Leeds Studies in English

Impersonating Spirits: Ghosts and Souls on the Medieval Stage

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One of the most fascinating and yet puzzling aspects of medieval plays is their method of presentation, that is the techniques and devices that might have been employed in their performance. In most cases, the dramatic texts either lack reliable stage directions or are not particularly explicit about stage business.[1] So, when a direction indicates in pageant II (The Drapers Playe) of the Chester mystery cycle that 'Then God doth make the woman of the ribbe of Adam . . .' (128), it is really hard for a modern reader to envisage what fifteenth-century actors could have actually done.[2] Similarly, in N-Town 25 (The Raising of Lazarus), Lazarus dies saying, 'To God in hevyn my sowle I qweth./ Farwell, systeryn, for hens I wende' (107-08), and a stage-direction adds: *Hic Lazarus moritur, et cetera* (108sd).[3] It is difficult to know what that mystifying *et cetera* could refer to, but there surely existed a well-known code of signs and gestures, easily recognizable by the audience, which made it possible for an actor to pretend to lie 'dead' onstage while his 'soul' was rising up to heaven.

There are many other similarly puzzling cases in medieval drama. This paper focuses precisely on the problems posed when actors – mostly in the English theatre – have to impersonate spirits. As well as attempting to show the difficulties involved, whenever possible I shall suggest practical solutions with regard to acting methods and devices. In each case, the main reference is the dramatic text, which is here treated as the 'script' for a conjectural performance. When the purely theatrical-speculative method fails or is not sufficient, medieval iconography is used as a complementary aid.

Although medieval English theatre is mostly religious, not very many 'spirit' characters appear. Angels and devils should perhaps not be regarded as such, since they seem to be usually treated as corporeal, even when they are shown descending from an upper level – heaven – or coming up from the low depths of hell. There is, however, a group of characters who are unmistakably

considered spirits and should have appeared as such onstage. They are either souls or ghosts, and their roles are quite significant for the dramatic action and for the doctrinal – theological and/or moral – teaching of the plays. The following is a tentative typology of all spirits found in the English plays:

a. The Holy Ghost, visible to other personages and to the audience in a fair number of plays, with or without a speaking part.

b. The souls of dying people which, as soon as their bodies drop dead, fly up to heaven or are dragged down to hell.

c. The character known as Anima Christi – the Soul of Jesus after crucifixion – who acts as Heaven's champion in the 'Harrowing of Hell' plays.

d. In the same plays, the procession of souls freed from hell – Adam, Eve, Abraham, John the Baptist etc. – which appear and walk on stage too.

e. Souls – like that of Mary in the N-Town Assumption – which go back to their bodies, bringing about their resurrection.

f. Good or bad spirits, similar but not identical to angels or devils, who enter the body of other people and act as their counsellors.

g. The Human Soul, to be found as an allegorical, independent character in *Wisdom* only, even if it appears with some allegorical features in other moralities as well.[4]

The Holy Ghost is necessarily represented in a number of English mysteries, especially in the Parliament of Heaven (N-Town), and the Annunciation, the Baptism of Jesus and Pentecost (all cycles).[5] Since in most cases this character does not have a speaking part, one may assume that a dummy in the shape of a white dove was lowered down with the help of ropes or a pulley. This is recorded as the standard practice in medieval Lincoln at Whitsun.[6] Such a procedure seems to be intended when in N-Town 22 (The Baptism) a stage direction reads: *Spiritus Sanctus hic descendat super ipsum, et Deus, Pater Celestis, dicet in celo* (92sd); and likewise, in the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul*, when Ananias blesses Paul: *Hic aparebit spiritus sanctus super eum* (291sd).[7] In N-Town 40 (Pentecost), the stage business – whatever it was – would have been fairly conventional, as it is taken for granted in the first stage direction: *Modo de die Pentecostes. Apostoli dica[n]t genuflectentes; Spiritus Sanctus descendat super eos, et cetera* (1sd).

Other plays are much more explicit about the devices employed. For instance, in N-Town 10 (The Marriage of Mary and Joseph), an angel speaks on behalf of (actually in lieu of) the Holy Spirit (120-32), and in Chester XXI (Pentecost), flames or 'tongues of fire' are placed by angels on the heads of the

apostles, thus avoiding the appearance of the Holy Ghost. In order that the audience may be aware of His coming, God the Father, probably speaking from above, announces: 'Nowe will I send . . . my Ghooste . . . in lycknes of fyre freelye . . .' (231-35). Similarly, in Chester VI (The Annunciation) Gabriel announces that the Holy Ghost will 'shadow' Mary (29).

The most exciting case of a speaking Holy Spirit is in N-Town 11 (The Parliament of Heaven), for in the first section of this play the three Persons of the Holy Trinity converse in heaven about the fate of mankind, and then speak to Gabriel, sending him down to Mary's house. The part of the Holy Spirit would have been undertaken here by a living actor, since he would have had to appear sitting by God the Father, and then speak. This uncommon presentation of the Holy Ghost – usually portrayed in most pictures as a dove – would have been familiar to a medieval audience, as in Jacobus's *Homilies* (a twelfth-century manuscript) He is depicted as a real person, and the *Book of Hours* of the Duchess Catherine of Cleves (c.1420-30) shows Him as a priest – wearing an alb and a stole – sitting by the Father.[8] Also, in an alabaster panel in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Holy Spirit appears as a man holding a book.[9]

The second part of that same pageant is more striking, for here must be shown the three Persons descending to Mary during the Annunciation episode. This is explained in a very puzzling stage direction:

> *Here þe Holy Gost discendit with iij bemys to oure Lady, the*
> *Sone of þe Godhead nest with iij bemys to þe Holy Gost, the*
> *Fadyr godly with iij bemys to þe Sone. And so entre all thre to*
> *here bosom, and Mary seyth* (292sd).

Here, not only the Holy Ghost, but all three Persons must have been either dolls (handled by actors from behind) or pictures, linked to each other by means of gilded wires (the light beams or rays). From the thirteenth century onwards some paintings of the Annunciation showed the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost in a descending line, all linked by rays which point to Mary. How they entered her bosom remains unclear, but a convenient trapdoor strategically placed in the stage floor may have solved the problem.

When human souls did not have speaking parts, an easy solution would have been to use either puppet-birds, small dolls or statues. Souls had often been equated with birds in ancient Egypt, an idea later taken up in Christian iconography; some pictures show doves coming through the mouths of dead

bodies.[10] On the other hand, a fair number of medieval paintings and sculptures portray the soul as a miniature person. Illustrations of the Death of the Virgin, for instance, show Jesus or an angel holding a miniature Mary, which presumably has come out of her body, and will eventually return to it so that She may rise again.[11] The N-Town Assumption (41) probably employed a doll when, according to a stage direction, *Hic exiet anima Marie de corpore in sinu[m] Dei* (329sd); the same method must have been used in the Antichrist plays, which show people reviving. A similar practice prevails in the performance of the Elche mystery today.

The only case of a speaking soul seems to be that of Anima in *The Castle of Perseverance*,[12] and therefore a living actor would have been necessary once again, as the initial directions demand that 'Mankyndeis bed schal be vndyr þe castel/ and þer schal þe sowle lye vndyr þe bed tyl/ he schal ryse and pleye'. A living actor (a child?) would have had to undertake that part, since after the death of the body (3007) Anima has to speak and act, and in 3593 he (she?) actually climbs up to the scaffold that stands for God's throne. Apart from Anima in *Wisdom* (which is an independent character), this is the most active role of a 'soul' in medieval English drama, probably because it is the spirit counterpart of Humanum Genus, an allegory of mankind.

Everyman's spirit, on the other hand, does not speak, but his presence is essential for the outcome of the morality *Everyman*, as only when his soul is seen going up to heaven is salvation finally accomplished.[13] An angel greets him with the words 'Come, excellente electe spouse, to Iesu!' (894) which bear a strong resemblance to the angel's song in the York Assumption (XLV) *Veni electa mea* (208, 312), actually a liturgical text (the fourth antiphon of the Common of Virgins) inserted in the play in order to stage the mystical 'marriage' of the human soul to Jesus. In a very enlightening paper, Cowling wonders whether Everyman's soul may be '. . . a separate female figure who ascends from the grave to the tower of heaven' (p. 302);[14] but, as has been suggested elsewhere, an angel hauling up a doll – by means of a pulley – from the grave to the space above, would have been more effective. Alternatively, the angel could have carried the 'soul' in his own arms, just like Jesus in the N-Town Assumption play quoted above.[15] Similar methods would have been employed in the Digby play of *Mary Magdalen* when a group of angels is supposed to lift up Magdalen's soul (2119-20), and in Bodel's *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas*, since an angel collects the souls of the dead, while their bodies are being removed from the stage by Saracens.[16]

So far, only the souls of the saved have been mentioned, but the

presentation of damned souls must have been even more exciting. A simple way of disposing of bad souls is already suggested in the Anglo-Norman *Le Jeu d'Adam*, where characters are simply dropped body and soul into hell's mouth.[17] Similarly, a devil disposes of Herod and two soldiers – dragging away body and soul to hell – in N-Town 20 (The Death of Herod, 233-45). The Chester Herod play (X), however, seems to require the carrying of Herod's very soul to hell, as a devil remarks: 'From Lucifer, that lord, I am sent/ to fetch this kinges sowle here present/ into hell' (442-44).

Although the texts are not explicit enough, English actors would have been familiar with the picture of devils opening up Herod's body in order to seize his soul, for a 'Norwich roof-boss shows devils dragging Herod's soul from his body';[18] a doll – probably in the shape of a devil, or even a black bird or dove – could have been used in these cases. In the *Cornish Ordinalia*, several devils appear after Adam's death, and a stage direction reads: *Hic accipiat animam et portabit ad infernum*.[19] In Chester XXIII (Antichrist) there is no doubt that devils seize the body and soul of Antichrist separately, since the text indicates: *Tunc capient animam eius, et potius corpus* (678sd); then, a devil says 'His soule with sorrowe in hand have I hent' (679), which seems to demand the practice employed in the 'Peniarth Antichrist': *Tunc ibunt demones ad infernum cum animam Antechristi*.[20]

The episodes enacting the death of Judas might have involved a detailed process of disembowelment in order to seize his soul, as a devil says in the *Cornish Ordinalia*: 'But your soul, you loathsome wretch, won't come through your mouth because you have kissed the Christ'.[21] According to an old tradition, Judas's damned soul could not come out through his mouth, for his lips had been in contact with Jesus's face. Certain medieval paintings echo this tradition and the English would have certainly been familiar with the practice of disembowelling the bodies of criminals at the scaffold.[22]

The souls of Christ and other biblical characters in the Harrowing of Hell episodes are even more relevant to our topic: they all speak, and therefore would have certainly been played by living actors. These souls, however, would have been fairly different from those mentioned by Meg Twycross, as she actually refers to *bodies* that have come back to life in the course of Doomsday, not to single souls.[23]

All four English cycles include the Harrowing of Hell – N-Town devotes two pageants to it – whose characters are spirits, even if little is said about their actual performance. The N-Town Anima Christi first declares in pageant 33 (The

Harrowing of Hell, I) 'I am þe sowle of Cryst Jesu,/. . . My body is ded' (9, 11), but then (35: The Harrowing of Hell, II) it has to carry out the following puzzling business: *Tunc transiet Anima Christi ad resuscitandum corpus* (72sd). In the Towneley and York cycles, Christ's soul just states that his body is in the grave. It is not easy to envisage the outward appearance of these souls, but since it has been proved that there existed a type of costume (black or white) to indicate the 'nakedness' of the Doomsday 'souls' (Twycross, 1989), one may assume that some kind of 'spirit' uniform was worn by actors to impersonate souls without bodies. A fifteenth-century painting – the Golden Panel from Lüneburg, Hanover – depicts the Harrowing-of-Hell souls as white figures;[24] also, Paris, B.N. MS de Cangé 819 identifies the soul of a pope as a man wearing the triple crown, dressed up in a white loose shirt and trousers.[25] It is very likely then that those souls would have worn a special 'spirit' garment.

As for the likely costume employed for Christ's soul, the *Cornish Ordinalia* may again be relied upon, since in those plays Jesus distinguishes himself from angels in that angels wear a white robe, whereas His is red.[26] At the moment of his Ascension, Jesus explains the symbolic meaning of that colour: 'Red is mine by right, seeing that my coat of mail/ became a coat of blood . . .'.[27] The playwright here echoes the Vulgate (Isaiah 63: 1-3 and Revelations 19: 13) which refers to a warrior, stained in red (blood) after treading alone the *torcular* or winepress of war. The actor could have worn a red gown to signify Christ's spiritual nature; at the moment of the resurrection (N-Town) he could have simply taken the gown off, thus appearing in his 'naked' costume beneath. The practice of wearing two different costumes, one on top of the other, is found in *Wisdom*, as a stage direction reveals: 'And aftyr þe songe entreth LUCYFER in a dewyllys aray wythowt and wythin as a prowde galonte' (324sd).

Finally, the good and bad spirits who seem to influence the conduct of other characters should be considered. Good spirits are normally portrayed as good angels in *The Castle of Perseverance* and the Digby play of *Mary Magdalen* and so their outer appearance was probably that of angels. Bad spirits, however, may have taken different shapes. A devil enters the body of Pilate's wife in her sleep – N-Town and York cycles – whereas devils, bad angels and the allegories of the seven deadly sins all seem to appear in *Mary Magdalen*, where the following stage direction can be read: 'Wyth þis word vij dyllys xall de-woyde frome þe woman . . .' (691sd). It is not easy to figure out the type of device employed here, but it may be assumed that a trap, appropriate disguises, and skilful theatre practice were involved.

Impersonating spirits must have entailed a great deal of ingenuity on the part of medieval players and producers, as those characters are involved in pivotal scenes. Beyond the evidence of sparsely surviving theatrical records, however, actual theatrical practice may be surmised from medieval iconography as well as from traditional and folk customs.

NOTES

[1]   This article follows up Meg Twycross's enlightening articles, '"With What Body Shall They Come?": Black and White Souls in the English Mystery Plays', *Proceedings of the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of S.I.T.M..* Lancaster, 13-19 July 1989, 207B-215A [later published in *Langland, the Mystics, and the Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S.S. Hussey,* ed. by Helen Phillips (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 271-86] and 'More Black and White Souls.' *Medieval English Theatre* 13 (1991), 52-63.

[2]   *The Chester Mystery Cycle,* ed. by R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, 2 vols, Early English Text Society, SS 3 and 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974 and 1986), 2 vols. All references cited are to volume 1 of this edition.

[3]   *The N-Town Play,* ed. by Stephen Spector, 2 vols, EETS SS 11-12 (London: Oxford University Press, 1991). All references cited are to this edition.

[4]   *Wisdom* in *The Macro Plays,* ed. by Mark Eccles, EETS 262 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 113-52.

[5]   See also *The Towneley Plays,* ed. by Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, 2 vols, EETS SS 13-14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); *The York Plays,* ed. by Richard Beadle, (London: Edward Arnold, 1982).

[6]   Peter Meredith et al. *Acting Medieval Plays* (Lincoln: Lincoln Cathedral, 1985), p. 24.

[7]   *The Digby Plays,* ed. by F.J. Furnivall, EETS ES 70 (London: Oxford University Press, 1896, repr. 1967).

[8]   Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art,* 2 vols (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), I: pp. 9, 11.

[9]   M.D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 132.

[10]   Pamela Sheingorn, 'For God is Such a Doomsman', in *The Iconography of Just Judgement in Medieval Art and Drama,* ed. by David Bevington et al. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), plates 7 and 11.

[11]   Luis Quirante Santacruz, *Teatro asuncionista valenciano de los siglos XV y XVI*

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(Valencia: Generalitat valenciana, 1987), pp. 314-40.

[12] *The Macro Plays*, pp. 1-111.

[13] *Everyman*, ed. by A.C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961).

[14] Douglas Cowling, 'The Angels's Song in *Everyman'*, *Notes and Queries* 233 (1988), 301-03.

[15] See also R. Portillo, '*Everyman* and the "Craft of Living": The Staging of Man's Last Day on Earth', in *Formes Teatrals de la tradició medieval*, ed. by Francesc Massip (Barcelona: Institute del Teatre, 1996), pp. 321-36, 326.

[16] *Medieval French Plays*, trans. by Richard Axton and John Stevens (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971).

[17] *Le Jeu d'Adam (El drama de Adán)*, ed. and trans. by Ricardo Redoli Morales (Málaga: Universitat de Málaga, 1994).

[18] *The N-Town Play*, p. 480.

[19] *The Ancient Cornish Drama*, ed. by Edwin Norris, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859), I, p. 68.

[20] *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, Appendix IIB, 702sd.

[21] *The Cornish Ordinalia*, ed. by Markham Harris (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1969), p. 125.

[22] Schiller, *Iconography*, II, p. 77.

[23] See note 1 above.

[24] Schiller, *Iconography*, II, plate 22.

[25] A.M. Nagler, *The Medieval Religious Stage: Shapes and Phantoms* (New York: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 75.

[26] Harris, *Ordinalia*, pp. 243-44.

[27] Ibid., pp. 245-46.