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'Poetics and beyond: noisy bodies and aural variations in medieval English
outdoor performance'

Pilate opens the Tapiters and Couchers guild's pageant of *Christ before Pilate I* in the York Corpus Christi Play by asserting himself acoustically, threatening those who 'cruelly are cryand' (1).¹ His manner of delivery both grabs the attention of the audience as a new pageant begins, and establishes him as one of the Play's ranting tyrants. The whole ensuing pageant is redolent with references to sound. After splitting the ears of the audience, Pilate settles down to sleep, instructing his Beadle to ensure that 'no myron of myne' should 'With no noyse be neghand me nere (138-9)', to which the Beadle assures him that 'what warlowe yow wakens with wordis full wilde, / þat boy for his brawling were bettir be vnborne. (140) Pilate's rejoinder is 'Yha who chatteres, hym chastise, be he churle or childe...' (142), and, in case we haven't got the message, 'Yf skatheles he skape it wer a skorne./ What rebalde þat rudely will rore,/ I schall mete with þat Myron tomorne,/ And for his ledir lewdenes hym lerne to be lorne.' (144-47)

A maid and the son help Pilate's wife Procula to bed. She says 'Nowe be yhe in pese, both youre carping and crye'. (157) This is immediately followed by Devil bursting on the scene with, the extra-metrical line 157a 'Owte! Owte! Harrowe!'. This occurs within her dream – so the unconscious mind is as noisy as the conscious. As she wakes in a panic, her servant complains of being noisily awoken by her. In the meantime the party escorting Jesus waken Pilate's Beadle with their noise, and he complains about that (232-35). The Beadle

¹ *The York Plays*, edited by Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982). All further references to the York Cycle are to this edition.

shouts to Pilate, who wakens with 'Howe!'. (255) Caiaphas has just apologised for waking him up when the boy bursts in with the message from Procula, he describes her dream in the same terms as she did to him earlier, that, 'with tene and with traye was sche trapped'. (286) This has been a noisy night thus far in the Pilate household, and we are by now accumulating a virtuoso alliterative vocabulary for unwelcome noise-making.

Pilate's Beadle, lately rudely awoken by the arrival of the Jewish priests spontaneously kneels to Jesus. He explains his action by recounting the experience of being present at the Entry into Jerusalem, another aural experience:

'Osanna', þei sange, 'þe sone of Daid',
 Riche men with þayre robes þei ranne to his fete,
 And poure folk fecched floures of þe frith,
 And made mirth and melody þis man for to mete. (343-46)

He is warned by Annas 'thy tonge schulde þou holde'. (359) Pilate then tries to assert himself by telling everyone to shut up: 'Do sese of youre seggyng, and I schall examine full sore. He then tells them all to go and sit down and calls on the Beadle who is ready to 'halow a hoy' and warns, 'Do move of youre maistir, for I shall melle it with my3t'

Pilate: Cry 'Oyas'!

Bedellus: Oyas!

Pilatus: Yit efte, be þi feithe.

Bedellus: Oyas! [followed by the by now redundant stage direction] *Alowde* (370)

Pilatus: Yit lowdar, that ilke lede may li[the] –
 Crye pece in this prese, vppon payne þeryppon,
 Bidde them swage of þer swaying bothe swiftly and swathe,
 And stynte of þer stryuyng, and stand still as a stone.
 Calle Jesu þe gentill of Jacob, þe Jewe.
 Come preste and appere,
 To þe barre drawe þe nere,
 To þi jugement here;
 To be demed for þi dedis undewe. (371-79)

After various complaints have been entered, Pilate finally turns his attention to Jesus, and spends a whole stanza asking him to speak in his own defence (468-76). Jesus replies with four lines that throw the matter back to Pilate with 'pou saiste so piselve...'

Critical explorations of audience and reception of early plays has tended to concentrate on visual arrangement and effects, drawing either on studies of static iconography, or, more recently, analyses of active looking derived from the cognitive sciences. Yet 'audience' etymologically refers to listeners, and the recent interest in theatrical noise therefore invites us to consider the aural production and reception of festivity, especially given its own evident alertness to its sounds. The word 'persona', which came to mean the theatrical mask in Roman theatre, derives from 'personare', that is 'to sound through'.² Moreover,

any thematisation of voice implies an attunement to the manner in which the voice is not just a transparent medium for language, insignificant in itself, but that in its very materiality a voice may clash with – i.e. disrupt, undermine, or comment on – the main propositional content of what a speaking person is saying.³

This is what seems to be happening in *Christ before Pilate I*, and possibly even more so in the Litsters following pageant, *Christ before Herod*.

Lagaay goes on to discuss the relationship between sound and vision, of 'eyes as ears and ears as eyes', which we can readily perceive in Christ's speech from the Cross in the York Crucifixion. Jesus says, 'Byholdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete' (255), the aural takes primacy in directing the eye of the spectator on where to look, and also, arguably, compensating for the inadequacies of representing death on the cross in its full reality for the audience by presenting them with a visual icon whose full meaning is imparted aurally, connotatively calling to mind the five wounds of Christ as meditative symbol. Elsewhere there is the common theatrical conspiracy of synecdoche in the *mise en scène*,

² Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner, 'Introduction', in *Theatre Noise: the Sound of Performance*, edited by Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. xiv.

³ Kendrick and Roesner, 'Introduction' p.xxii, quoting Lagaay (Chapter VI)

whereby a throne stands in for Herod's court, for example, whose semiotic functionally is dependent on what is *attended to* aurally.

In recent theoretical definitions, 'theatre noise' subsumes within it vocal art, audience noise, and 'the political in produced noises'. In considering early outdoor theatre we will include within vocal art, song and chant, as distinct from the stylisation of spoken verse, while the 'political in produced noise' reaches across the range from the rhythmic variations that mark out the morally approved from the evil characters – and I restrict this to the sound rather than the content of the spoken word –, to the mellifluous sounds of the heavenly as opposed to the discordant and or frightening noises emanating from hell and the devils.⁴ As Ross Brown has reflected, theatre as an art form has a 'self-contained microcosmic scope', and 'intermediality', and a set of 'governing conventions' which 'make play of the intersections between noise, signal, silence and the corporeal subject'.⁵ This theorisation, though helpful in its articulation of a number of foci for my study, is also, surely, a *re-discovery* in the world of sound mediation through electronic means, a return to the corporeally produced and ambient world of sound which was the acoustic universe of the early theatre.

After years of study of the largely silent embodied gestural histories of medieval drama it is past time for the talkies to arrive, to look not at the morally inflected meaning of spoken text, but how it sounded, and what connotations that may have been designed to provoke. Speech is a particular form of embodied noise, far more cognitively sophisticated than any other noise produced by the human body or its ambience. Speech is materially kinetic and an ethically-loaded form of transmitting signs at the level of cognition that precedes intellection. There are a number of verbs in Middle English which convey all these understood properties of speech, from 'sounyng' to 'labbyng' and 'janglyng' – many of them in the first Trial before Pilate. Beyond speech is chant and song, and beyond them other bodily noises, sounds made by the audience, the noises of the mechanics of the theatre, and the whole ambient acoustic universe – the

⁴ Kendrick and Roesner, 'Introduction', p.xv.

⁵ Ross Brown's contribution to the conference on Theatre Noise, found at <http://theatrenoise.org.uk/index.html>, accessed 1 June, 2013, quoted by Kendrick and Roesner, 'Introduction' p.xvi.

soundscape – of the theatrical space. That is what this paper will go on to explore.

Sound is the new turn in the discipline of theatre studies. Patrice Pavis 's opening observations in the Preface to the first book devoted to *Theatre Noise* make the case:⁶

The point is to go beyond (or at least to make complete) our vision of theatre as visual *mise en scène* by way of a sonic, auditive, and musical conception of a performance: *aurality*, the counterpart and complement of visibility. We spend our lives faced with images: they stand in our way, they guide us, and they absorb us. But we live inside the world of sound: it encompasses us, mothers us, feeds and greets us with sound and meaning – it has terrified us since we were little.

She continues to remind her reader that '*mise en scène* groups, hierarchises, or combines its signs – the building materials of an organised world. The sonic aspect certainly always had its place, but it tended to *serve* the visual arrangement ... nor did it recognise a phenomenology of listening'.⁷ Bruce Smith, to whom anyone writing on acoustics in early theatre is necessarily indebted, observes that '[in a written text] place and time become wherever and whenever the reader chooses. Sound fades into the background. By contrast the play is time - and site-specific, and it happened through bodies in sound'.⁸

It is time for another case. In the York Winedrawers' *Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene*, Mary Magdalene encounters Christ as the gardener after the Resurrection. Although we are beginning by looking at spoken words, this pageant serves to demonstrate how in verse drama even 'ordinary' speech is by

⁶ Patrice Pavis, 'Preface', translated by Joel Anderson, in *Theatre Noise: the Sound of Performance*, edited by Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p.x.

⁷ Pavis, 'Preface', p.viii

⁸ Bruce R. Smith, *The Accoustic World of Early Modern England: attending to the O-factor* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p.41.

its rhythms 'made strange'⁹ and has its own sonic effects that do not coincide necessarily with the semantic progress of the language. Mary Magdalen here acts as an inciter of emotion throughout the sequence, although the audience's comfort anticipates hers as they immediately identify her interlocutor.¹⁰ Christ draws attention to her emotional state and keeps it continuously in the foreground. Between them they then offer a compressed retrospective narrative of the Crucifixion, culminating in her renewed and repeated expressions of distress:

Of bale howe schulde I blynne?
 To se þis ferly foode
 þus ruffully dight,
 Rugged and rente on a roode,
 þis is a rewfull sight... (107-111)

Christ then tells her that she must soon relinquish his physical presence for good, so there is no apparent narrative justification for Mary's sudden emotional reversal:

Alle for joie me likes to synge,
 Myne herte is gladder þanne þe glee,
 And all for joie of þy risyng
 þat suffered dede vppone a tree. (123-126)

The pageant describes an emotional cycle of distress, comfort, and joy, while the logic of events, from the comfort of recognition to the sorrow of the news of a further parting would seem to run precisely counter to this. There is, then, a contrapuntal relationship between the shape described by the narrative of the scene and that described by the development of its affective rise and fall. I have argued elsewhere that here the audience is first brought into emotional proximity with remote biblical characters, then put through a cathartic

⁹ Smith, *The Accoustic World*, p.12, drawing on Dennis Fry, *Homo Loquens: Man as a Talking Animal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp.101-24.

¹⁰ On how such characters serve in the performance circumstances of processional production to incite emotion in the crowd see, Meg Twycross, 'Playing the Resurrection' in P.L. Heyworth, ed., *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett, aetatis suae LXX* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 273-96.

experience.¹¹ The chief tools in this process are not those of dramatic realism but of performance poetry.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf in his *Poetria Nova*,¹² highlights the importance of matching tone of voice and pace to subject matter, and in this he is close to modern theories of performance poetry. In performance, the choice has to be made of whether or not to add direct emotional expression – gasps, sobs, sighs – or to trust to the particular arrangement of the spoken text. In life emotional cognition does not share the same temporal dynamic as thought and speech, but the sound and rhythm of poetry can achieve what ordinary spoken language can not. Poetry unifies the time-scales of emotion and concept so that ‘the poet can make the speed of thought and the speed of imagined emotion coincide’.¹³ The point for us in thinking about spoken verse as sound, however is, further, that,

Intonation cannot mime its reaction to imaginary emotion without copying the necessary relation it has to real emotions: the coding is already there in the usage of language... our delicacy in perceiving the emotional effect of intonational patterns is even more fine in poetry than in ordinary speech, owing to the more evident patterning.

The authenticity of the intonation pattern, be it the mouths full of alliterative verse in the Trial before Pilate, or the emotive expletives of Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalen, achieve a pre-cognitive effect on the audience. While we have inquired from the visual arts how scriptural plays may have supported their message by means of demonstrative gesture resolving itself into familiar images, we have paid less attention to the more directly observable probable effect of patterns of sound. In performance poetry, rhythm gives a sense of movement by combining prosody and intonation, and we don’t have to go to modern theorists for this; John of Garland recognised in the twelfth century how rhythmic patterning generates emotional impact. The seventh book of his

¹¹ See further in Pamela M. King, ‘The Drama: Sacred and Secular’, in *The Companion to Medieval English Poetry*, edited by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp.626-46.

¹² Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova* in J.J. Murphy, *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (California, 1971), pp.105-06.

¹³ Douglas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.168.

twelfth-century *Parisiana Poetria*, 'Incipit ars rithmica', relates rhythm in poetry to music.¹⁴ The poetics of affect, be it alienating, moving, or consoling, depend on aural arrangement. In short, verse-speaking offers sound-patternings, compression and heightening that supplies a direct pre-cognitive emotional range beyond that of most prose, something commentators from Boethius to John of Garland perceived.

It follows that when the performers in York were examined by Ordinance ,in 1476 to ensure they were 'sufficiant' in 'in connyng, voice, or persone',¹⁵ something specific about their oral delivery in addition to memory and audibility is probably required. Beyond the inherently rhythmic, there is then volume, or pitch. Of the forty-seven attested pageants in the York Register, eleven open with a raging tyrant:- Satan, Pharaoh, Herod (elder), Pilate at the Conspiracy, Caiaphas, Pilate, Herod (younger), Pilate in the trial scenes, Pilate in the Remorse of Judas, then a Roman Soldier in the same temper opens the *Road to Calvary* pageant, Pilate yet again at the *Death of Christ*. How do we know that they are raging, and how was it done? We have some well-known external evidence in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 3:2 1-14, as Hamlet instructs the travelling players thus:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it.

¹⁴ John of Garland, *The Parisiana Poetria of John of Garland*, ed. Traugott Lawler (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp.136-223.

¹⁵ *Records of Early English Drama: York*, edited by Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, 2 vols, Vol. 1, p.109

Chaucer's Miller is also a very noisy individual, cross-referenced to biblical tyrants. In the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* he is described thus:

His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys.
 He was a janglere and a goliardeys,
 And that was moost of synne and harlotries. (561-63)

This is confirmed in the Prologue to his Tale:

The millere, that for dronken was al pale,
 So that unnethe upon his hors he sat,
 He nolde avalen neither hood ne hat,
 Ne abyde no man for his curteisie,
 But in pilates voys he gan to crie,
 And swoor, by armes, and by blood and bones,
 I kan a noble tale for the nones,
 With which I wol now quite the knyghtes tale. (12-19)

What is it about millers? We might also think of the debate between the Wind Miller and the Water Miller in John Heywood's *The Play of the Weather*.¹⁶ Merry Report prevents the Water Miller from gaining access to Jupiter to ask for rain because,

...I dowl nothing of your audacyte
 But I feare me ye lacke capacityte,
 For yf ye were wyse ye myghte well espye
 How rudely ye erre from rewls of curtesye.
 What ye come in revelynge and rehetynge
 Even as a knave might go to a beare beytynge' (470-75)

There are certain occupations that lead to habitually raised voices. In post-industrial society many people have learned to speak above the noise of machinery – in fact it is said that the sharp, carrying, notes of the female voice with a strong Lancashire accent reflects the necessities that women working in the cotton mills had in developing a voice that could converse above the noise of the steam-driven shuttles. Without machinery, the medieval labourer would stop making a noise if he needed to speak – unless he worked a mill. Close too, the sails of windmills creak as they turn, and water mills make slapping rushing

¹⁶ *The Plays of John Heywood*, edited by Richard Axton and Peter Happé (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 183-215.

sounds, both of which drown out the human voice. Millers worked in a constantly noisy environment, from flour mills to fulling mills, so they had to shout. Pilate, Herod, Pharaoh, Caiaphas, and that Roman soldier, all have *inappropriately* loud voices, and excessive volume seems to convey bullying.

But there are also certain occupations that actually demand a voice made strange not by shouting but by projection. Hamlet mentions one: I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. The medieval Italianist, Steve Milner, working on the town-criers of Florence,¹⁷ finds that the role tended to pass from father to son, and carried the qualifications that the holder of the office had to be able to blow a trumpet, provide his own horse, and have a projected voice. A trumpet-blast certainly helps to draw attention to the speaker and to silence the audience. English town criers had a bell, French a drum, Italians a trumpet. We do well to remember that training in voice projection and modulation was not just narrowly confined to the schools, but was part of apprenticeships to various occupations outside the Church and the Law.

The schools were responsible, however, for preachers' voice projection techniques. Of those forty-seven pageants, arguably twenty-two begin with a kind of preaching. Most of these involve speeches delivered by God, a patriarch, or Christ. Peter takes over the role in *The Incredulity of Thomas*, *The Ascension*, and *Pentecost*. Two are begun by angels. All use formulae that ask the audience to listen – as opposed to telling them to be quiet. The Angel that opens the Old Testament pageant of *The Expulsion*, begins 'All creatures to me take tent..' (1) Equally *The Entry into Jerusalem* begins with a speech from Jesus 'To me takis tent and giffis gud hede...' (1), and *Pentecost* opens with St Peter, 'Brethir takes tente vnto my steuen...' (1) It looks very much as if this is a formulaic call to attention akin to the 'Listen up and listen good' formulae used in popular romance emulating oral story-telling. In its most stylised form the formula would be familiar to audience members in the Anglo Norman of the courtroom's *Oyez*, the plural imperative form of *oyer*, French *ouïr*, 'to hear'. Within the trials of

¹⁷ Stephen J. Milner, "'...Fanno bandire, notificare, et expressamente comandare...". Town Criers and the information economy of Renaissance Florence.' *I Tatti Studies: Essays in the Renaissance* (In-press) . eScholarID:[155440](#)

Christ in York, the formal institution of the court room, even in the most unlikely of places such as Pilate's bed-chamber, is marked out by the cry of Oyez! Within the Tilemakers' *Christ before Pilate 2*, it is Annas who cries 'Oyez' (264), as a summons and to establish the formal status of the evidence against Jesus that he is about to deliver.

What other information do we have about public speaking techniques? Chaucer's Pardoner confides to his fellow pilgrims,

Lordynges-quod he-in chirches whan I preche,
I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,
And rynge it out as round as gooth a belle, (1-3)

...

I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet,
And whan the lewed peple is doun yset,
I preche so as ye han herd bifoore,
And telle an hundred false japes moore.
Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne.
Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne
That it is joye to se my bisynesse. (391-99)

Albeit that this as parodic, it gives us a glimpse of the oratorical techniques of the market-place preacher that we might recognise in the delivery of some of the long opening speeches in the pageants. In this connection we find, however, that whatever common practice, commentators on preaching from Tertullian to Alan of Lille were deeply suspicious of theatrical effects being deployed in actual preaching. Augustine warns of *suavitas* in delivery which might, as it does for the Pardoner, substitute for unadorned truth. And Alan of Lille opines that:

Preaching should not contain jesting words, or childish remarks, or *that melodiousness and harmony which result from the use of rhythm or metrical lines; these are better fitted to delight the ear than to edify the*

soul. [my italics] Such preaching is theatrical and full of buffoonery, and in every way to be condemned...¹⁸

Beyond the various vocal techniques for voice projection and rhythmic effect, lie more adventurous areas relating to the spoken word. In the Litsters' *Christ before Herod* in the York Play Herod opens with threats against the audience to be quiet: 'Your tounge fro tretying of triffillis be trased.' (3), and '...no brothel be so bolde boste for to blowe. / And 3e þat luffis youre liffis, listen to me...' (20-21). As he proceeds to interrogate Jesus, who will not bow to him nor speak, he says, 'Lo, sirs, he deffis vs with dynne,' and '...His langage is lorne!' (189,190); then a soldier advises 'Whe, man, momerlyng may nothyg avayle (195). Herod's virtuoso language display still fails to get anything out of his victim, but then the court experiments with French, dog Latin, and nonsense, and the macaronic turns cacophonous. They end up breaching the basic turn-taking rules of speech by speaking all at once: 'Oyoez! Oyoez! Oyoez!' Prompting Herod to complain, 'O, yoe make a foule noyse for the nonys.' (333) Whether it is spiritual or social in context, speaking is a form of noise, and noisiness (and its opposite, silence) are forms of conduct, as the metaphors used to describe them attest. As Vicki Hamblin has pointed out, characters are stigmatised as outsiders if they make strange vocal sounds, and can be taken to represent the demonic in everyday life, or, in the case of Père Patelin in the farce that takes his name, for simple comic effect and as a marker of deception.¹⁹ Similarly in the Towneley *Secunda Pastorum*, the sheep stealer Mak is enjoined to 'take outt that sothren tothe' (215), that is his affected southern, and therefore unreliable, accent, and sett in a torde! (216)²⁰

¹⁸ Alan of Lille, *The Art of Preaching*, translated by Gillian R. Evans (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1981), pp.18-19, quoted in Claire M. Water, 'Dangerous Beauty, Beautiful Speech: Gendered Eloquence in Medieval Preaching', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 14, <http://www.illinoismedieval.org.ams/VOL14/waters.html> [7/19/2011 9:53:41 PM] accessed 8 April, 2013.

¹⁹ Vicki Hamblin, "'Ho Ho Ri Ha He": Linguistic Otherness in French Mystery Plays', unpublished paper given in Session 363, 'Speaking in Tongues: Reconsidering Macaronic Performance Texts', sponsored by the Medieval and Renaissance Drama Society (MRDS) at the 48th International Medieval Congress, Kalamazoo, Saturday 11 May, 2013.

²⁰ *The Towneley Plays*, edited by Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, EETS, SS 33 and 34 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Tooth or tongue? Annas tells the Beadle who bears witness to the Hosannas at the Entry into Jerusalem to hold his tongue. William Peraldus, in the remarkably enduring mid-thirteenth-century *Summa de vitiis*, includes a special section on the 'Sins of the Tongue', *De peccato linguae*. The iconographic physiology of the tongue was further allegorized with the common proverb *mors et vita in manu linguae* (Prov. 18:21), literally, death and life are in the hands of the tongue. On the other hand, the tongue also has agency for good. The *Golden Legend* discusses why the Holy Spirit should have taken the form of tongues of flame at Pentecost.²¹ The tongue is the member that is particularly difficult to control, but 'because the tongue is very useful if well-controlled, it needed to have the Holy Spirit as its controller'. Unruly tongues clack with discordant noise, indicating to an audience who may not understand the actual words, because they are in a foreign language, or nonsense, that the producer of the noise is unreliable, dangerous, or evil.

All this further suggests that the plays work at a fundamental perceptual level, action is not dependent on the spectators' foreknowledge of the story of the action, on their intellectual attention, but on the use of their ears as well as their eyes. English uses discrete verbs to define the distinction: we can see without looking, and we can hear without listening. So what of the other vocal tricks that the plays deploy to engage their audiences at the pre-cognitive level? We know from the records that most supernatural beings wore masks – were *personae* in the narrow and original sense, but how are voices made strange inside full-face masks? What does God sound like? A bad mask can muffle a voice, but a well-made one can act as a sounding box. In *Mankind*, was Titivillus's 'hede þat ys of grett omnipotens' (460), and any large devil mask an amplifier?²² We should perhaps begin now to look briefly at the medieval science of acoustics before we move on from the matter of the spoken voice.

²¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*, trans William Caxton, ed., F.S. Ellis (London: Temple Classics, 1900), 161, at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume1.htm>, accessed 2 June, 2013.

²² *The Macro Plays*, edited by Mark Eccles, EETS 262 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.153-84

There are a number of practical examples of acoustic knowledge. For example, the west front of some cathedrals, famously Wells, incorporated singing-holes used on Palm Sunday to project the voices and trumpets hidden behind the standing figures in niches as Christ and his followers entered the portal representing the gates of the Holy City.²³ We need not go this far, however, as the stations for performance of the York Play were placed so that adjacent buildings acted as reflectors against which to bounce the voice.²⁴ Moreover Philip Butterworth cites more extreme instances of 'speaking pipes' which allowed disembodied voices to emanate from brazen heads, or from ghosts. Pipes were also used through water to simulate bird song.²⁵ One late example tells of how a trick 'oracle' spoke through a dead man's head by means of a speaking tube hidden the cellar. Butterworth concludes that '...sound is a less precise tool conditioning imaginative responses than is light in determining visual perception'.²⁶ The implication is that people are more suggestible when it comes to sound than they are with sights.

On the other hand, as a number of pageants in the York Play open by having voices emanate from a direction that is different from where their visual attention is fixed, for example Joseph's Trouble about Mary, the Shepherds, Joseph and Mary bringing Christ to the Temple, the pilgrims in the Supper at Emmaus, perhaps 'by placing the sounds we relate to them through our bodies and confirm our own positions. Hence any disembodied voice calls for an embodiment with which we try to solve the auditory distress'.²⁷ Attention

²³ David Hendy, *Noise: a Human History of Sound and Listening* (London: Profile Books, 2013), unpaginated e-book at books.google.co.uk/books?id=0_FNN0iF1LIC&pg=PT47&dq='Wells+Cathedral'+singing+holes&hl=en&sa=X&ei=QcOrUdu4MuOb0QWbx4CIDg&ved=0CDcQ6wEwAQ , accessed 2 June, 2013.

²⁴ For further detail see Clifford Davidson, *Corpus Christi Plays at York* (New York: AMS Press, 2013), pp.141-42.

²⁵ Philip Butterworth, *Magic on the Early English Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 104-07.

²⁶ Butterworth, *Magic*, p.106.

²⁷ Pieter Verstraete quoted by Kendrick and Roesner, 'Introduction', p.xix

derives from *ad tendere*,²⁸ to stretch towards, further emphasising the corporeal nature of listening. People like to see who is speaking, to support aural with visual data. The voice from behind, like the voice from inside the inscrutable full-face mask, causes the audience, as is easily observed empirically, to turn their heads in search of the source of the sound, to work their ears kinetically.

Perception psychologists have taught us how types of manipulation of the visual field provided a clear counterpart to the semiotics of spoken text, in a situation of high risk of distraction in the material world of the outdoor festive performance.²⁹

[Perception] is not a process in the brain, but a kind of skilful activity on the part of the animal as a whole... We tend, when thinking about perception to make vision, not touch, our paradigm, and we tend to think of vision on a photographic model. You open your eyes and you are given, at once, a sharply focused impression of the present world in all its detail... All perception I argue is intrinsically active... [and] all perception is intrinsically thoughtful...

These kinetic definitions of the perception process, commonly applied to the act of seeing then attentively looking, help to refine further our understanding of how the audience hears then listens in the visually rich world of the festive event. The central purposive object of listening has to compete for attention with a whole contextualising social world. Audience members familiar both with the action and the actors, could listen as connoisseurs, but equally could be distracted by noises which would be, to the literary scholar of the pageant, classified as ephemeral, though arguably elements of the total meaning of that festive event.

Within the compass of the scripted play come other kinds of vocal production to which many of the same considerations apply. We know reasonably precisely the

²⁸ Kendrick and Roesner, 'Introduction', p.xix.

²⁹ Alva Noë, *Action in Perception: the Representation of Mind* (MIT Press, 2004) 1-2; 223; Andy Clark, 'Cognitive Complexity and the Semimotor Frontier' in Andy Clark and Naomi Eilan, eds. *Semi-motor Skills and Perception*.

set pieces in the York Play that were sung, and in Latin, but what beyond that was chanted or intoned? In the York Cycle *Annunciation*, a 'Doctor' bridges Old into New Testament. This sermon is 144 lines long and liberally peppered with Latin quotation. To me it is unimaginable that the Latin was not intoned or chanted. Here is the final stanza:

Ecce mitto aungelum meum ante faciem tuam, 124
qui preparabit viam tuam ante te.

Of John Baptist he menyd thore,
 For in erthe he was ordand ay
 To warne the folke that wilsom wore
 Of Cristis comyng, and thus gon say:
Ego quidem baptizo in aqua vos, autem 128
baptizabimini spiritu sancto.

Eftir me sall come nowe
 A man of myghtis mast,
 And sall baptis yoowe
 In the high haly gast.
 Thus of Cristis commyng may we see
 How sainte Luke spekis in his gospell:
 Fro God in heuen es sent, sais he,
 An aungell is named Gabriell,
 To Nazareth in Galalé,
 Where than a mayden mylde gon dwell,
 That with Joseph suld wedded be;
 Hir name is Marie-thus gan he telle.
 How God his grace than grayd
 To man in this manere,
 And how the aungell saide,
 Takes hede, all that will here.

This is immediately followed by the direction *Tunc Cantat Angelus* so that Gabriel presumably sings the *Ave Maria* before he delivers his vernacular speech:

Angel:

Hayle Marie, full of grace and blysse,
 Oure lord God is with the

And has chosen the for his,
Of all women blist mot thou be. (145-49)

Mary asks him briefly what kind of a greeting the foregoing is: 'What maner of halsyng is this/ Thus preuely comes to me?/ For in myn herte a thoght it is, / The tokenyng that I here see. (150-53)

and he sings again, the *Ne timeas Maria*, which he then glosses in the vernacular:

Angel:

Ne drede the noght thou mylde Marie,
For nothyng that may befalle,
For thou has fun soueranly
At God a grace ouer othir all. (153-57)

This apparently short pageant is not short at all, it is just that its spoken dialogue is sparse, and liberally supplemented with both chant and liturgical singing. It ends with Mary singing the whole *Magnificat*. I am not going to explore further the use of the liturgy in the pageants, which I have considered extensively elsewhere, and Richard Rastall has exhaustively explored musically,³⁰ but we should perhaps think about the physical acoustic properties of voices made strange in this way, their connotative potential and available conceptual blends for the audience. Consider moreover where the concentrations of singing occur as an acoustic effect. In the Creation and Fall of Lucifer, the Annunciation, the Shepherds' pageant, the Ascension, and Domesday, singing marks heavenly movement. Thus the sung voice indicates something other-worldly, blending with the audience's experience of worship.

The description of sung, and to some extent intoned matter, in the York Play has been covered in some detail in Clifford Davidson's recent book on the cycle.³¹

³⁰ See further Pamela M. King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), passim, and Richard Rastall, *The Heaven Singing: Music in Early english Religious Drama* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), passim.

³¹ Davidson, *Corpus Christi*, pp.127-64.

Davidson is of the considered view that participation took precedence over polyphonic complexity and quality, building up a picture in which most of the performers may have been unable to read notation, suggesting that much of the music was constrained by what could be replicated by ear and/or from memory.³² Most of the music that can be identified in the Play is, unsurprisingly, liturgical. Davidson, whose major work has all involved the allying the verbal with the visual, cannot however, move beyond concluding that music in the pageants provided an 'atmospheric touch', symbolic of the larger harmony of God's Creation. Angel singing was believed to be a ravishing experience for the soul.³³ His catalogue of depictions of musical instruments in local art of the period, while useful, again demonstrates the ingrained habit of those who work on these plays to have recourse to visual sources, if only because they endure, while the aural is ephemeral.³⁴

Davidson's empirical observations are, however, confirmed by the theatre theorists. Pavan suggests that,

unlike music at a concert, where the musicians and listeners focus their attention, it is not isolated or capable of being taken in isolation. The world of sound, when it is confronted and combined with the visual and the visible, consciously and unconsciously plays with visuality, as if the better to promote its own uncontrollable subjectivity. In the theatre, sound is never pure music. Rather and to its great credit, it is impure music. It is still steeped in what its public embodiment precisely seeks to conceal: the physicality of the performers, the unforeseeable circumstances of the performance, the listeners' more or less noisy and physical attention.³⁵

The question of what it actually sounded like surely follows from there, and applies to both the intoned and the sung. In modern readings, even while

³² Davidson, *Corpus Christi*, 133-34.

³³ Davidson, *Corpus Christi*, 154.

³⁴ Davidson, *Corpus Christi*, pp.158-63.

³⁵ Pavis, 'Preface' p. xi

Middle English is faithfully reconstructed, Latin is Latin. And yet however 'strange' the Latin inserted into the pageants was to the audience, we must surely assume that, like the music, it would have echoed local customs, practices and limitation. Singers did not have to use a particular resonance, characteristic of modern 'trained' voices, to cut through instruments, so the tenor of the voices would be different; and we cannot guess as to customary pace. More importantly, Latin would have been pronounced according to the letter values of the day, that is before the great vowel shift. For the modern scholar, therefore, who feels on safer ground, perhaps, with notated Latin song than with many other aspects of the soundscape of the early theatre, we do well to recall Wilfred Mellers's warning that 'We cannot hear original early music because we have heard the Beatles'.³⁶

Verse dialogue, chant and song are all corporeally produced and received matters in the soundscape of early drama, then, that invite explorations separate from the visual and interpretative. Their ephemerality does not render that exploration impossible, but must leave it in the realm of informed speculation. Taken in the spirit of free enquiry, they then allow us to proceed to consider the wider effects of bodily noises, both those produced by the resources of the body and those produced by bodies operating in concert with mechanical devices. That is where we go next. There are, in fact sparse enough references to bodily non-verbal noises in the early plays in the English tradition. Looking at non-dramatic texts, chiefly in the Romance tradition, John Burrow arrived at the view that there were only laughs, meaningful coughs, and farts to be considered.³⁷ If Beatrice can cough discreetly in *Paradise*, and this seems as good a place as any to start, or the Green Knight to remind Arthur's court that someone needs to respond to him,³⁸ it is surely inconceivable that such non-

³⁶ The quotation from Mellers, and the preceding cautionary material about medieval Latin song are derived from a paper given by linguist and early musician Alison Wray to the Bristol University Medieval Research Seminar on 30 May, 2013.

³⁷ J.A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁸ Burrow, *Gestures*, 165-68, referencing Dante's *Paradiso* XVI, 13-15, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l.137.

verbal sounds did not contribute to the construction of meaning in our plays. Coughs in human communication are used to call someone to remember themselves, and/ or to call attention to the person coughing. 'Ahem' may not be written into the spoken text, and would certainly be extra-metrical, but every time a messenger enters, some such preliminary noise could plausibly have been uttered. It is unlikely, perhaps that an angel arriving to tell Joseph that he need not trouble himself about his wife's pregnancy (*Joseph's Trouble about Mary*, York Play) needed to clear his throat audibly before his 'Waken, Joseph' (246), but, in lower register, it is entirely plausible that the shepherds, coming upon each other, made just such a noise. They also laughed: in the York pageant of the Shepherds, II Pastor says, 'Ha! Ha! þis was a mery note' (l.65), a perfectly metrically regular iambic tetrameter, but to imagine it being delivered without the necessary oral gesture is like imagining King Lear merely speaking 'Howl, howl, howl, howl!' on discovering that Cordelia is murdered Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V:iii, 302). There are other opportunities for laughter in the pageants, particularly as the tormentors buffet Christ. This is a different type of laughter, of course, but, as Burrow points out, laughter can signal joy, amusement, condescension, or contempt.³⁹ The ultimate bodily sound of contempt emanates not from the mouth, however, but from the arse, and is the fart. Burrow points out the fart's gestural affinity to spitting and sticking out the tongue, but the fart is peculiarly sonic in its resonance. Speaking with the nether mouth has of course all sorts of carnivalesque connotations that I cannot do justice to here;⁴⁰ one example will serve, and that is the falling Lucifer in the pageant of the *Fall of Lucifer* in the N.town manuscript who says, 'Ffor fere of fyre a fart I crake' (l.90),⁴¹ which was surely accompanied by an appropriate sound.

³⁹ Burrow, *Gestures*, 78-81.

⁴⁰ I am grateful here for the illuminating discussion of farting following Session 127, Late Medieval Soundscapes, sponsored by the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Bristol, at the 48th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, May 9, 2013, in which instances of minstrels who could fart in tune, and who could play musical instruments by farting into them, were shared, but which are beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁴¹ *The N-Town Play, Cotton MS Vespasian D 8*, 2 vols, edited by Stephen Spector, EETS (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1991)

The devil in *The Castle of Perseverance* does not rely upon his own flatulence to indicate depravity, but, according to a well-known direction on the set diagram that accompanied the play text, ' & he þat schal plai belyal loke þat he haue gunne powder brennyng in pypys in hys handys and an hys erys and in hys ars whanne he gothe to batayl'.⁴² Mechanical additions to human interaction in early drama are frequently associated with the other world, particularly hell, and with Doomsday, and are clearly intended to create dissonance in the soundscape, and even to provoke fear. In the records of the Passion Play from New Romney in Kent we find an explosive shopping list ordered up by producer Gover Martyn that enters the account in 1560-61,⁴³ where the Chamberlains record paying for 'brymstone', 'red leade', 'red oker', 'rosset', 'fflorey', and 'vardegrese'. Equally, in the records of the lost *Doomsday* pageant of the Drapers from Coventry, money was paid for the man who kept the barrel of the earthquake.⁴⁴ Outside the insular context, we can add that Rouen in 1474 used drums, 'engines' and canon, while flames came from the eyes ears and mouth of hell mouth. Mons had a thunder machine, consisting of a barrel with skins stretched over both ends, and a cauldron with a skin over it. They also borrowed and used two large flat brass basins, and also paid someone for materials to make a crank handle for two great vats that made thunder in hell.⁴⁵ An earthquake was simulated in a Provençal Passion Play in the sixteenth century 'by rolling stone balls on a wooden framework below the stage platform that is supplemented by firing canons ten or twelve times 'promptly''.⁴⁶

We can only speculate on what these effects were like, but would do well to remember that gun-powder and thunder probably produced the loudest noises within the experience of pre-industrial people in England. In contrast to these

⁴² *Macro Plays*, ed. Eccles, frontispiece.

⁴³ *Records of Early English Drama: Diocese of Canterbury. Kent*, edited by James M. Gibson, 2 Vols, (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2002), I p.791

⁴⁴ *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry*, edited by Reginald Ingram (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1981), 230, 474.

⁴⁵ Peter Meredith and John Tailby, *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages: Texts and Documents in English Translation* (Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo, 1983) 152-5.

⁴⁶ Butterworth, *Magic*, p.100

concealed mechanical devices, we must not forget the use of musical instruments, closely documented by Clifford Davidson, including the metal trumpets that sounded the coming of the end of the world, but which would also have included the cacophony of musicians bands and the city waits whose sounds would have leaked into one another as they accompanied each pageant from station to station.⁴⁷ Davidson also expresses surprise that, unlike continental cases, the York Passion itself has no indication that it was threaded through with the customary Holy Week music. Instead he suggests that through the stark noises of the nails being driven in, of the beatings, and the Cross dropping into its mortise, 'the audience is invited to see and *feel* the disharmony at the center of the Christian story...' ⁴⁸

Moreover, beyond the deliberate mechanical sounds of this theatre was surely the incidental sound of machinery. The York Mercers' indenture famously describes the parts of the mechanism by which God was conveyed between heaven and earth.⁴⁹ Any such movement would inevitably produce noise that was part of the soundscape but not part of the theatrical illusion. It is perhaps worth noting that singing frequently accompanies movement between earth and heaven; hell can creak and rumble and screech – heaven probably should be more acoustically continent. All noises of this kind do, however, serve to remind us that there is a materiality to theatre events which is borne out in the vicarious sounds of human and mechanical effort, 'the creaking of the theatre machine' which puts noise at the core of the aesthetic of theatre.⁵⁰ Bringing all considerations of that aesthetic together, Bruce Smith refers to Langham's description of the Coventry Hocktide play which is all couched in terms of the noises it made, the 'gallops, thwacks and bangs' and primary sounds which were not for the observer speech but 'hooves clattering, alder poles clashing, harnesses rattling, shields clanging'. It was a 'corporeal event', happening in the bodies of the performers and listeners. He goes on to reflect that a

⁴⁷ Davidson, *Corpus Christi*, 132.

⁴⁸ Davidson, *Corpus Christi*, 146-47.

⁴⁹ *REED: York*, Vol. 1, p.24

⁵⁰ Kendrick and Roesner, 'Introduction', p. xxi

communication community is established through phonetic speech - dialect, variety, register, code, but also through singing, whistling, drumming, horn-calling and other means to keep the community in aural contact with one another.⁵¹

The reconstructed soundscape of early drama challenges the modern scholar both to understand its nature and, according to a process of iteration, how it offers access to the social existence of the community in which it was first performed. That community vitally contains its audience, an audience of deliberately or inadvertently noisy listeners. Within present day theatrical conventions, and commentary on contemporary theatre, the noisy spectator is more or less assumed to be a 'chronic troublemaker', upsetting the rest of the audience and often the actors.⁵² However Pavis acknowledges that the noisy spectator can inject meaning into the performance, and she draws an example from Korean *Pansori* opera, where

the spectator, in the course of the performance, has the possibility of making brief interjections, compliments, or commentaries. Such *Ch'uimsae*, if correctly placed by the connoisseur spectator – at the right moment, and with the right energy and tone – do not interfere with the dynamics of the singing and playing, and actually strengthen and help the singer. Far from being reduced to annoying noise within the system of communication, *Ch'uimsae* form part of the sonic and visual stage event: the spectators are not abstractions and recorders, but living beings, accompanying and protecting the performance as it unfolds.⁵³

For the scholar of early theatre, this simply draws our attention not only to the key function in the trajectory of *Mankind* played by the audience song, but also makes us consider the impossibility that the Crucifixion in any play was performed to a dumb audience, that indeed the workmen in the York Crucifixion, by taunting each other for bad workmanship are actually inciting the audience to

⁵¹ Smith, *The Acoustic World*, pp.39-43.

⁵² Pavis, 'Preface', p.xiii

⁵³ Pavis, 'Preface', p.xiii.

barrack them in a way which enriches the meaning of the event. In both these cases, of course, that meaning lies in the demonstration of how easy it is to fall into sin – a demonstration that is carried out vocally and aurally. As Bruce Smith reminds us, the audience also makes noises as ‘the listener *in* the environment’.

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So finally what can we understand about that environment? Clifford Davidson devotes a single page to his analysis of the wider soundscape, to the mixture and absence of customary noises with sounds specific.⁵⁵ Here again we are entering the realm of informed speculation, and yet it would seem wrong not to fill in something of the likely ambient background to the analysis of bodily noises.

Sounds within an aural community are temporally and site-specific. Sunday sounds are different to weekdays; spring sounds different to winter. Was excitement and anticipation stoked on Corpus Christi day by the sound of wagon-wheels rumbling to the start point, performers rising early and walking to specific locations, and singers warming up? Many of the usual sounds of manufacturing activities would have fallen silent on the holiday, although the sounds of divine office would have leaked from the religious houses as usual. Within the pageants, however, some of the familiar sounds of industry were recontextualised, so that pinning and hammering became the noise of the Crucifixion, or the building of the ark, and noises and smells emanated not from the tanneries but from hell. This was more than product-placement for the guilds but a particularly meaningful process of defamiliarisation. In cities like York, wharves on the river also produced particular sounds, of the crane unloading vessels, of men shouting, the thump and bangs of heavy weights being loaded and unloaded, alongside the creak of ship’s timbers in water, the scrape of going alongside, and the slap of furled sails and ropes. We cannot know definitively how much of this noise ceased on the holiday. Then there were human cries: the cries of vendors in the street and calls for alms surely continued, but possibly not the rhythm of work songs, while the calls of officialdom as proclamations are

⁵⁴ Smith, *The Accoustic World*, p.44.

⁵⁵ Davidson, *Corpus Christi*, p.155.

read, or hue and cry raised, or sermons were preached in public spaces also found their form of replication in the play's action.

Writing about another city with a waterfront and numerous religious houses, Thomas Boogaart II takes particular note of how the norms of the ordinary work day had been suspended. He also adds another important element to the urban soundscape: bells. Davidson is of the view that in York church bells would continue to ring periodically to mark the hours and call the religious to prayer, but it seems that, in Bruges, 'during the procession of Holy Blood they continued to resound during the length of the ritual, infusing the urban soundscape with a pulsating rhythm, punctuated only occasionally by the horns and trumpets of the city minstrels and guild musicians as well as psalms sung by celebrants'.⁵⁶ The possibility cannot be ruled out, though it is hard for the modern audience member accustomed to minimal aural distraction, to imagine that bells rang continuously on Corpus Christi day in English cities too. As Kathleen Ashley observes, 'a dimension of the processional experience, even the urban soundscape was not univocal but multi-layered, with bells, instruments and voices communicating disparate, although not incompatible, messages about the event and its various participants'.⁵⁷

Beyond the immediate urban environment, we do well to remember that York and Chester throughout the period in which their annual cycles were performed were the size of modern large villages, so city and country noises would not have been sharply delineated, and therefore the imaginary of the multi-layered soundscape cannot be complete without adding the sounds of domestic animals, of birdsong, and, at dusk the sounds of the surrounding woodland, the bellowing of deer, of wild boar, the cawing of rooks and crows, the cry of seagulls, and the sharp bark of foxes in the night. All of these are very carrying noises. The many domestic cats that inhabited places of human population would have fought and mated noisily, setting dogs barking, and the many small water courses would

⁵⁶ Thomas A. Boogaart II, 'Out Saviour's Blood: Procession and Community in Late Medieval Bruges', in *Moving Subjects: Processional Performance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, edited by Kathleen Ashley and Wim Husken (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001) pp.69-116, p.89.

⁵⁷ Kathleen Ashley, 'Introduction: the Moving Subjects of Processional Performance', in *Moving Subjects*, ed. Ashley and Husken, pp.7-34, pp.19-20.

have provided the background sound of frogs croaking in a summer's evening as the cycles wound to their close.

Those working with the large medieval church building as a ceremonial place, encourage us to look at it as a container in which movement, gesture and sound took place and were witnessed. The same might be said of the civic space, described by urban historians is predominantly in terms of zones and their connecting streets, spaces accorded significance by the orientation and arrangement of the built environment. Those who study processions have shifted the emphasis away from the static to the idea of spaces being moved through, but have not often given emphasis to the acoustics, and the acoustic effects, of those spaces. We do well to consider in the present context, however, that the very ontology of sound is 'not in the producer nor the receiver, but in the space in which it resonates: sound is therefore fundamentally constitutive of performance space'.⁵⁸ That being the case, a consideration of the materiality of the performance of early dramatic performance could, I suggest, fruitfully re-orientate itself away from its near monolithic preoccupation with its visual effects and turn up the sound.

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SITM, 2013.

⁵⁸ See further Brown, chapter 8 in *Theatrical Noise*, ed. by Kendrick and Roesner.

