

Estella Ciobanu¹

The Scatological End of Eschatology in Mankind, or the Grotesque Body of/in the Text

Abstract: “[Y]owr body ys full of Englysh Laten,” *New Guise* insults Mercy in the Middle English play *Mankind*. Symbolically one of the four Daughters of God, yet here also an embodiment of the confessor-priest and, given his preacherly penchant, of the preacher so ubiquitous in the later Middle Ages, Mercy – the representative of the ecclesial hegemony – is perceived by his worldly-minded detractors as pompous in language and pre-eminently corporeal. *New Guise*’s is an irreverent metaphor for the cleric as the corporeal container of hybrid language, which ultimately makes Mercy a body/language hybrid. *Mankind* thrives as much on theatricality as on linguistic abuse, especially of Latin, whether as macaronic Latin or in parodic reduplication. Frequent recourse to Latin renders the play a specimen of both the overall polyglossia of the many-language culture and discursive formations of the time – in late medieval England as well as the Catholic church – and of the heteroglossia at work in any utterance, from phrase to discourse, which medieval religious theatre in the vernacular hinges upon. This paper aims to unravel the grotesque intertwining of scatological and eschatological discourses in a self-reflexive play centred on the body used and abused both physically and linguistically, and argues the inadvisability of “censoring” its irreverent heteroglossia.

Key words: *Mankind* (Middle English play), the grotesque, carnival(esque), heteroglossia, glossolalia, ventriloquism, poaching, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel de Certeau

“[Y]owr body ys full of Englysh Laten” (124), *New Guise* insults Mercy in the Middle English play *Mankind*.² Symbolically one of the four Daughters of God (*M*, 840-3; Ps 85.11-12), yet here also an embodiment of the confessor-priest and the preacher so ubiquitous in the later Middle Ages, Mercy – the representative of the ecclesial hegemony – is perceived by his worldly-minded detractors as pompous in language and pre-eminently corporeal. *New Guise*’s is thus an irreverent metaphor for the cleric as the corporeal container of hybrid language, which ultimately makes Mercy a body/language hybrid. *Mankind* thrives as much on theatricality (Ciobanu, “Theatricality”) as on linguistic abuse,

¹ Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

² Quotations from *Mankind* retain the Middle English characters “ȝ” (*yogh* – modern “gh” or “y”) and “þ” (*thorn* – modern “th”), as well as the East Anglian “xall” (*shall*); however, other spelling features have been regularised.

especially of Latin, whether as macaronic Latin³ or in parodic reduplication. Frequent recourse to Latin renders the play a specimen of both the overall *polyglossia* of the many-language culture and discursive formations of the time – in late medieval England as well as the Catholic church – and of the *heteroglossia* at work in any utterance, from phrase to discourse, which medieval religious theatre in the vernacular hinges upon. This paper aims to unravel the grotesque intertwining of scatological and eschatological discourses in a self-reflexive play centred on the body used and abused both physically and linguistically, and argues the inadvisability of “censoring” its irreverent heteroglossia.

Mankind seems a particularly apt illustration *avant la lettre* of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of language as formulated in “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” (1935). Bakhtin pairs off the centripetal tendency of language, its drive towards homogeneity and stability, which results in *monoglossia* – the national/official language or the hegemonic discourse before the historical configuration of a national language – with a centrifugal drive, linguistic heterogeneity manifest both diachronically and synchronically as *heteroglossia* – an agonistic co-existence, even clash, of professional sub-languages and dialects, with their particular sociolinguistic points of view structured differentially in terms of power/knowledge. Related to the latter, *polyglossia* designates the co-existence and interaction of several languages, as was also the case of western Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

Heteroglossia, however, characterises both language and any individual utterance in it: Bakhtin conceives of communication in *dialogic* terms (Holquist 37-9). Not only is dialogue the underlying condition of all communication, but meaning emerges on the boundary of consciousness between people, for they use words that are both socially originated – as available to different subject positions – and infused with past and future voices. It is at this juncture, I submit, that behind the many different agonistic, sociolinguistically grounded voices within communication and within the chain of addressivity *the human presence* keeps lurking, and with it an awareness both *embodied* – the corporeal – and *positioned* – the socio-political.

Such inherent dialogism of communication is ontologically akin to what in his *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin names the grotesque. To the orderly, static, well-defined and self-sufficient classical body (320), Bakhtin opposes the grotesque body which exceeds limits and is never complete or self-sufficient, but always in process (316-7). The grotesque comes to the fore in the subversive inversions and debasement characteristic of carnival, in physical or linguistic acts which demote the sublime in favour of the “material bodily lower stratum” and derision (370, 410-1), albeit often sanctioned by the hegemony. Such grotesque visibility arguably *embodies* the very dynamics of “interanimation” qua relationality at work in verbal communication.

Bakhtin’s postulates on both language/communication and the grotesque conceivably resonate with two propositions by Michel de Certeau. Discussing *glossolalia*, in “Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias,” he posits the inherently split nature of *reasonable* communication

³ Since the script’s use of macaronic Latin in the Vices’ derisive speeches echoes schoolchildren’s in-joke, it works as a ventriloquist instance of heteroglossia, viz. linguistic awareness pushed to the extreme of deliberate mockery, and hence as much more than what Diller (14-15) identifies as a linguistic means of defining the character’s spiritual condition. However, Diller (15) rightly invokes such linguistic variety and sophistication as indicative of an educated dramatist.

through its grounding in the body, not just the mind.⁴ In his “Reading as Poaching,” de Certeau (169) contends that the reader does not passively adopt the author’s intended meaning but rather re-creates it. *Poaching* – in cultural theory, the subordinate groups’ appropriation and reorganisation of the “meaning” of mainstream concepts – appears therefore to be virtually the most subversive form heteroglossia can assume *intentionally*, especially when the consumers of cultural goods craft new meanings for old ideas often in the form of mock ventriloquism.

Where did *Mankind* stand in the late medieval theatrical, spatial, professional and communicative environs of East Anglia, the flourishing agricultural and mercantile region where it originated? *Mankind* dates in manuscript from about 1465-70, yet its performance circumstances have not been elucidated. Seemingly “the quintessential – and earliest – popular drama for a travelling troupe” (Clopper 191), *Mankind* has often been regarded as a “modest professional drama performed in an inn” (191), whether in- or outdoors, and whose audience, as suggested in the script (*M*, 29), is socially mixed; in fact, a scripted appeal to the yeomanry to join the characters in the singing of a lewd Christmas round (334-5) has made some scholars identify a “popular orientation” in this play. Nonetheless, as Clopper (192) argues, the literalness of the script does not exclude the possibility for this play to have been either a Christmas or perhaps a Shrovetide amusement performed at some manor house or, according to Meg Twycross (66-70), in the great hall of a noble household or college. Unfortunately, not only is there no record of any performances of *Mankind*, but little evidence comes from East Anglia for the production of other plays too; as Clopper (202) cautions, scarcity of evidence does not imply, however, that such plays did not have a performance life, but rather may suggest that they were “occasional, rare, and without extensive runs.”

A brief description of *Mankind* will provide the context for understanding the play’s heteroglossic cannibalism of the Latin church’s discursive corpus, a form of poaching on the sacred language for purposes divergent from the ecclesial agenda. *Mankind* thematises labour as a remedy for the deadly sin of sloth and therefore seems to be a theatrically effective didactic piece intent on teaching and enforcing the basics of Christian behaviour to its Christian audience. Not only does the confessor-preacher Mercy enjoin that Mankind till the field industriously, but the latter, having internalised the sermon, counterpoises his earnest agricultural labour to the enticements offered by Nowadays, New Guise and Nought, the distraction vices. Quite appropriately for the spiritual tug-of-war between soul and body/flesh⁵ dramatised here, Mercy’s and Mankind’s drab homilies in the opening and closing episodes are copiously interspersed with the Vices’ *enterlude* routine (Ciobanu, “Theatricality” 257).⁶ While unattended by their leader Mischief, the three Vices deride Mankind but fail to lure him away from his toil, through scatological jokes, singing and dancing; threatened with the spade and eventually beaten up in a comic slapstick routine,

⁴ An outline of de Certeau’s theorisation of glossolalia pertaining to the present analysis is available in my “Glossolalia, Heteroglossia and the Grotesque Body” (190-3).

⁵ In Christian parlance, the *flesh* – as opposed to both body and soul – largely names the principle of unruliness which divorces the human race in its post-lapsarian condition from the Creator (Biernoff 26-34).

⁶ The Vices refer to various entertaining activities – “game” (69), “sporte” (78), “reu[e]ll” (82), “pley” (84), “rewelinge” (85), “dysporte” (167) – in terms now notorious for their ambiguity by *modern* taxonomic standards (Kolve 12-20; Mills 6-11; Clopper 3-19; Dillon 144-6).

they lament having been torn asunder. Later, Mischief provides for another round of amusement in a routine evoking the mummers' quack doctor: he promises to cure the Vices' injured parts by chopping them off and then restoring each one. The play thus dramatises the carnivalesque means whereby, on Mercy's temporary departure, the World⁷ orchestrates – even before the appearance of the devil, with his (diabolised) theatrical skills – the manipulation of Mankind and indirectly presumably also the audience's profession of faith, in an attempt to subvert his/their religious allegiance through excessive merry-making. While initially the Vices appear as pre-eminently entertaining figures, the happy denouement of Mankind's reconversion to orthodoxy and Mercy's closing sermon *ad spectatores*, nonetheless, expose them as demonic minions insidiously attempting to win over the unwary into perdition. Was this *grave* lesson – serious because of its *eschatological* import – one so comprehended by all spectators? We should be wary of a monoglossic answer.

The grotesque body in pieces

The highly theatrical quack doctor episode should give us pause. There's no telling whether the audience would have perceived this as a theatrically self-reflexive demystification of the quack doctor routine or as the funny routine itself, yet one presumably never entirely able, nor meant, to fool the spectators (Ciobanu, "Theatricality" 256):

MYSCHIEFF

Why grete (*weep*) 3e so, why?

NEW GYSE

Alasse, master, alasse, my privyte (*private parts*)! ...

NOWADAYS

Here, here, se my hede, goode master!

MYSCHIEFF

Lady, helpe! sely darlynge (*poor dear*), ven, ven!

I xall hele þe[e] of þi peyn;

I xall smytt of þi hede and sett yt on again (*I shall chop off your head and set it on again*).

NOUGHT

By owr Lady, ser, a fayer playster (*[that's] a fair cure*)!

⁷ This is an allegorical illustration of the proverbial triad of "the World, the Flesh and the Devil," a Christian conceit warning against the spiritual dangers of succumbing to material worldly pursuits (*M*, 768): the Vices represent the world with its mundane distractions and Titivillus is *the* devil, Mercy explains to Mankind (885-9). Diller (12) perceptively identifies the absent character of flesh as "man's physical needs," even as he takes the script's Christian moralisation of "þe unclene concupissens of □our body" (*M*, 888) at face value.

Wyll 3e of wyth hys hede! Yt ys a schreude charme! (*Will you [chop] off his head? That's a wicked trick!*)
As for me, I have non harme.
I were loth to forbere myn arme (*I'd be loath to lose my arm*).
3e pley *in nomine patris*, choppe!⁸

NEW GYSE

3e xall not choppe my jewellys (*testicles*), and I may (*if I can help it*).

NOWADAYS

3e, Cristys crose, wyll 3e smyght my hede away?
Ther? Wer on? and on? Oute! 3e xall not assay (*try*).
I myght well be callyde a foppe (*fool*).

MYSCHIEFF

I kan choppe yt of and make (*fix*) yt agayn.

NEW GYSE

I hade a schreude *recumbentibus* but I fele no peyn (*I had a wicked recompense, but I feel no pain*).

NOWADAYS

Ande my hede ys all save and holl agayn. (429-30, 433-48)

Nought's mockery of Nowadays' fears of losing his head and New Guise's regarding his "jewellys" subtly acknowledges the "schreude charme"/*wicked trick* (438) involved, whether black magic or mere stage conjuring tricks. On the other hand, for all his allegorical role as evil distracter, Mischief is a carnivalesque stand-in for Christ the Doctor of souls and, at one remove, his priestly lieutenants. Medieval preaching, including sermons on the Eucharist, and the Catholic sacrament of the *viaticum* or last unction administered to dying Christians emphasised the spiritual healing which Christ worked through clerical mediation and which worldly medicine couldn't vie with. Likewise, the medieval practice and *exempla* of visits to holy shrines to supplicate the Virgin Mary or the saints – as intercessors with Christ – to heal the ill connected the spiritual and the bodily not only in mysterious ways but also in rather palpable terms, as the beneficiaries would return to the shrine with *ex votos*.⁹

If the quack doctor is – from the perspective of the Christian hegemony – a charlatan impersonating a doctor who is himself but a poor replica of Christ the Healer, then this second-degree discourse of theatrical healing which here gains pride of place mounts a (comic) heteroglossic challenge to the supremacist monoglossia of the church, even as it

⁸ *In the name of the father...* (*M*, 441) echoes the last blessing – and legitimation of the cruel act of justice – before the axe came down in medieval executions (of aristocrats).

⁹ The proliferation of wax-made votive offerings of cured body parts coincided with the "vogue" for the cult of relics and the cult of the wounds of Christ.

actually ventriloquises the latter's discursive practices. Furthermore, the limb restoration episode mocks (in both senses) one typical representation of martyrdom. Christian martyrs are often depicted during their torture and dismemberment, yet their iconic image shows the body at once whole and reduplicated *in part*: the chopped head or limb is both restored in its right anatomical place and presented separately to Christ or the viewer as the token of eternal devotion to Christianity. In *Mankind*, the martyrs to the evil cause are first limb damaged by their future victim, Mankind, and then further injured so as to be healed by their master, himself the lieutenant of Titivillus, here the Devil incarnate. Staging this may have enhanced the sense of theatricality, or rather artificiality, of the proffered cure. Like in the popular cult of relics and the cult of Christ's wounds, in *Mankind* the injured body part ultimately gives the measure of how and wherefore restoration is possible, as also dramatised, this time in earnest, in plays of miraculous conversions to Christianity through body damage and subsequent healing. Ironically, then, in a play purportedly intent on teaching Christian mores, some of the most important figures and tropes of Christianity have been successfully appropriated and inverted: *Mankind's* grotesque theatrical game challenges and occludes the dividing line, if any, between body and discourse, the good and the evil, injuring and healing, re-membering (after dismemberment) and remembering (through spectacular rendition).

The carnival(esque) body of Lent and the fundamentals of belief, or the return of the repressed

"[Y]owr body ys full of Englysh Laten" (124), New Guise lampoons Mercy. The preacher's hybrid speech is perceived by Mercy's avowed enemy as a misplaced token of self-importance and by extrapolation a token of the institution's puffed-up pretence. While manifestly a Lent figure akin to Brueghel's,¹⁰ so in principle a *disembodied* voice of spiritualised reason, Mercy insidiously transmogrifies into Carnival: his haughty Englished idiolect, unless it is Latinised English, grotesquely exceeds his body (of *sententiae*) when it overflows the world and linguistic margins alike through preaching, even as it remains grounded in the body. Linguistic excessiveness can explode Mercy's body, as New Guise further derides the preacher: "I am aferde yt [your body] wyll brest/*burst*" (125). Looking at these lines in their context, it appears that New Guise, the figure of the *modernus* and of fashion itself, ab-uses Mercy literally – separates him from himself.¹¹ Not only does New Guise use the body trope improperly, reviling the body as the token of a priest inflated with

¹⁰ Pettitt (192-4) makes an appealing case for *Mankind* as an English analogue of the German *Fasnachtspiel* – Shrovetide dramatic revelry – and likens the play's psychomachia convention to the Carnival/Lent clash as featured in Brueghel the Elder's *The Combat between Carnival and Lent* (1559).

¹¹ Documented in English before the 1430s, *abusen* ("to misuse sth, to abuse sb sexually; to falsify, to betray; to behave improperly") derives from MF *abuser*, which comes from the Latin *abūsus* ("misuse, wasting"). The Latin noun corresponds to the verb *abūtor* ("to waste; to misuse, abuse; to utilize"), a compound of *ūsus* ("use; power of exercising; practice; experience; function," from *ūtor*, "to use; to manage; to practise, exercise") and the prefix *ab-* ("from, away from," to signify departure from some point, as from source and origin, or separation) (*MED*, s.v. "abūsen"; *OLD*, s.v. "abūsus," "ūsus," "abūtor," "ūtor," "ab-").

pride in both his office and aureate diction, but the Vice also contemplates the prospect of this body's self-injury (125), soon obliquely derided in the joke about a butcher having chopped a carcass into pieces: "'Pravo te,' quod þe bocher onto me / When I stale a leg a motun" / "'Damn you,' said the butcher to me / When I stole a leg of mutton (126-7).¹² Such body isotopy of the (biological) body and (linguistic) corpus shows New Guise playing at the tormentor who butchers Mercy's body linguistically yet also assaults it physically, thereby butchering symbolically the ecclesiastical Latinate corpus Mercy symbolises. New Guise ventriloquises the latter idiom to parody the apostolic speaking in tongues even as it gets travestied within the joke as the stolen mutton leg of an implicitly already butchered beast, while he actually curses in Latin the authorised wielder of both Latin and the binding power of the word, albeit displaced as someone else's direct speech. Linguistic corruption as abuse is thus aligned with its physical counterpart, assault/*sparagmos*, to attack the body of an ironically named "cunning clerke" (128) – erudite, yet also shrewd, priest (*MED*, s.v. "cōnning," "cōnninge").

Nor can Mercy withstand Nowadays' exquisitely wrought, albeit excremental, piece of chicanery, where the *joke* grotesquely travesties what theological discourse proffers as eschatological *reality*. When Nowadays urges Mercy to translate into Latin and in "clerycall manere" – to carry over discursive and socio-religious boundaries¹³ – a commonsensical and yet nonsensical joke about the grotesque transformation of milk into curd through digestion and its elimination as "turdys," he connects indecorously the matter of digestion with the wrong body orifice. Mercy as the butt of the scatological joke both is soiled in the face with excrement and loses face as an expositor of church dogmas:¹⁴

NOWADAYS

I prey yow hertyly, worschyppull clerke,
To haue þis Englysch mad in Laten:
"I have etun a dyschfull of curdys,
Ande I have schetun yowr mowth full of turdys,"
Now opyn yowr sachell with Laten wordys
Ande sey me þis in clerycall manere! (129-34)

¹² New Guise's aborted anecdote shows the Vice adept at poaching on Christian topoi: is the mutton leg a torn piece of a Christic symbol – akin to the cult of Christ's wounds – turned non-Eucharistic meal?

¹³ Translation involves here rendering Latinate – sublime – bodily functions (e.g. eating–defecation) named in the vernacular so as to associate the speaker with either the *curia*, hence refined manners, or *rustica*, hence uncouth manners. In ecclesial parlance, *translation* can refer to saints' *apotheosis*; the joke thus furthers the previous inversion by positing the saints' (posthumous) spiritual elevation to heaven and implicit overcoming of biological limitations due to the original sin. Nowadays' debasement of eschatological hopes as but a scatological account of digestion is nevertheless premised on the carnivalesque logic of "praise-abuse" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 426-34).

¹⁴ Some of these dogmas, like transubstantiation, are rather unpalatable when taken literally, i.e. in accordance with the stipulation of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), especially considering the worldly afterlife of the Host once it has been eaten and digested, a notion which troubled many prelates and theologians throughout the Middle Ages (Macy).

The joke encapsulates a coarsely phrased yet (grotesquely) realistic view of the life and death of the body: the digestion of curd – itself pointing to a rather “sour” perversion of nourishment, viz. milk turned sour and thickened, and likely echoing the Isaian “curds and honey” distinction between evil and good (Isa 7.14)¹⁵ – ends in defecation, here displaced in carnivalesque fashion to the inappropriate end: mouth and its soiling-*cum*-silencing. Tarnished communicative decorum notwithstanding, the jocular interest in *substantial* change resonates with the topic of the eschatological discourse of afterlife salvation (or doom) and transubstantiation dogma alike. In Nowadays’ scatological joke, however, such change involves grotesquely an interchangeability of orifices linked to digestion (132) both of food and, metaphorically, of teachings. Ironically, what in New-Guise’s view is Mercy’s ventriloquist *body* full of “Englysch Laten” (124) is demoted here to a mere *bag* full of Latin words (133-4): for Nowadays, clerical ventriloquism is but inflated artifice. Later on, Mischief too insults Mercy for the latter’s vain dissemination of lies: “3e are all to-gloryede in yowr termys; 3e make many a lesse (*you tell many lies*)” (774). Mischief’s assessment of Mercy’s linguistic, hence identitary, *performance*¹⁶ during the cleric’s “second coming” is no different from Nowadays’ view of Mercy’s artful manipulation of language, a bagful of alien words (133). How did the medieval spectators react to such abuse, especially as they were themselves no strangers to preacherly rhetoric?

When the Vices slander Mercy *in absentia*, fabricating as they do a lie about Mercy’s social delinquency – theft conducive to hanging (595-601, 792) – so as to win Mankind’s allegiance, they ultimately engineer a return of the repressed. The taboo on *appropriation* – both *theft*, whether anecdotal, e.g. New Guise’s joke about the mutton leg, or actual, i.e. New-Guise’s (622-3), Nowadays’ (633-5) and Mischief’s vicious exploits (640-50), and *fornication* with a married woman (645-6), which infringe two commandments – is transgressed, the Vices claim. Moreover, the taboo is rendered null and void when the transgressor is no other than a godly personage, even a persona of God – as one of his daughters – or at least of his earthly vicar, not just the pope but all priests.

Strive as he may to proffer a convincing story of afterlife redemption through this-life *askesis*, Mercy is derided as incapable of apostolic glossolalia, even as he ostensibly speaks in tongues. For the Vices, the preacher ventriloquises the discourse of (church) power with a view not so much to disseminating its teachings as to asserting his own affiliation with

¹⁵ Notwithstanding the degree of familiarity the medieval spectators may have had with curd proper, the biblical hint could not have been entirely lost on them, despite their clerically mediated and partial knowledge of the Bible, especially because of its context, the much insisted upon “Immanuel Prophecy” (Isa 7.14-15). Nowadays’ scatological joke ostensibly verges on the eschatological: the contextual (inadvertent?) allusion to the prophecy of the Virgin Birth, as the church routinely interpreted the Isaian verse, may have tarnished the sublime aura attached to the Incarnation and also derided the related vexing issue of the Adamic sin transmitted sexually, according to the theological discourse of abjection. Furthermore, what is brought to the fore here is the “curds” associated with Christic(-like) knowledge (and consequent rejection) of evil; the script’s association of curds/evil with defecation (“turds”) only further carnivalises and extols the lowly and so-called evil end (in all senses) of life, as well as, if my assumption is correct, thereby obliquely de-mythologising the Virgin Birth itself as a worldly affair.

¹⁶ See Judith Butler’s theorisation of gender and body as existing solely in *performance* rather than being (immutable) essences, which attempts to circumvent the essentialist bias of structuralist discourses on gender/body (esp. 32-44, 170-80).

power. Accordingly, his intentional double-speak makes Mercy a figure of the *hypocrita*, the ancient actor/interpreter later, especially in early Christian times, decried as a deceiver. Like the Vices, Mercy is a poacher and a heteroglossic ventriloquist; what differs is whose perspective is offered on transgression, hence the script's intimation of an inherent relativity of what/who is good or evil. Beneath the voiced discourse of ecclesial power there lurks – in cracks within Mercy's (linguistic) body – an inarticulate linguistic helplessness due to the preacher's inability to convey an originary discourse/power.

Such carnivalesque demotion and verbal thrashing as characterise the Vices' abuse of Mercy is consistent with the demotion manifest in the popular tradition of the world upside down. When Nought mocks him, Nowadays travesties the carnivalesque "kiss my arse" as the pompous "*osculare fundamentum!*" (142). The grotesque mouth-to-anus encounter, which has also threatened Mercy (132), is further displaced and enriched with a sexual innuendo in Nought's image of perversely granted indulgences, and then reappears in New Guise's curse at Mankind on encountering the man's earnest agricultural-*cum*-spiritual labour and his spade. Here is Nought's abuse of Mercy once the Vice produces a papal pardon allegedly found on the cleric:

NOUGHT

Lo, master, lo, here ys a pardon bely-mett (*a pardon to meet/satisfy the belly*).

Yt ys grawntyde of Pope Pokett (*It is granted by Pope Wallet / bought with bribes*),

Yf 3e wyll putt yowr nose in hys wyffys sokett (*If you put your nose into his wife's hole/vagina*),

3e xall have forty days of pardon. (143-6)

Nought mocks not only the simoniacal misuse of sacraments, often decried in the later Middle Ages by the clergy and laity alike, but also the sinful payment "in kind" for such favours, here by having sex, though likely "against kind" or contrary to nature¹⁷ and, worse, with the wife of the celibate pontiff. The joke is particularly offensive in the context – where Nought, literally Nobody or Zero, a figure of alterity-*cum*-nothingness, lampoons the authoritative Mercy – since it references sex unabashedly as the price for purchasing a forty-day period indulgence from "Pope Pokett." While in a Christian-inflected discourse *forty* hints at culinary/sexual abstinence during Advent or Lent fasting patterned on Jesus' forty-day fasting in the wilderness, *to buy*, the verb naming the transaction, is itself very

¹⁷ Whether *nose* is to be taken literally or metaphorically (as referencing the penis), the sex envisaged is a "sin against nature," with a term investigated by Carolyn Dinshaw with regard to late medieval theological views on sexuality and their dissemination to the laity by parish priests, e.g. John Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests* (late-fourteenth–mid-fifteenth century). "Against kind" becomes fully intelligible only by "determin[ing] what things, in realms other than the explicitly sexual, are deemed to be against nature," e.g. heresy, leprosy and treachery (Dinshaw 6): Mirk was writing in an unsettled climate where Lollardy was rampant. Discourses of heresy and of sexual irregularities were linked and mutually constitutive in late medieval western Europe, yet Mirk's age was not alone in voicing the church's anxiety over illicit erotics (Holsinger 140-60) – after first excluding it as illicit.

much charged in such a discourse because of its salience for redemptive theology.¹⁸ A salacious joke could thus virtually turn the tables upon the soteriological narrative through its derision of abusive ecclesiastical practices, and render Mercy comically ambiguous.

A curse levelled at Mankind – for his misprision of the bawdy “Crystemes song” (333) which the Vices have just sung – reverts to the grotesque mouth-to-anus coupling evoked in Nowadays’ insult to Mercy:

NEW GYSE

Ey, Mankynde, Gode spede yow wyth yowr spade!
I xall tell yow of a maryage:
I wolde yowr mowth and hys ars þat þis made
Wer maryede junctly together. (345-8)

The unsavoury marriage (346, 348) is all the more grotesque as its immediate co-text introduces an excremental twist into the metaphor of oneness by evoking monastic communion through a homosexual innuendo.¹⁹

In effect, the Christmas ditty itself praises the unholy birth of faeces and their likely “marriage” to the breeches:

NOUGHT

Yt ys wretyn wyth a coll, yt ys wretyn wyth a cole (*It is written with a coal*),

NEW GYSE and NOWADAYS

Yt ys wretyn wyth a colle, yt ys wretyn wyth a colle,

NOUGHT

He þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll, he þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll (*He who shits with his hole/buttocks*),

NEW GYSE, NOWADAYS

He þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll, he þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll,

NOUGHT

But he wypppe hys arse clen, but he wypppe hys ars clen (*Unless he wipes his arse clean*),

¹⁸ *To buy* hints at Christ’s ransom of humanity at the price of his own life; the joke is so much more potent as Mercy’s very name is cognate with the Latin for reward/payment, *merces*, from which *mercator* (“merchant”) also derives. Theologians often resorted to commercial metaphors to name Christ, as Augustine did (Ciobanu, “City” 66, n. 33).

¹⁹ Oneness as a Christian communal value is also derided in the grotesque sexual innuendo of New Guise’s misquotations from the Psalms (*M*, 325-7); the Vice points to a chameleonic performance of oneness: be as the other one is, either pure/honest or perverse/shrewd (Ps 18.26-27). Having the devil poach on the controlling metaphor of oneness in Psalm 133.1, moreover, demonises jocularly the practice of sodomy often imputed to monks.

NEW GYSE, NOWADAYS

But he wyppe hys ars clen, but he wyppe hys ars clen,

NOUGHT

On hys breche yt xall be sen, on hys breche yt xall be sen (*On his breeches it shall be seen*),

NEW GYSE, NOWADAYS

On hys breche yt xall be sen, on hys breche yt xall be sen.

Cantant omnes.

Holyoke, holyoke, holyoke! holyoke, holyoke, holyoke! (336-44)

Like the subject matter of the Nativity carols it parodies in name, the Vices' antiphon depicts a *rite of passage*, although not the deity's passage into human form – the Incarnation – but, anally, of excrement into the world (of the breeches). Furthermore, like the Nativity carols, the ditty is also pregnant with the authority of *writ* (336-7), which it mocks by ventriloquising the language and rites of the church. Nought, the professional fool among the Vices (275), is here the soloist, with the chorus following his lead and comically reduplicating the musical heteroglossic *mess*: in a song about defecation, it is quite appropriate to sing a “Hallelujah” or “Holy-holy” in macaronic (non)form, “Hoylyke, holyke,” presumably “hole-ly” and “hole-lick” (Walker 266 n. 37). Anal ventriloquism parodying the vehemently defended, albeit much disputed, belief in the Virgin Birth indirectly celebrated at Christmas carnivalises one of the *fundamental* would-be dogmas of Christianity and therein grotesquely (re)marries the polar literal and metaphorical senses of the Latin *fundus* (“basis, foundation; bottom, base [of an object]”), thence *fundamentum* (“foundation, basis”): the bottom as both anus and foundation (*OLD*, s.v. “fundāmentum”; “fundus”).²⁰

Granted Titivillus' theatrical entrance, the devil's presence onstage unfolds as a mirror-image of the liturgical Real Presence (Ciobanu, “Theatricality” 255-8). The play's debased literalisation of Catholic dogma through theatricality²¹ finds its grotesque correlative in Titivillus' prank: when Mankind resolves to stop working to pray (551-5), the devil induces him an urgent need for defecation (561), to be “performed” offstage (562). Regarded, in Bakhtinian terms of praise-abuse, as relief, purgation – a bodily function of the “material bodily lower stratum” – not only is here the most expedient countermeasure to prayer, by Titivillus' calculation, but it also offers the panacea for “colyke” and “þe stone” (563), by Mankind's. The protagonist's grotesque plight thus performs a debased *realisation*, or *incarnation*, of the Johannine “Word made flesh” (Jn 1.14): in this parodic, literal translation of the *argumentum ad rem*, the relentless bodily drive provides a logical conclusion to the strife between spirit and matter as expounded by Mankind when he first

²⁰ The *OLD* decorously glosses over the meaning of the human and animal *fundus* apart from the sanitised definition of *fundulum* (from *fundus*) as “the blind gut, caecum” (s.v. “fundulum”).

²¹ By recourse to highly theatricalised skills, the archetypal trickster-figure puts on a show for the spectators at the expense of Mankind: casting a net over the protagonist's eyes (531-2), symbolic of the man's lapse into moral *caecitas*, Titivillus slips in a board to have Mankind think the soil is hard and deter the labourer from his agricultural/spiritual pursuits (534-7); later, the devil *stages* Mankind's sleep (593) in terms of “a praty game” that “xall be scheude yow” (592).

entered the stage. With this, Titivillus has demonstrated that he is indeed “*dominancium dominus*” (476) and that *his* fiat is just as effectively binding as God’s.

Power, arguments and (e)sc(h)atology

Power in *Mankind* is disseminated between (representatives of) institutions, the church and state, even as they strive to outdo one another. In the footsteps of Mischief, Nowadays derides Mercy’s lamentations and search for Mankind as a juridical search for jurisdiction over the man:

NOWADAYS

Yf 3e wyll have Mankynde, how *domine, domine, dominus!*

3e must speke to þe schryve for a *c[a]pe corpus* (*You must speak to the sheriff for a [legal writ of] “Take his body”*),

Ellys 3e must be fayn to retorn wyth *non est inventus* (*Otherwise you will have to reply “not found” [in this jurisdiction]*). (780-2)

Quite tellingly, Nowadays’ mock teachings to Mercy echo the dispute between ecclesiastical and civil courts regarding jurisdiction (Peters 40), here over Mankind’s deeds. At stake was not so much what counted more, the spiritual or the worldly definition of one’s actions, as who had the authority so to define.

Yet derision as embodied glossolalia, the body’s voice of unreason and delinquent or indecorous actions, looms large in this mock institutional *querelle*.²² Nowadays jocularly asks Nought to consent to his argument, even as both of them, the latter character suggests, are urinating. Jurisdictional arguments and/over Mankind are worth but a piss shot awry, puns the script:

NOWADAYS

How sey 3e, ser? My bolte ys schett (*My arrow is shot*).

NOUGHT

I am doynge of my nedyngeys (*I am doing my necessities*); be ware how 3e schott!

Fy, fy, fy! I haue fowll arayde my fote (*Fie! I have foully covered my foot*).

Be wyse for schotyng wyth yowr takyllys, for Gode wott (*Beware how you shoot with your gear [penis], for God’s suffering*)

My fote ys fowly ouerschett (*My foot is foully overshot*). (783-7)

²² Power is also grossly ventriloquised in the mock court of law where Mankind has to confess his evil treatment of the Vices, humbly repent and swear allegiance to a new lifestyle of socio-religious iniquity (665-722). An inverted rite as much of the Christian sacrament of confession–absolution as of the feudal rite of pledging loyalty, Mankind’s experience ushers in a show of the power of linguistic and ritual formulae to do and undo one’s self- and other-relation, of which the Vices are well aware: when Mischief reads Nought’s minutes of the proceedings, the scribe’s nonsense macaronic Latin – “blottybus in blottis, / Blottorum blottibus istis” (681-2) – speaks volumes about ventriloquism and the pretence of legalese too.

Judicial “eschatology” in this jurisdictional argument, like its highbrow theological counterpart, lapses into playful grotesquery. Power – by implication the power of argument – has been theatricalised as the property – and perhaps discursive (im)propriety too – of those who have the floor: it is at once verbal argument in Nowadays’ speech, battling gear – “bolte” (783) or “takyllys” (786) – and the penis – “takyllys” (*MED*, s.v “bolt,” “take!”). Power as the Law of the Father is travestied here grotesquely – as scatological metaphor – to appear all the more appealing and democratic. Prone to mishandling, such penile power may disseminate its effects to the wrong, ludicrous end. Unsurprisingly, argumentative manipulation and other forms of mishandling will soon nearly undo both Mankind, determined to hang himself in order to avoid being confronted with Mercy (800-4), and New Guise, who undertakes a demonstration of the suicidal technique to Mankind (805-11).

To revert to Nowadays’ early lines connecting the digestive chain of curd and turd with unpalatable clerical Latin (131-4), there is more to this grotesquery than meets the innocent, yet laughing, eye. The sudden nonsensical re-morphing of this excremental joke into a groundless spousal battle as to who is the greater master in the household (135-8) – echoing both the spiritual *agon* for the deceased’s soul in the fifteenth-century *ars moriendi* tradition and the popular world upside down – brims over with allusions to ethnic-*cum*-religious strife over discursive truth and pre-eminence, once we notice the wife’s Jewish name, Rachel.²³ The joke moreover challenges the familiar theological equation of spirit with the male and the body with the female. The latter analogy, only implicit here, becomes explicit both in Mankind’s allegory of upset domestic governance of the flesh/wife (198-200) and in New-Guise’s offstage parody of Mercy’s parable of the man and his horse, which transmogrifies into the fabled story of the domineering wife-*cum*-insatiable sexual object:

MERCY

Yf a man have an hors and kepe hym not to hye (*too lavishly*),
He may then reull (*govern*) hym at hys own dysyere.
Yf he be fede overwell he wyll dysobey
Ande in happe (*perhaps*) cast his master in þe myre.

NEW GYSE [*from off-stage*]

3e sey trew, ser, 3e are no faytour (*deceiver*).
I have fede my wyff so well tyll sche ys my master.
I haue a grett wonde on my hede, lo! and þeron leyth a playster,
Ande anoþer þer I pysse my peson.
Ande (*if*) my wyf were yowr hors, sche wold yow all to-banne (*she would curse you*). (241-9)

²³ Nowadays’ is at once displaced abjection – which moreover elides woman with Jew, both marginalised groups under Christian patriarchy – and indeed a mock rhetorical question echoing the late medieval courtly *querelles des femmes*, the question of women’s ontological and social condition as posited mostly by men since the twelfth century.

This is indeed a heteroglossic cornucopia. If its master discourse, the parable, is for Christians the discourse of Christ and at one remove of the Church, albeit in various hortative guises, e.g. the *exemplum* and the *sermones ad status*, here it is handled equally convincingly by both Mercy and New Guise. As to the controlling metaphor of governance, the two characters' imagery is again a loan from medieval allegories familiar from patristic writings (e.g. Augustine, *City of God* 19.16) and preaching alike, while the easy translation from horses to wives – or perhaps from brutes (“dumb” animals, yet also unbridled human instincts, or the flesh) to non-subjects (disowned, *muted* humans) – is endorsed by the Christian deprecation of the body, often (mis)identified with the flesh, as female. Striking the just balance between feeding and bridling the horse/woman is more than an allegorical travesty of Christian *askesis* inverted in the topsy-turvy image of the domineering wife: the appetite which New Guise has unwisely catered for may also be sexual, in view of the medieval analogy between mouth and vagina as an insatiable organ disruptive of the Christian *ordo*, with its exclusive allegiance to God. When images of governance as riding and the suggestion of the woman on top – the latter a (sexual) position not condoned by either the church or patriarchy – coalesce in the glissando from the woman/chattel to woman/rider or perhaps master (246), the token of mastery is precisely her *performance*: the “overfed” woman inflicts injuries both to the head (247), i.e. to man as metaphorical head of both household and the state, and to the *membrum virile* (248), the male generative organ as the disseminator (in every sense) of the Law of the Father.

The Vices' and Titivillus' jokes fired at the earnestness of Mercy and Mankind ostensibly scrutinise the eschatological through the distorting magnifying glass of the scatological, in an intimation that spiritual purgation is not essentially different from its bodily counterpart, but just as fundamental, viz. pertaining to the “material bodily lower stratum.” Given its multi-level grotesquery, does *Mankind* endorse or subvert the Law of the (Church) Father(s)? At a macroscopic level, we may safely assume that the audience laughed heartily at the evil characters' pranks and profanities, especially where they mocked Mercy's gravity. Would Mankind's conversion in the end have indeed turned the tables on the early laughter, as some modern commentators argue? At a microscopic level, it is virtually idle to enquire whether any spectator, however well versed in Latin, would have been practically able to hear *all* heteroglossic suggestions that become conspicuous on the written page. Nonetheless, they lurk in the fissures of the script, are hurled around during the actors' delivery and ventriloquise Holy Writ, thereby questioning its truth-game as mediated by the church. Are the two levels irreconcilable? Instead of attempting an answer, which would foreclose the very existence of heteroglossic positions, I will quote the Act of 16 May 1559, which stipulated civic and juridical licensing of performance of plays and interludes, and ordered the cessation of productions of religious drama. Queen Elizabeth I charged that officers in the towns and cities:

permyt [no drama] to be played wherein either matters of religion or of the governaunce of the estate of the common weale shalbe handled or treated, beyng no meete matters to be wrytten or treated vpon, but *by menne of auctoritie, learning and wisdom*, nor to be

handled before any *audience* but of *graue and discrecte persons*: All which partes of this proclamation, her maiestie chargeth to be inuiolably kepte. (qtd. in Kahrl 125; emphasis added)

Implicit Protestant anti-Catholic polemic notwithstanding, the Act seems anxious to clearly define (professional) jurisdiction and to assert the State's monoglossia over a heteroglossic cornucopia of religious and festive discursive practices, feared and penalised for "straying" from state-enforced discipline. Nevertheless, its claim that matters religious were the preserve of (Protestant) doctors of divinity, as otherwise they got distorted by the ignorant, harked back both to Catholic writings, e.g. Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* (c. 1303), and to the Wycliffite *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (c. 1380-1425), which discountenanced religious plays as sacrilegious since they "usen in bourde (*in jest*) and pleye þe myraclis and werkis þat Crist so ernystfully wrou3te to oure helpe" (24). As I argue in "*Unthinking Genre*," actual or envisaged censorship of certain entertaining theatrical activities in the later Middle Ages, as well as clerical apprehensions about the laity's profane misprision of religious imagery, despite the church's programme of edification and spiritual disciplining of lay Christians, suggests the force with which devilment and grotesque scenes like those in *Mankind* could speak to ordinary people beyond, and perhaps because of, clerical disciplining efforts.

References

- Augustinus, Aurelius. *St. Augustin's City of God and Christian Doctrine*. Trans. Marcus Dodds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Philip Schaff. New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1890.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 (1966).
- . "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. 2nd ed. rev. and exp. Nigel Wood. Harlow: Pearson, 2000. 105-36.
- Biernoff, Suzannah. *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. Houndmills, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999 (1990).
- Ciobanu, Estella Antoaneta. "Theatricality in *Mankind*: The Devil's 'Real Presence' between the Sacred and the Profane." *Studia Universitatis, Chişinău, Seria Umanistice* 10 (2007): 253-61.
- . "Glossolalia, Heteroglossia and the Grotesque Body in the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play*." *Annals of Ovidius University Constanta, Philology* 20 (2009): 189-207.
- . "City of God? City Merchants, Bloody Trade and the Eucharist in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*." *Images of the City*. Ed. Magdalena Cieslak and Agnieszka Rasmus. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 50-70.
- . "*Unthinking Genre* in Modern Scholarship of Medieval Drama, or Who Is Afraid of Historicising Generic Limit(ation)s?" *University of Bucharest Review: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies* 12.1 (2010): 51-64.

- Clopper, Lawrence M. *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- de Certeau, Michel. "Reading as Poaching." *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. 166-76.
- . "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias." *Representations* 56 (1996): 29-47.
- Diller, Hans-Jürgen. "Laughter in Medieval English Drama: A Critique of Modernizing and Historical Analyses." *Comparative Drama* 36.1-2 (2002): 1-19.
- Dillon, Janette. *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Holsinger, Bruce W. *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Kahrl, Stanley J. 1984. "Of History and Time." *Medieval English Drama*. Ed. Peter Happé. Houndmills and London: Macmillan. 117-29.
- Kolve, V. A. *The Play Called Corpus Christi*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966.
- Macy, Gary. "The Dogma of Transubstantiation in the Middle Ages." *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45.1 (1994): 11-42.
- Middle English Dictionary*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Mills, David. *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and Its Whitsun Plays*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- New King James Bible, The*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984.
- Peters, Edward. *Torture*. Exp. ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- Pettitt, Tom. "Mankind: An English Fastnachtspiel?" *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre, Lancaster, 13-19 July, 1989*. Ed. Meg Twycross. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996.
- Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, A. Ed. Clifford Davidson. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993.
- Twycross, Meg. "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. Ed. Richard Beadle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 37-84.
- Walker, Greg, ed. *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*. Oxford, UK and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000.