should offer no surprise. In her survey of critical responses to Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, Martha Bayless argues that the violation of order that the carnivalesque celebrates actually serves to reinforce the audience's awareness of the order (183-4). The orthodox aim of what may at first appear to be subversive comedy depends on the common faith of the medieval audience. The spectators in fifteenth-century York, despite differences in age, guild, or social position, were homogenous in their foundational beliefs about God, human nature, and evil. They could, therefore, watch a comic performance of Satan that made them laugh with temporary agreement or sympathy and attracted them with his ethos; however, the comedy and rhetoric only moved them toward Satan in order to help them see their need to move toward God in real life. Similarly, a medieval audience could laugh at Herod's boasting or Cain's crude abuse of Abel without fear that such laughter would undermine an orthodox view of their wickedness. Such drama points to a faith that not only gave freedom to laugh, but a faith strengthened through the comedy, which reminded spectators of their own fallibility and made the forgiveness and grace at the center of that faith more inviting.

Notes

1. Portions of this paper originally appeared in "Now mendys oure chere from sorow": The Rhetoric of Humor in Middle English Drama, Spiritual Instruction, and Chaucerian Religious Comedy," Diss. The Catholic University of America (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2005); portions were also presented in "Temptation in York: Satan, Eve, Jesus and Audience in 'The Fall of Man' and 'The Temptation' Pageants, GSA Conference, Texas A & M U Commerce, 2000.
2. In the original text of the York plays, the individual plays (also frequently referred to as "pageants") are identified only by the guilds that performed them, e.g. "The Smyths." In this paper I employ the subject titles assigned by Beadle for the York cycle and by the respective editors of the other cycles mentioned.
3. The biblical sources for this pageant are Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:9-12, and Luke 4:1-13.
4. York 5, *The Fall of Man*, performed by the Coopers' guild. This pageant is also the most recent appearance of Satan in the cycle prior to his entrance in pageant 22, *The Temptation of Christ*.
5. Throughout this discussion I primarily use "comedy" and "comic" in the narrow

sense which denotes action on stage or literature that aims to induce laughter in the audience. I do not discount the broader use of the terms for action or narrative that ends happily or in hope, but this essay is particularly concerned with the presence of laughter-inviting comedy, which I also use synonymously with “humor.”

6. British Library MS Additional 35290.

7. Much recent scholarship on the bawdy humor of devils and evil human characters in medieval drama interprets their dramatic effect in terms of carnival and misrule, seeing the humor as either subverting the serious message of the play or serving as a temporary transgression of social and religious boundaries that is necessary for maintaining them. A primary source of these ideas is Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. Martha Bayless provides a useful summary of Bakhtinian carnivalesque and other subversion theory of medieval comedy, particularly with respect to her study of medieval Latin parody. My conclusions about Middle English drama support hers; she finds these approaches valid in part but “based on a purely theoretical set of modern assumptions about humor” and insufficient for understanding the complexities of medieval humor (182).

8. Bakhtin’s observations are rooted primarily in Continental literature, where the carnival of which he writes took place. Because England had no known established carnivals of the kind on which Bakhtin bases his argument, “carnavalesque” more properly describes the effect when discussing in English literature.

9. York 11, *Moses and Pharaoh*; 16, *Herod / The Magi*; and 19, *The Slaughter of the Innocents*.

10. The performance of the cycle of plays in York initially took place on the same day as the annual feast and procession of Corpus Christi day. In the late-fifteenth century, the ecclesiastical procession (an event completely separate from the procession of pageant wagons for performing the plays throughout the town) was moved to the day after the feast (Beadle, “Introduction” 28).

11. For example, Gash interprets one comic passage by the villains in lines 135-8 of the play as “a veiled way of expressing scepticism about the celibate clergy’s right to pry into the affairs of the married laity at confession” (91). See also Gash 79, 81-2.

12. See also the *York Memorandum Book*, Part II, Ed. M. Sellers (Surtees Soc., 1915) 124.

13. In contrast to Bakhtinian interpretations, for example, Robert Weimann sees the realistic, the grotesque, and the comic portions of the cycle plays as a positive means of “interrelating the message of Christianity, the representation of society and the

self-expression of ordinary people” (97).

14. The Towneley cycle shows significant influence from the York cycle; several plays were borrowed with only slight modification, and others, while generally different, have small amounts of borrowed material. *Herod the Great* is one of the Towneley plays by the skilled playwright known to scholars as the Wakefield Master, who is believed to have written at least six and influenced several other of the plays (Meredith 146-7, 150-1). This play shows similarities that suggest the Wakefield Master was at least familiar with his York counterpart (*The Towneley Plays* 521).

15. She cites Oliver F. Emerson, “Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English,” *PMLA* 21 (1906): 831-929 as tracing this tradition in the Middle Ages.

16. The plow team may have consisted of several animals, possible four horses and four oxen or simply a horse and a mare with the names Cain uses (Davidson, “Cain” 213). Davidson cites A. C. Cawley, ed., *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester UP, 1958) 91, 186-7 and Margaret Rogerson, “The Medieval Plough Team on Stage: Wordplay and Reality in the Towneley *Mactacio Abel*,” *Comparative Drama* 28 (1994): 182-200.

17. Paul Ruggiers appropriates Aristotelian and Freudian treatments of amusement and catharsis to argue for the presence of a “comic catharsis” in much of Chaucer’s poetry, whereby “comedy, being vicarious, gives innocent release to the untoward pleasure that attaches to even so-called painful emotions” (208).

18. Clifford Davidson provides a useful overview of the medieval understanding of Cain’s evil, based on biblical, apocryphal, iconographic, and dramatic evidence.

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