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Elements of a Persuasion Strategy in the English Cycles and Early Moral Plays

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The very existence of the theatre of persuasion which medieval and post-medieval English drama undoubtedly is, to a large extent, might be invoked as evidence equally for or against the rhetorical statement in the title of this collection. I am not aware that critics at large have ever radically antagonized the notion that the cycle plays or early moral plays that have come down to us had for their prime objective to persuade their audiences of the truth of some central tenets of the Christian faith. Yet, more surprisingly, maybe, rare indeed, to my knowledge, have been critical attempts to show *how* these plays may have succeeded in such an enterprise. Armed with too little expertise and within the cramped ambit of an article, I certainly cannot claim to fill the gap but will simply provide a few suggestions likely to develop one day into the sketch of an approach.

For the cycles, I shall borrow my illustrations from the extant plays or surviving remnants, whereas for the early moralities instances will come from *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Mankind*, and lastly from the existing miracle play, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, whose issues particularly fit the present topic. As to the few references to interludes of the 1500-25 period, they are essen-

tially meant to show that some of the techniques described undergo little change in the interval.

I. Play-area Characteristics and the Blurring of Limits between Play-World and Spectator

Because it frames the whole strategy of ideological persuasion attempted in the medieval plays, I shall begin by investigating the apparently extraneous topic of the play-areas in which that theatre was staged (cycles and moralities, as well as the first interludes down to the 1530s). For the categories of Christian drama, these are, on the one hand, the medieval street or marketplace, with their various stationary or processional forms of performance, and, on the other, the perhaps rarer but just as efficient staging format called “place-and-scaffold or “arena staging”. I will then pass on to the apparently standard form of staging the interludes between the 1470s and the 1530s in private or public halls.

To begin with, I wish to highlight the physical and emotional proximity ensured between the play-world space and the world of audience and public life. Turning first to the cycle plays, I shall make an initial point about the world-famous stage direction from the *Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors* at Coventry: “*here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the street also*” (l. 783).

This, too often regarded as a case of purely spatial intrusion of the play-world onto the ordinary world of public life, hides in fact an overwhelmingly emotional violation and ideological stamping down of the spectator’s world by the dominant values of the fiction. The physical intrusion of King Herod upon the public space and his unresisted breach of the usual frontier-taboo between “in-play” and “out-of-play” take on deeper significance when one considers the context of the episode; it is framed at first by the arrival of Nuncios, the Messenger, bringing the news, so damaging to Herod’s reputation, of the Three Kings’ “flight”:

Hayle, kynge, most worthist in wede!
Hayle, manteinar of curtese throug all this world wyde!
Hayle, the most mightiest that eyuer bestrod a stede!
Hayle, most monfullist mon in armor man to abyde!
Hayle in thyne hoonowre!
Thesse iij kyngis that forthe were sent,
And shulde haue cum ageyne before the here present,
Another way, lorde, whom the went,
Contrare to thyn honowre. (ll. 768-76)

Then comes the outcry of Herod's soldiers, who spontaneously refuse to perpetrate the Massacre of the Innocents which Herod has just decreed (ll. 793-800) in an outburst of anger:

Myles. My lorde, kyng Erode be name,
Thy wordis agenst my wyll schalbe;
To see soo many yong chylde dy ys schame,
Therefore consell ther-to gettis thou non of me. (ll. 793-96)

This further explodes the image of Herod as head of a civilised state and turns his brutal violation of the theatrical rule into a fitting analogue of his incensed barbarity, which exceeds even the rough disposition of his soldiers.

Similarly, at moments of dramatic tension, some characters, when seriously involved in the issue of the episode, will not hesitate to shatter the conventional limit severing them from the audience to exchange in the mode of direct or indirect address. Thus Joseph in the same pageant, in a fit of resentment at the apparent unfaithfulness of his young wife, gives the following advice:

Josoff. All olde men, insampull take by me,
How I am begylid here may you see!
To wed soo yong a child. (ll. 133-35)

Again, in the Coventry *Pageant of the Weavers*, Joseph, a tired old man unwilling to start again on his journey with Mary, complains to the audience three times over of the difficulty of being married to a young wife (ll. 463-70, 483-90, 565-72).

Yet contaminations of one world by the other far exceed such occasional outbursts of emotional complicity between character and audience. At a much more continuous level, a connivance which is intellectual rather than purely emotional is created in ways and to effects which I will now discuss.

As is well known, the episodes selected by the authors-revampers of the extant plays offer an alternation of scenes set in the world of ancient Palestine with a sequence of supernatural views of our universe and destiny suggested by the Christian myth. Alternating the depiction of natural realities on this side of death and vistas of the mythic story of man's life according to the fundamentals of the Christian faith invites the spectator to constantly travel between two levels of reality and adjust by turns to widely different spatial and chronological conditions, as well as to characters whose status ranges from the quasi-historical (Herod the Great, Joseph of Bethany or sundry shepherds) to myth-oriented

figures like Adam and Eve, Noah, the Prophets and so on. Thus hovering over the two categories of the terrestrial and the sacred, the fiction is, by some delicate anastomosis, surgically cross-connected to the audience's native time and space, its cultural reality easily straddling Judea (or Galilee) and East Anglia (or Cornwall). In reaction to the naive scientism of such critics as Marius Sépet and Petit de Julleville, who would charge the playwrights with ignorant in consequence, later critics, in approaches culminating in the epoch-making re-reading of V. A. Kolvé (*The Play Called Corpus Christi*) argued that such spatial and time combinations served the catechetic purpose of the plays, providing an apt picture of what Hardin Craig, after Thomas Aquinas and Boethius, defines as "vertical time" (p. 16)—an a-chronic, a-topical figure of eternity.¹ If Kolvé's view rightly highlights the doctrinal role of the plays, it does not minimize the basic fact that these plays, customized to the cultural tastes and needs of their audiences, aim at making them equally conscious of the figural dimension of the message and of the daily reality around them. Figurally-oriented intimations of "vertical time" in the plays will therefore be found here and there, as when (in *The Pageant of the Weavers* at Coventry once again) young Jesus, being presented in the temple, replies to the Third Doctor, who enquires about his identity:

Doctor III. Whense cam thys chylde, I marvell soore,
Thatt speykyth to vs this mystecawly?
Jesus. Surs, I wasse all you before
And aftur you agen schal be. (ll. 922-25)

In contradistinction, such intimations are balanced by various tricks meant to shorten the spectacular distance between play and audience. Even the casual reader of the cycles will need no reminder of the almost constant presence in the various episodes of the common run of a humanity strongly smacking of fifteenth-century England. Additionally, the actors impersonating the figures in the drama are clad in contemporary attire, which visually enforces a sense of historical proximity and topical confusion. Further to this, in the case of the cycle plays, at York or Chester, for instance, the local management of the feast provided that some major roles were possibly played by local guild members or citizens, which may further have fuelled a sense of near-identity between local reality and the mythical story. Another well-known and telling device will be

1 For a new presentation and rewording of the concept for twentieth-century audiences, see Philippe.

found in the almost constant wording of the various town or guild-accounts carefully equating the actor and the character represented.² If these various devices do feed a sense of familiar proximity, a much more fundamental feature of paradigmatic importance continuously fashions the audience and play relationship. It is Kolvé again who, among others, evokes it as a major factor in the way the medieval and proto-modern theatrical code operates, highlighting the fact that the potency of convention and playing style continuously keeps audiences, emotionally and notionally involved as they may be, *aware of the spectacle being a performance*. An instance in point is the close connection established in the Towneley Plays (Nos. 22, 23, 24, respectively named *Scourging*, *Crucifixion*, and *Play of the Dice*), between the most dramatic moments of the Passion and Death of Christ and the notion of playing a game. Beyond branding the torture inflicted upon Christ as an irresponsible monstrosity, this serves effectively to place the torturers' crime *somewhere in-between* the historical/mythical event and its ritualistic re-enactment, effectively demanding a response in equivalent terms from the audience (Kolvé, pp. 181-83).

The essential thing here is to realise how the spectator born and bred in such a tradition is steadily invited to take what is shown him/her as a pretence deliberately created for him/her by the scenic object, while keeping in mind the collateral knowledge that a spiritual reality of superior truth is signified (i.e., *at once concealed and revealed*) by the theatrical sign contemplated. Such a transparent reading of two meanings in one sign must really be the essence of theatrical perception in such a tradition, one able to reconcile pretence and belief as two antithetic but closely interdependent moments of mimetic reception and spectacular pleasure.³ Such a tension, manifest in the frequent ironic returns of the word "peasse" (which opens play 23) is at the core of these plays. It keeps alive in the spectator the dual consciousness of the actual sense and weight of the events enacted and, at the same time, of the show being performed. It should rightly, in the strict etymological sense of the word, be referred to as "*illusio*" (or immersion in the "*ludus*"). But in this age of ours, when theatre is strictly conceived as

2 For evidence that this was common also at performances of French Passions, see Bordier, quoting Michel Menot, who reports an apparently frequent experience: "O ille qui ludebat sanctum Martinum, c'est un mauvais garçon; et ille qui rex apparebat, c'estoit un savetier" (Bordier, p. 71n43).

3 On identifying this moment of dual consciousness in reception, I provisionally, for want of a better term, called it "theatrical diaphora" ("Culture et théâtre", pp. 581-668). I did not know at the time that the phenomenon had been described, though not named, by Honzl, p. 123.

reflecting unsubstantial images of the outward phenomenal world (i.e., what is now regarded as reality), the notion of theatrical illusion is reduced to the faked duplication on stage of the outer world's phenomenal forms and objects, a bogus fabrication of artificial appearances. In her brilliant if slightly petulant libel against Aristotle's professedly deadly influence upon the theatre of the Western World, Florence Dupont ascribes to the spirit of the Enlightenment the total reversal of meaning which the term "illusion" has suffered, as well as its radical impoverishment following the amputation of its former duplicitous depth which leaves it crippled beyond reclaim.⁴

Turning now to the later forms of staging, used for interludes played in private or public halls, we find that the question at stake (that is, the relationship between audience and play-area) has not fundamentally altered. For one thing, the design of the hall is such, and the relative positions of play-area and public so nearly comparable to those in use for cycle plays and moralities, that the same capacity for close relationship between play and audience remains largely unaltered. Actually, the contiguity is such, and the dividing line between players and hearers so uncertain—effects no doubt augmented by poor lighting—that the precise perimeter of the fictional world may remain very loosely defined. The first 185 lines of Medwall's play *Fulgens and Lucrez* evidently rely on such an uncertainty to accommodate the two pseudo-characters, A and B, between fiction and audience. The two fellows who first stroll, uninvited, among the public, gradually join the audience and become active listeners. Later on, achieving a theatrical putsch, they intrude upon the play, one after the other and, actively joining the cast, attempt to waylay the plot to their own profit. *Mutatis mutandis*, about the same thing happens in John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*, the interceding character and prospective Vice-figure taking pride of place from the first, whereas the real centre of action, Jupiter, the figure of authority, is pushed aside behind the back curtain. It is nearly certain that the hegemonic theatrical dominance exercised over the play-area by the leading character(s) keeps up much of the confidential exchange between public and fiction, replacing the ideological linkage hitherto ensured by the Christian fiction. But it is also probable that, though drastically different and curtailed of its mythical attraction, the largely

4 See Dupont, pp. 84-152. To her substantial argument, one could, in a totally different perspective, add the remark (usually invoked in defence of the medieval religious theatre and paradoxically strengthened by the Wycliffite pamphlet *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleying*) that this kind of illusion illustrates the neo-platonic argument that such an "art du faux" in fact is "le miroir du vrai", as Bordier excellently summarizes it (pp. 60-79).

socio-political narrative artfully echoing the present local situation in both plays was responsible for welding together, around a new ensemble of “commonalty” values, the assembly gathered in the hall at and around the festive tables.

I am aware that I may seem to be insisting unduly on the structural relationship between play-area and audience, and on the various devices emphasizing mental proximity between the play-world and the audience’s immediate reality. But the correct triggering and upkeep of the code at work, built as it was on the spectator’s consciousness as divided in a sustained way between in-play and out-of-play, surely went hand-in-hand with the need to keep a careful balance between a physical intimacy with the show and the antagonistic limitation of emotional involvement in the events presented. Such a balance, I would finally suggest, owes more than has been critically recognised to the layout of the play-area. In my next section, I shall argue that it owes a lot equally to the inner clockworks of the dramatic piece enacted, and I will concentrate upon an element of special interest in that respect: the category of characters who act as mediators between play and audience and whose study has long been neglected.⁵ Among such a numerous and varied lot I will select some of the characters who play an essential part in securing (or attempting to secure) the audience’s belief in the enactment.

II. The Doubting Twin as Mediator in the Belief Process

I shall concentrate on an apparently minor figure to which critical attention has (to the best of my knowledge) seldom been accorded: that of the reluctant witness as intercessor in the reception process. Certainly, several critical studies have addressed the nature and role of ideologically important characters in the cycle plays, as well as in the moral plays. Yet, most of these seem to have concentrated on the function of the “expositors”, the choric figures who, at the close or the outset of some episodes, will comment on the Christian tenets which the plays propose to illustrate. In that respect, the work of Anne C. Gay, M. P. Forrest and Lawrence G. Craddock has proved especially helpful.⁶ Yet surprisingly few

5 For a recognition of the functional importance of the intercessor or mediating character in late medieval and Early Renaissance English theatre, see Lascombes, “Culture et théâtre”, pp. 606-32). See also Débax, *passim*, who has further used and amply developed the concept into a rich functional typology.

6 I have not yet been able to consult the M.A. Dissertation of D. R. Jenkins (Cardiff University, 1960), promisingly entitled, “The Antagonist, the Nature and Function of Oppositive Characters

efforts have been devoted to commenting on and illustrating the function in the cycles and the moral plays of a category of characters who, at the most sensitive moments of doctrinally capital episodes, will suddenly disclose a striking capacity to fathom the innermost meaning of the tenets at stake and, as members of a misbelieving or doubting community, use a sudden wildfire persuasive authority, actively inducing other characters to an on-the-spot conversion. Whatever their origin or status, analysis shows that they belong to the same functional category. This function might be defined as that of the reluctant follower or active doubter, whose classic trajectory goes from initial rejection of any faith in the tenets discussed to a lucid testimonial recognition of their inner worth and a fervent display of moral authority leading others to conversion. To name just a few of the characters belonging to that functional category, Noah's wife is one of the early sketches of the figure in the Chester cycle and the other extant texts. Old Simeon in the Chester cycle, play 11, and in the Coventry Pageant of the Weavers, or Joseph in at least three different nativity episodes, and one of the two midwives both in the Chester Nativity and in the N-Town play, are vivid reworkings of such a figure. Above them all, however, both in the plays and in the evangelic sources, Thomas, one of the eleven disciples, possibly stands as the archetype of the most effective witness, doubter and converter. There seems to be even today a continued importance in the apologetic tradition of a very ancient legendary trend relating to the otherwise minor Thomas figure, giving him pride of place as Jesus' twin, whose capital role is to reflect the inner significance of the Master's teaching, first stressing its discrepancy vis-à-vis human values, but finally bridging the gap between the essence of the divine lesson and its acceptance by his fellow humans.⁷ If the figure of the doubter plays an important role in *The Play of the Sacrament*, or in Morality plays like *Mankind*, it is possibly in the cycles that his mediating function is made most spectacular.

It should be noted at first that such characters intervene during episodes and at moments concerned with the incredible breach (by a divine puissance that actually verges upon lawlessness) of the ordinary laws of human life, such as those of human sexual procreation, the irreversibility of death, or the stability of the nature of objects. The first irruption of divine lawlessness in the mythical sequence occurs when God, angry and disappointed by mankind's conduct after its creation, decides to send His son as its redeemer, thereby giving rise to

in Medieval Religious Drama".

7 See Kuntzmann, chap. 2 ("La tradition de Thomas le didyme"), and his conclusions, p. 182.

the myth of virginal nativity, which is abundantly illustrated in the episodes selected by the various cycles (York plays, nos. 12-14; Chester plays, nos. 6-9, plus 11; N-Town plays, nos. 9-16).

I shall, for my first sampling, quote from the sixth Chester play, called “The Annunciation and the Nativity”, a 722-line play made up of a sequel of independent episodes linked together by the theme of Christ’s Nativity.⁸ This takes us to the climactic moment of the divine child’s birth (ll. 461-547), the key moment I intend to comment on. When Mary’s time has come, Joseph gets out to fetch two midwives, Tebell and Salome, to assist her (ll. 469-508), but it turns out that the child is born when they return and the Star shines up over the event. Whereas Joseph and Tebell join in Mary’s praise of God’s glorious power, Tebell, a specialist in childbirth, marvels that it was achieved “without teen or travailing” (l. 527). Moreover, her partner, Salome, playing the sceptic, raises the technical objections of worldly science and demands proof of some non-human interference:

Be styll, Tebell, I thee praye,
For that is false, in good faye.
Was neuer woman clean maye,
And chyld without man. (ll. 533-36)

And a stage direction at line 540, which reads, “*Tunc Salome tentabit tangere Mariam in sexu secreto, et statim arentur manus eius, et clamando dixit*”, indicates the reason for her subsequent outburst:

Alas, alas, alas, alas,
Me ys betide an evyll case!
My hands bee dried up in this place,
That feelinge none have I. (ll. 540-43)

It is important to note that the spectacular pragmatics of the withering hands takes place first, preceding the frightened exclamation of Salome. This highlights the visual event, which is thus made perceptible by everyone (ll. 540-47).

8 As in the source, Chester play 6 begins with the Annunciation. Then it quickly passes on to Mary’s visit to Elizabeth (ll. 50-122) and to Joseph’s fit of jealousy on discovering his young wife’s pregnancy (ll. 123-60). When God’s angel has briefly comforted Joseph (ll. 161-76), the scene broadens out and stages Octavianus’ concern that Jesus’ impending birth threatens his worldly power (ll. 177-388). And after a brief account of the Holy Family’s flight to Bethlehem, the play tackles the climactic moment of the Nativity proper (ll. 389-553), the key moment I shall comment on.

It also triggers a succession of events which further emphasize the miraculous event, the first one purely visual, whereas the next ones are linguistic. At line 547, a stage direction says, “*Tunc apparet stella et veniet Angelus, dicens ut sequitur*”, and the Angel’s words are as follows: “Womann, beseech this childe of grace / That he forgive thee thy trespass” (ll. 548-49). Salome then asks mercy from the child God, and her hand is instantly made whole again (ll. 556-63), which should, in itself, be enough to conclude the episode. But with surprising insistence, an Expositor intrudes, commenting on this feat of God’s power and adding other miraculous instances of divine intervention (ll. 564-643). This lesson is immediately followed by the return of Sibilla, who proclaims the same to Octavianus, the Roman ruler (ll. 644-98), plus the final return of the Expositor, who addresses the audience so as to instil the lesson in their minds (ll. 699-722). The amount of insistence put here on the lesson and significance of the event is a dubious sign, surely betraying the fear that local audiences might be hard to persuade.

This degree of concern to persuade and convert is further suggested by the fact that the same cycle returns to the topic in a subsequent play, this time in a much more sober mode and through a different compound of emotional and intellectual argument. Let us briefly review the passage *De Purificatione Beatae Virginis* (ll. 1-118) which opens play II *The Blacksmithes Playe*. This time the doubting figure does not defend scientific materialism, like Salome, but he is an oldish priest. A faithful servant of the pre-Christian religion, in his own terms, his first words show him, if aware of the old sayings of the prophets, perfectly unable to conceive or admit anything like the absolute power of the new God and therefore any breach in the existing order of things. Earnestly as he looks forward to the announced coming of Christ, the prophetic wording in Luke leaves him totally incredulous—hence, his thrice-repeated attempt to correct Luke’s “*Ecce virgo concipiet et paret filium etc.*”. As in the previous episode, an angel finally intrudes upon the scene to make God’s will clear even to the old fool. He then instantly submits to the extraordinary truth thus superimposed upon him, while the old widow, obviously standing as antagonist and witness, speaks in favour of a quiet submission to God’s power in tones of quiet triumph. Here, as in the previous situation, the same opposition obtains between, on the one hand, a tolerant acknowledgement of the limits of man’s understanding, which entails graceful submission to a superior will, and, on the other, the useless resistance represented by the rational exercise of human volition. Each time the violence of God’s power, represented by supernatural signs such as the angel’s intrusion and

his clearly supernatural message, forces the antagonism to an ending. One can see at this point why the debate is so fierce and the spectacular demonstration so radical, involving supernatural means and an absolute surrender on man's side. We shall find a final instance of this in one of the very few miracle plays which has come down to us in English, *The Play of the Sacrament*.

It is another moot point of doctrine which is at stake here, the bitterly disputed notion of transubstantiation. The play picks up the theme at a time when the demands of rational understanding in Northern Europe coincide with the additional threat posed to European Christianity and its economic dominance by the cultural and military presence on the margins of Europe of both Arabic and Jewish communities. Hence, from the time of the Ottoman successes in the mid-fifteenth century, the figure of the wealthy enterprising Jew duplicates that of the dangerous Turkish soldier. As is well known, this is the way the pattern works in *The Play of the Sacrament*. The Jewish hero Jonathas buys from his Christian counterpart, the merchant Aristorius, a consecrated host pilfered at night from a church, intent as he is on testing whether the doctrine of transubstantiation is valid. When Jonathas and the Jews start inflicting upon the host a precise replica of the Passion suffered by Christ, the host bleeds profusely, involving Jonathas and his four acolytes in degrees of physical harm and momentary loss of sanity.

Two features should be underlined here. A minor remark concerns the structure of discourse on the two sides of the argument before conversion: obviously, the discursive structure is strongly schizoid, that is, internally divided into two antagonistic moments of rhetorical effort at intellectual and/or emotional persuasion. It is unnecessary to underline that each moment corresponds to the argumentative position of one of the two antagonists and therefore to the two successive moments of the mental response of the hero at the centre of the episode. We must be alive to a fundamental detail in terms of audience reception: such an argumentative division seems meant to feed the divided response of the spectator, vacillating between acceptance and refusal of the hero's mental journey, between concern and lack of concern for his plight, or even between deep emotional/intellectual belief in the reality of the event and outright unconcern for or resentment at a situation and issue perceived as worrying or futile play.

More importantly, it is noticeable that in every one of these instances the hero's mental reversal *strictly follows the visual enactment on stage of the incredible event* which, inserted in the sequence of dramatic events, affirms and optically represents the superior might of God. It seems important to underline here (and

an attentive micro-reading of the two plays brings plenty of evidence) that the paranormal miraculous fact is not only visually provided on stage: the birth of the Infant and the proof of the virginity of Mary in Chester play 11, with the sudden rewriting in golden letters on Simeon's book of Luke's prophecy; the deluge of blood escaping from the host in the Croxton play. Even more significantly, such events are not only made to be seen and scrutinized at length, but, especially in the Croxton play, they are also closely tied to a constant and fairly minute commentary. This coupling up of the two current and technically most effective channels of theatrical rendition, the visual and the verbal, amounts to a capital form of *ostension* (or spectacular highlighting), which in my view is equivalent to one of the most rhetorically effective forms of theatrical *hypotyposis* in the proto-modern stage tradition. Unable to name it by any existing term known to me, I would suggest that it amounts to an effective self-mirroring technique, in which the mouth verbally depicts what the image shows, and vice-versa.

This supplementation of argumentative force by a visual translation of what the argument aims to posit as truth may, of course, be read in two opposite ways. First, in view of the insistent repetition we have noticed at the end of the Chester Annunciation and Nativity, it may well be that the audience would receive the above device as an unwilling admission that the discursive medium is powerless when left alone, and that it needs a childish visual device to clinch the demonstration, even at the risk of discrediting the whole episode. Such may have been the attitude of the growing numbers advocating the discontinuation of the traditional cycles, or at least a severe purging of episodes dealing with articles of the traditional Catholic faith resented as superstitious.

Conversely, the belief assumed in the possible co-existence in the spectator's consciousness of two possibly antagonistic attitudes as to the truth of what is contemplated leads me to posit that, to some extent, a belief in what is seen, especially in the rhetorical circumstances I have evoked, could be totally evacuated. In unknown agreement for many years with such critics as Clifford Davidson, I have long held the view that the many references to be found in documents about aspects of the fifteenth-century vernacular religious practice in Northern Europe, in particular the emotional outbursts of tears generated by the contemplation of the crude woodcuts (known as images of Man of Sorrows) representing episodes of Christ's Passion, point to a sensitivity to images which

we today would easily think abnormally superstitious.⁹ Many documents besides the cycle plays themselves show that the Catholic authorities never ignored or neglected this in their conversion strategies. And this again may add weight to my remark on the capacity of the device to determine an influx of emotional belief, however momentary, in the passages at stake.¹⁰

III. Conclusion

Though the above remarks entail assumptions, I will buttress them with two more views likely to impart greater validity. The two have to do with a critical evaluation of spectatorship, one from a literary, the other from a physiological view-point.

In his analysis of the different aspects of the spectator's reception of theatrical action, Michael Goldman identifies three facets to the concept of action. He names them by terms borrowed, after due adaptation, from Aristotle's description in his *Poetics*. Relating to three different components of what goes by the name of dramatic action, they are: *praxis*, the action effected by the characters in the drama; *poiesis*, that which is performed by the actors enacting the play; and *theoria*, the action as received (registered) by the public. The last term Goldman partly empties of its Aristotelian content so as to stress its link with verbs which refer to "the gaze of lively inspection and active attempt to understand" which the public accords the play they contemplate (pp. 169-70, n. 6 to p. 12). Rather surprisingly, however, Goldman does not immediately fathom the *theoria* concept but immediately turns to the effects upon the spectator of *praxis* and *poiesis*. A few paragraphs earlier (pp. 10-11), however, he had vividly and forcibly described what anyone interested in the reception activity of the public would define as the obverse or complement of *theoria*, an attitude which he derives from what Francis Fergusson calls "histrionic sensibility". Fergusson describes this as the spectator's response to the powerful kinesthetic appeal of any mimetic "acting and action":

9 I make bold to assume that Davidson's conclusions regarding the topic in his recent *History, Religion and Violence* are in line with his positions argued earlier in "Sacred Blood", as well as those stated years before by Robinson. Their conclusions generally agree with those of other critics such as Nichols and Duffy.

10 Lascombes has used Davidson's views and other documents in "Culture et théâtre", pp. 318-98, and returned to the question in "Un statut ambigu", pp. 14-28.

It should be remembered *that we share in the actor's performance through action of our own. Acting has a powerful kinesthetic appeal. As we sit in the theatre, we follow the action by internally copying or re-enacting what we see. Here, we are only responding to what the characters do; we are also re-enacting the actions by which the actors possess and project their parts. As we leave the theatre we may find ourselves walking or talking like one of the characters—a clear sign of the inner mimesis that acting induces*). In watching the play, we internalize that actor-like thrust towards utterance of the self which is the ground of all action in drama. (Fergusson, pp. 236-40; my italics)

The first two sentences of this quotation aptly summarize the phenomenon.

Goldman goes on to sum up the influence of action as “how the play operates, how and to what purpose it engages our imaginations” (p. 11). Fergusson’s description obviously needs no complementary gloss. I would just like to point out to what extent it has helped me to see better into the mystery of spectatorship—to understand why many young mothers gape as they lift the spoonful of food to the lips of their reluctant infants; or, again, why old loafers, silently staring at a giant scraper on a building site loading astounding volumes of earth and stone, will have their idle fingers unconsciously mimic the jerks of the machine.

An underlying physiological elucidation of the puzzle came some years ago when Professor Gilbert Lelord, generously answering some of my questions on the powers of the image, explained what was then a fairly new piece of medical information: namely, that specific centres in the brain of the *onlooker* of an act (whatever the act) produce the same or nearly the same sequence of electric waves (alpha waves) as the one called up by the said action in the doer’s brain. I suppose I need comment no further on what quality of belief we may credit such a spectator with experiencing, at least during the latest stages of the history of “Homo sapiens sapiens”. It is sufficient for the success of a spectacle and its enjoyment by an audience to posit that *belief in what is seen* may last as long as the image remains imprinted in the brain. Quite another problem, of course, is the question of the survival in the memory’s archives of the intellectual and emotional effects, together with the middle- or long-term consequences of acts thus visually registered. Technically speaking, the wonderful and disquieting ability of our neuronal circuits thus to imprint in us an echo of the acts we have contemplated suffices to prove that “seeing is believing”.

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