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The Grotesque in the York Mystery Plays

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THE GROTESQUE IN THE YORK MYSTERY PLAYS

by

Dennis M. Ryan

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VITA

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CHAPTER I

THE GROTESQUE: NATURE AND EFFECT

Minimal critical attention has concentrated upon the dramatic technique informing the mystery cycles. The emphasis given to the Renaissance, the apogee of English drama, has generated this situation. Too often, the critic regards pre-Renaissance drama as only a preparation for Shakespeare, the putative heir to an inchoate dramatic tradition. E. K. Chambers, for instance, admitted that his two-volume study of the medieval stage evolved from his attempt to place Shakespeare among his predecessors in English drama.¹ As late as 1950, A. P. Rossiter levelled this patronage at medieval drama:

Rightly or wrongly, we assume that readers with a main interest in medieval literature (and specifically drama) are few . . . To put it another way, we assume the existence of a public already interested in seeing more in Shakespeare (and possibly other Elizabethans) and capable of extending that interest backwards in time towards a rather hazy 'medieval stage' in which it is not very easy to take a similar interest.²

This gratuitous assumption belies the uniqueness of

¹E. K. Chambers, The Mediaeval Stage, I (London: Oxford University Press, 1903), v.

²A. P. Rossiter, English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans: Its Background, Origins and Development (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), p. 8.

the mystery cycles. After all, they imitated an action vaster than any staged before or since, the spectrum of salvation history from the Creation until the Day of Doom. Beginning in the late fourteenth century, they sustained their popularity for close to two hundred years, edifying and delighting the people in such places as York, Wakefield, and Chester.³ Only the intemperance of Reformation zeal finally extirpated them.⁴ That the most popular drama of England has generated the least amount of sensitive appraisal is, indeed, paradoxical.

Struck by this hiatus in literary criticism, George Coffman pleaded for a reevaluation of the mystery cycles solely from the standpoint of their dramatic values:

. . . let a study be made of available sources of a text from one definite point of view -- the quality of the dramatic art revealed in the composite product.⁵

Seconding Coffman, Eleanor Prosser argued that an understanding of the religious tradition, shared by dramatist and spectator, helps the critic to assess the impact that this drama registered upon the medieval audience:

³V. A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 1.

⁴Harold C. Gardiner, S. J., Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. xii.

⁵George Coffman, "A Plea for the Study of the Corpus Christi Plays as Drama," Studies in Philology, XXVI (October, 1929), 417-18.

But the approach of the dramatic critic alone is inadequate when we turn to medieval drama. Evaluating plot structure and emotional impact necessarily depends on understanding the playwright's purpose and the audience's orientation. Without a knowledge of doctrine and tradition, a critic can go only so far as his instinctive sense of theatre will take him.⁶

Illustrating her thesis, Prosser defined the doctrine of repentance and used it for a comparative study of the dramatic art displayed in the extant plays of Cain, Joseph, the Woman taken in Adultery, Magdalene, and Thomas. My dissertation, on the other hand, will define the grotesque in order to criticize the dramatic technique of one specific cycle, the York mystery plays. The publication of Wolfgang Kayser's The Grottesque in Art and Literature⁷ has stimulated critical interest in the basic structure of the grotesque. Unlike Kayser's work, my study attempts to connect the grotesque with medieval thinking on sin, disorder, and confusion. My contention is that the York playwright, attempting to stage the fall and redemption of man, exploited the grotesque, a traditional technique for reflecting the very nature of sin.

In studying post-Romantic German prose, Lee Byron Jennings postulated an approach to the grotesque: "The

⁶Eleanor Prosser, Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays: A Re-Evaluation (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 194.

⁷Wolfgang Kayser, The Grottesque in Art and Literature, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963).

process of evaluation starts, ideally, from the concrete grotesque imagery."⁸ Following this desideratum, I shall adduce examples of what I consider grotesque, spanning the ages from the civilization of the Egyptians down to our own. The common property shared by these examples will furnish the basis for an induction as to the fundamental character of the grotesque.

Upon their sarcophagi, the Egyptians etched representations of their god Typhon. This god had large, coarse features, capped by a lolling, protruding tongue.⁹ The disparity between the size of this tongue with respect to the rest of the face shatters accepted conceptions of human physiognomy. The tongue looms monstrously out of proportion.

In addition to the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, fifth-century Greece witnessed the satyr play. By law, each poet competing in the City Dionysia had to submit one satyr play with his tragic trilogy.¹⁰ This play featured a chorus of satyrs, "hairy fellows with

⁸Lee Byron Jennings, The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 26.

⁹Thomas Wright, A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1968), pp. 8-10.

¹⁰Roy C. Flickinger, The Greek Theater and its Drama (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 24.

horns, tails, and phalluses,"¹¹ who triggered farcical scenes. In Euripides' The Cyclops, for example, the satyrs trick the blinded Polyphemus so that he repeatedly bumps into the sides of his cave:

A Satyr: They're hiding, mad with fear, close to the door.

Polyphemus: I'll feel. Which hand is near?

A Satyr: Your right hand.

Polyphemus: Where?

A Satyr: You've got them! Near the rock!

Polyphemus: Ow! Damn! I've caught my head an awful knock!

Satyrs: They're getting out!

Polyphemus: Not where you said they were.

Satyrs: No, not that side!

Polyphemus: Which side?

A Satyr: Why, over here!

Polyphemus: You're mocking me! Don't cheat me when I'm ill! 12

As the enemy of Ulysses, whom he seeks to devour, Polyphemus arouses terror. But this tricking of him

¹¹Sheldon Cheney, The Theater: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting and Stagecraft (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1935), p. 67.

¹²Two Satyr Plays: Euripides' 'Cyclops' and Sophocles' Ichneutai, trans. by Roger Lancelyn Green (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), pp. 48-49.

by the satyrs undercuts the terror with farce. Coming after the tragic trilogy, the satyr play used laughter to discharge the tension that the three tragedies had cumulated.¹³ Like the play in which they appear, the satyrs themselves elicit a confused response. The usual notions of human form cannot apprehend the satyr-body. Instead of being tailless and hornless, it exhibits a monstrosity of appendages. The satyr points up the inadequacy of the conventional notions of human form.

Saint Augustine has recorded Seneca's censure of the depictions of the gods in ancient Rome:

To beings who are sacred, immortal and inviolable they consecrate images of the cheapest inert material. They give them the shapes of men or beasts or fishes; some, in fact, make them double creatures of both sexes combined or unlike bodies united. They are called divinities, but if they were suddenly brought to life and encountered, they would be regarded as monsters. 14

These heterogeneous bodies jar against the mind's habitual segregation of the living into such categories as fish, beasts, and men.

The Dance of Death and the gargoyle witness the imprint of the grotesque upon the medieval sensibility. A representation of a procession coupling the living and the dead, the Dance of Death, until 1549, adorned the walls

¹³Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴The City of God Against the Pagans, II (Books iv - vii), trans. by William M. Green, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 351-53.

of a cloister to the north of Saint Paul's cathedral. From the verses of John Lydgate, that accompanied this depiction, one can infer the characters in this procession:

There were thirty-six characters at St. Paul's. The whole hierarchy of church and state, from the pope to the clerk in minor orders, from the emperor to the labourers, was represented . . . The last character is 'Machabre the doctour' who was regarded as the author of the dance. 15

By thus conjoining the living and the dead, the Dance of Death obliterated a metaphysical boundary. When confronted with this phenomenon, the mind recognizes the inadequacy of its usual demarcation between the living and the non-living. Faced with the proximity of decay, no longer remote but indissolubly linked with every station of life, the mind recoils with horror. Death, in all its grim reality as a body shorn of flesh, is joined with life itself. Still, by giving the skeleton both a grimace and a dancing motion, the artist of the Dance of Death regulates the horror aroused. In spite of its grim symbolization, this cavorting skeleton triggers laughter. Functioning as a safety valve, this laughter prevents the horror from becoming too intense:

. . . the boundary between the living and the dead, the vital and the inert, is broken down. The menace of decay and the collapse of our existence is made only too prominent by the theme of death and dissolution; but the farcical element, too, may come to the foreground. The human skeleton, the prototype

¹⁵James M. Clark, The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Company, 1950), p. 12.

of the grotesque object, is set in motion and presides over the scene with grim, demonic mockery. Being thus brought to life, it becomes doubly menacing; but it also becomes a ludicrous figure as the attention is centered upon its semblance of foolish leering and its puppetlike contortions. 16

Similar to the Dance of Death, the gargoyle combines a terrible with a "farcical element." Quite as jolting as the eradication of the border dividing the living and the dead is the contrast between the hideous gargoyle pustulating from a sacred cathedral:

. . . the gargoyle tends . . . to depart monstrously from representations of normal forms of life and of anything that can be called nobility. It departs farthest when it becomes something with compound form, such, for example, as a fool mounted upon the shoulders of a presumably wise old man the better to spew water away from a building. It then is monstrous by having oppositions within itself as well as by being opposed without to the cathedral sacredness to which it is joined. 17

Yet, notwithstanding its monstrosity, the base function of the gargoyle further degrades it. It vomits rain water from the cathedral. Forced to serve the cathedral by keeping its foundation dry, the gargoyle has a "farcical element."

Here, in the gargoyles and chimeras, the degraded and comparatively powerless monsters made a last inglorious stand. In the gargoyles they were subjugated to the menial function of drains, and on rainy days could be seen spouting water from their

¹⁶Jennings, Ludicrous Demon, p. 20.

¹⁷Willard Farnham, The Shakespearean Grotesque: Its Genesis and Transformations (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 11-12.

unwilling mouths -- an object of derision and amusement to those who passed below. 18

Fifteenth century Roman excavation unearthed an ornamentative style festooning underground grottoes, for which the epithet "grotesque" was coined.¹⁹ Like the Dance of Death, this decorative style collapsed customary boundaries, namely, those separating the three grades of life, the vegetal, the sentient, and the rational:

Around the framed scene, taking up more space on the panel than the scene, is a grotesque border that is mainly of vegetation-like scrollwork. This departs from nature not only in its formalization but also in its incorporation of human figures, some of them winged, which tend to merge at their heads and feet with the scroll and to become sections of it. 20

Such a style clashed with the mind's habitual categorization of reality. Men suddenly became parts of plants:

They impressed the connoisseurs by the extremely fanciful, free, and playful treatment of plant, animal, and human forms. These forms seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other. The borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed. 21

¹⁸Walter Abell, The Collective Dream in Art: A Psycho-Historical Theory of Culture Based on Relations between the Arts, Psychology, and the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 198.

¹⁹Ralph Mayer, A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), pp. 177-78.

²⁰Farnham, Shakespearean Grotesque, p. 8.

²¹Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), p. 32.

In our century, Faulkner's The Hamlet evinces the stamp of a viable grotesque tradition upon contemporary letters:

Ike Snopes, idiot, is in love with a cow. Seen in one way, his "affair" with the cow would seem only a grotesque case of rural sodomy. But Ike, bemused though he is, truly loves the cow. The 'normal' people in the novel do not love each other . . . Ike Snopes' relationship with the cow has in it more affection and is more sacred than any other relationship in The Hamlet. 22

What have these examples in common? What common property subsumes a god with a distended tongue, men bristling with horns, tails, and phalluses, gods whose bodies fuse together parts of man, beast, and fish, a dance of men with skeletons for their partners, a hideous deformity spewing water from a cathedral's summit, the fusion of the human with the animal and vegetable in Roman decoration, carnal passion between man and cow?

The common property is that of incongruity. The grotesque juxtaposes elements that the mind senses are incompatible, mutually exclusive, not fitting. A distended tongue dwarfing the rest of the face is incongruous. So, too, is the riot of appendages upon the human form. Metaphysically, a dance coupling the dead with the living passes beyond the periphery of the fitting; morally, carnality between man and cow goes beyond the bounds of the

²²William O'Connor, The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1962), p. 14.

proper. A grotesque work clashes against the mind's usual conceptions of form, of appropriate boundaries, of limits; its elements escape, and, hence, threaten categorization, thereby depriving the mind of its accustomed means of ordering reality:

The most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque has been the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparates. ²³

But the grotesque and the incongruous are not conterminous. The former relates to the latter as species to genus. Every experience of the grotesque is necessarily a confrontation with incongruity. But only some confrontations with incongruity generate the grotesque. Consider this real-life event: a gang of sadists first douse a woman with gasoline and then ignite her. To a normal onlooker, this event is incongruous, but not grotesque. To subject a person to such cruelty is not fitting. Informing this judgement is the assumption of the worth, the dignity, of human life. But the normal person of any civilization has internalized this very value. He, consequently, cannot laugh at the burning woman. The cruelty of her torturers fills him with horror. Their sadism threatens a value whereby he orients himself to reality.

²³Philip Thomson, The Grotesque (London: Methuen & Company, 1972), p. 20.

If one switches the context of this event, however, the onlooker experiences not horror, but laughter. Let the woman be a damned sinner; her torturers, devils in hell; the onlooker, a saint in heaven. Unable to empathize with her sufferings, the saint must laugh at the burning woman. From the medieval perspective his mockery manifests his holiness, the perfect conformity between his will and God's.²⁴ Assured of his own salvation, he derides the sufferings of one publicly damned, heretofore an unpunished agent of the devil.²⁵

To generate laughter in the onlooker, one need not transpose the event to an eternal context. Removing it from the real world to the world of art will do. All art, as Aristotle pointed out, is imitation.²⁶ Make believe,

²⁴The Ancrene Riwe emphasized the pleasure that the saved will take at the sufferings of the damned: "The just man shall rejoice when he shall see the revenge. On the day of judgement God will act as though he were saying: 'Daughter, did this man injure you? Did he make you stumble into anger or grief of heart, into shame or any vexation? Look, daughter, see how he shall pay for it.' And there you shall see him beaten with the devil's mallets until he wishes he had not been born. You will be well pleased at the sight, for your will and God's will shall be so joined that you shall will all that He ever wills, and He all that you will." Trans. by M. B. Salu (London: Burns & Oates, 1955), p. 82.

²⁵George J. Engelhardt, "The 'De contemptu mundi' of Bernardus Morvalensis, part one: A Study in Commonplace," Mediaeval Studies, XXII (1960), p. 111.

²⁶Aristotle: The Poetics. "Longinus: On the Sublime. Demetrius: On Style, trans. by W. H. Fyfe, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1927), p. 5.

the game of "let's pretend," is its ultimate postulate. At a play, for instance, the audience willingly pretends that the woman is burning to death. But no one can entirely suspend his disbelief. No matter how much he wills to suspend it, he all the time knows that the woman is not really on fire. Although its excess can precipitate revulsion, as Titus Andronicus demonstrates, horror on the stage differs qualitatively from that in real life. The element of the fantastic keeps staged horror from approaching the intensity of real-life horror.

In being presented under artistic control, horror on the stage again differs from that in real life. That is, a dramatist can regulate the horror that any scene arouses. To regulate the horror aroused by the staging of a burning woman, he can make her torturers comic figures. What if one of them were to slip on a banana peel? The audience would simultaneously experience horror and laughter. The laughter directed at the stumbling torturer would undercut the horror he also arouses.

This kind of incongruity, involving the simultaneous experience of terror and laughter, constitutes the grotesque. As a corollary, the grotesque cannot be found in the real world. There, the terror is too extreme, not amenable to control. In a work of art, on the other hand, the element of the fantastic allows for the undercutting of terror by laughter.

But how does laughter function to regulate terror in one's reaction to the grotesque?

In calling the tongue of Typhon grotesque, I mean that it has been distorted, twisted from the mind's norm of a fitting length for a tongue, until it approximates monstrosity. The monster drastically distorts the characteristics that delimit a form so that the very form itself veers toward annihilation. An impulse of horror, an urgency to escape from the strange, from the fear-inciting stimulus, surfaces. The satyr, tailed, bristling with phalluses, approaches the monstrous. The distortion of the human form verges toward monstrosity, threatening the safety consequent upon the mind's habitual pigeon-holing of reality.

While this distortion is approaching the monstrous, however, laughter becomes increasingly functional. If carefully bounded, distortion can precipitate laughter. Caricature and comedy rely upon just enough distortion, a controlled exaggeration, to make people laugh. Caricature keeps its exaggeration of an individual's prominent facial features carefully bounded. When looking at a caricature, one experiences a controlled ugliness. If the distortion is not bounded, the caricature is ruined: Boris Karloff's Frankenstein monster, for example, is not a caricature. Because the ugliness is uncontrolled, it awakens impulses of terror.

Similarly, Lydia Languish of The Rivals has a distorted view of reality, a romantically inflated illusion as to the demeanor of a man in love. She remains comic because Sheridan carefully regulates the harm that her romanticism lets loose upon the world of the play. Had he applied another turn of the screw to Lydia's view of love, had he, for example, let it occasion the death of Jack Absolute, he would have pushed the distortion beyond the pale of the comic.

Distinct from caricature and comedy, the grotesque pushes distortion to monstrosity. That is, it gives the distortion free rein to collapse customary formal limits. The grotesque thereby jostles the mind from an ordered, into an alien, world. The mind cannot handle the form-annihilative distortion by those categories with which it usually grasps the real. Because the distortion is unclassifiable, it is terrifying. Now the mind must protect itself from extreme terror. Indulging this emotion threatens its integrity, its very sanity. But how to protect itself? If the mind can glimpse the distortion from a comic angle, the consequent laughter will keep the terror at bay. If one can laugh at it, the monstrous is not so terrifying. Now, before attaining monstrosity, the distortion, still safely contained, was comic. Upon reaching monstrosity, the distortion, no longer bounded, never the- less harbors still a comic potential. The mind protects

itself by actualizing this comic potential. That is, it intentionally refers the distortion to the norm from which it has deviated so markedly. The laughter thus triggered momentarily reassures the mind of its superiority over the terror-inducing stimulus.²⁷ This pitting of laughter against terror produces the fundamental incongruity at the very core of the grotesque:

One is about to freeze with horror, yet the muscles of risibility twitch at the same time. One would like to rid oneself of the entire uncanny impression by a laugh, yet a shiver overcomes us before we succeed in doing so. 28

But what is responsible for this confusion, this pitting of laughter against terror. This confusion in one's reaction to the grotesque implies that annihilating forces are threatening the order man imposes upon reality:

The grotesque world is -- and is not -- our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence. 29

This confrontation with the abysmal, the annihilating, suggests the kinship of the grotesque with tragedy. Like the grotesque, tragedy also contacts the under-

²⁷Prosser, Drama and Religion, p. 83.

²⁸Friedrich Hebbel's preface to his play Ein Traverspiel in Sizilien, quoted by Karl S. Guthke, Modern Tragicomedie: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 61.

²⁹Kayser, The Grotesque, pp. 36-37.

current of annihilation surging through the universe.³⁰

This kinship derives from their common origin, the masked dance-rituals prominent among primitive tribes:

Whether we seek beyond the beginnings of a recognizable drama among the Chinese of 2000 B.C., the Greeks of 500 B.C., the Romans, or our own more immediate cultural ancestors, we find that the ritual of the dance, more often masked than not, is a point of departure for the dramatic. 31

Anthropologists have emphasized the grotesque character of the masks used in Eskimo dance-rituals:

Among the Eskimos masks . . . contain the subtle and unexpected quality of laughter. This indefinable admixture of laughter and terror has been noted by many authorities as characteristic of Eskimo art. 32

These grotesque masks subserved the function of magic.

That is, they attempted to control the hostile forces in the universe:

Among the Eskimos of Bering Strait there is held a more or less dramatic feast, known as the 'Inviting In' feast. During the drama which follows, masks are worn, which represent either the totem animal of the maker or some mythical fancy. The object of these faces is to propitiate and do honor to the animal or other being represented by them, with the hope that there will be a plentiful supply of game

³⁰Clifford Leech, Tragedy (London: Methuen & Co., 1969), p. 54.

³¹Rossiter, English Drama, p. 16.

³²Harold Daniel, Devils, Monsters, and Nightmares: An Introduction to Grotesque and Fantastic in Art (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1964), p. 43.

during the coming year, and that evil influences may be warded off. ³³

The primitive, then, frightened by the unknown both within him and without, exploits the grotesque as his tool of magic:

The art and mythology of primitive peoples, in its various artifacts, fetishes, idols, masks and pageantry, seems to be continually on the verge of grotesqueness, from old German Fastnacht costumes to the demons of the Javanese. ³⁴

Modern man, on the other hand, grapples with the unknown, not by physical representation through the use of masks, but by verbal representation through the use of nomenclature. By labelling the threatening force, he lessens its terror. Psychiatry, for example, has devised an elaborate nomenclature to reduce the terror of the aberrant. Lacking this verbal sophistication, the primitive resorts to the grotesque. He fashions an amulet into which he externalizes his own terror at the hostility in his universe and, simultaneously, copes with that terror by making the representation of it also comic.³⁵ John Ruskin has underscored this preoccupation with universal malignity darkening the creative vision of the artist of the grotesque:

³³Loomis Havemeyer, The Drama of Savage Peoples (New York: Haskell House, 1966), p. 54.

³⁴Jennings, Ludicrous Demon, p. 7.

³⁵Ibid., p. 23.

. . . misery and wrath, and discordance and danger, and all the work of the dragon and his angels; this he sees with too deep feeling ever to forget. 36

Having the same ultimate task, that of coping with the terrible in the universe, tragedy and the grotesque perform it differently. Tragedy sets up the protagonist as a scapegoat.³⁷ In accounting for the impact of Sophocles' Oedipus the King, Freud stressed the function of the protagonist as a vicarious victim:

His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours . . . While the poet, as he unravels the past, brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, he is at the same time compelling us to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found. 38

The audience burdens the protagonist with its sins. These sins exact terrible retribution. King Lear, for instance, displays excessive pride in disowning Cordelia and in banishing Kent. This radical evil links king and audience: with this universal taint it identifies, seeing itself in Lear. Lear's pride unleashes those annihilative forces satisfied only by the total destruction of the sinner. Tragedy, as Aristotle pointed out, thus generates

³⁶The Stones of Venice, III (London: George Allen, 1898), p. 140.

³⁷Leech, Tragedy, p. 51.

³⁸Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Thomas Woodard (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 102-03.

fear, a withdrawal response.³⁹ The audience shrinks from the implication of its identification with the protagonist. If these annihilative forces can destroy one as great as Lear, what chance has a common man of coping with them? Arresting this fear is the empathy that Lear arouses. Like themselves, "more sinned against than sinning," Lear has, after all, vicariously suffered for the evil common to humanity. He has sacrificed himself to appease those annihilative forces activated by the evil within man. Ultimately appealing to the compassion of the viewer, tragedy evokes the necessary empathy to enable the audience to join with the protagonist, against the forces ruining him and ever threatening them. The audience participates in the sacrifice Lear offers. Militating against terror, empathy serves as a defensive mechanism: that is, it provides the audience with a counter emotion to check the withdrawal response of fear.

Like tragedy, the grotesque initiates a withdrawal response. The audience steps back from the annihilative forces producing distortion so radical that a previously recognizable form has become monstrous. But laughter, rather than empathy, serves as the defensive mechanism operative in the grotesque. By laughing at it, the audience discovers an outlet for its terror. The grotesque

³⁹Poetics, p. 23.

subsumes two poles, the horrid and the comic. Instead of permitting one dimension, the horrid, to determine its reaction, the audience can revert to the other dimension, the comic, to shield itself from the excess of terror.

Lear's stripping on the heath, for instance, shows the undercutting of terror by laughter sustained by the grotesque. Annihilative forces have produced the monstrous in both the natural and the human planes. Lear's enjoiners to the wrathful skies underscore this monstrosity in nature:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the
 cocks! 40

On the human plane, Goneril and Regan, distorting the character of a natural daughter, display a monstrosity eclipsing that in nature:

Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?
 A father, and a gracious aged man
 Whose reverence even the head-lugged bear would lick,
 Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you madded! 41

On the heath, then, Lear confronts monstrosity both in the world of nature and in the world of man:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters,
 I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness,
 I never gave you kingdom, called you children,
 You owe me no subscription. 42

⁴⁰King Lear III. ii. 1-3.

⁴¹Ibid. IV. ii. 40-43.

⁴²Ibid. III. ii. 14-18.

The entry of the vermin-ridden Edgar aggravates the horror. Verging toward insanity. Lear strips himself, identifying with the naked vulnerability of man:

Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here. ⁴³

But, at this point, the fool suddenly interjects comedy to regulate the increasing terror. Discerning "the potentialities of comedy in Lear's behavior,"⁴⁴ he voices the absurdity involved in a man's undressing on such a cold night:

Prithee, Nuncle, be contented, 'tis a naughty night to swim in. ⁴⁵

By telling Lear that it is too cold to swim, the fool undercuts the terror, prevents it from becoming aesthetically unendurable.

This function of laughter as a shield against terror characterized the parodies of Aztec drama. The Aztecs made such threats to the body's faculties as blindness and deafness targets of derision. By making sport of them, the Aztecs controlled the fear that these threats incite:

When all was ready the actors appeared and went through various scenes of buffoonery in which the deaf, lame, blind and paralyzed were mimicked. . . .

⁴³Ibid. III. iv. 110-13.

⁴⁴G. Wilson Knight, "King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque," The Wheel of Fire (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), pp. 164-67.

⁴⁵King Lear III. iv. 114-15.

Each actor endeavored to represent his role in the most grotesque manner possible. He who was for the moment deaf gave nonsensical answers to questions put to him; the sick man depicted the effects of pain and so forth. ⁴⁶

In setting up this conflict between laughter and terror, the grotesque parallels Tillich's notion of the demonic as a category for the interpretation of history. Tillich points to primitive art to prove the reality of the demonic. He finds a peculiar tension in primitive art. It, on the one hand, displays forms that are easily recognizable:

They [art works of primitive peoples] bear forms, human, animal, and plant, which we understand as such, recognizing their conformity to artistic laws. ⁴⁷

Primitive art thus embraces an element of form, of meaning, of positivity. But, on the other hand, it has elements that destroy form. Parts of the body, for instance, loom monstrously out of proportion to the body as a whole:

The organs of the will for power, such as hands, feet, teeth, eyes, and the organs for procreation, such as breasts, thighs, sex organs, are given a strength of expression which can mount to wild cruelty and

⁴⁶L. Biart, The Aztecs, pp. 302 ff, quoted by Havemeyer, Savage Peoples, p. 218.

⁴⁷Paul Tillich, "The Demonic. A Contribution to the Interpretation of History," The Interpretation of History, trans. by Elsa Talmey (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 77.

orgiastic ecstasy. It is the vital forces which support the living form; but when they become overpowerful and withdraw from the arrangement within the embracing organic form, they are destructive principles. 48

Primitive art therefore embraces also an element of formlessness, of meaninglessness, of negativity. Tillich maintains that the art work as a whole unites form with the formless, the meaningful with the meaningless, the positive with the negative. He thereby describes the demonic as "the unity of form-creating and form-destroying strength":⁴⁹

The depth of the demonic is just this, that the meaningful and the meaningless elements in it are inseparably combined. 50

I contend that the grotesque corresponds to the demonic. Like the demonic, it combines a meaningful and a meaningless element. The meaningful element is the comic. Laughter implies the reference of its target to a norm from which its deviation is measured. That reference is meaningful. The meaningless element is the horrid. Horror implies that the mind cannot apprehend the unknown, the annihilation of form toward which the distortion verges.

Consider, again, the staging of the burning woman and of her torturer toppling over a banana peel. The distortion of human nature, apparent in the monstrous sadism

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 78.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 81.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 120.

of the torturers, engulfs the mind with terror. The mind cannot classify such monstrous distortions of the nature of man. But there is also comedy here. The toppling torturer deviates from the norm of man as a sure-footed creature of dignity. The mind can recognize the disparity between the sprawling torturer and this norm. The appreciation of this disparity is meaningful. The grotesque thus brings together the meaningless and the meaningful, the terrible and the laughable.

Tillich further asserts a generic similarity between the demonic and sin. This similarity is that both defy essence or form:

The reality of the demonic is bound to the reality of that which is essence-defying, a sin
It is contrariness to essential nature and therefore is plainly to be denied as contrary to meaning, the separation from absolute being. 51

In that the demonic and sin are generically similar, the grotesque becomes an image of sin. It reflects the nature of sin, of that which defies essence. To the York playwright, attempting to stage the consequences of sin, the grotesque was indispensable.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 93-4.

CHAPTER II

THE GROTESQUE: THE TRADITIONAL IMAGE FOR SIN

The last chapter has demonstrated the correspondence between the grotesque and sin. In setting up an incongruity pitting laughter against terror, the grotesque reflects sin, that which contradicts essence or form. This chapter intends to show that this use of the grotesque as a technique reflecting the nature of sin was traditional by the fourteenth century. To stage the fall and redemption of man, the York playwright could make use of this technique.

Adam of Dore's thirteenth century tract Pictor in Carmine witnesses the stamp of the grotesque upon church art. Scandalized by the incursion of the grotesque within the sanctuary itself, Adam denigrated its moral efficacy:

For indeed -- to touch but a few points out of many -- which is more decent, which more profitable, to behold about the altar of God double-headed eagles, four lions with one and the same head, centaurs with quivers, headless men grinning . . . , or surely to contemplate the deeds of the Patriarchs, the rites of the Law . . . ? 1

¹Trans. by Lilian Randall, Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 4.

This prominence of the grotesque in altar decoration leads one to expect that it will occur in other expressions of medieval sensibility.

Robert Mannyng of Brunne's Handlyng Synne, an early fourteenth century tract, fulfills this expectation. In "The Dancers of Colbek," Mannyng correlates the grotesque with the sins of impiety and rash cursing. Interrupted at divine worship by the riot of Yuletide revellers, dancing within earshot of his church, "Seynt Magne," Robert the priest curses them. They, consequently, stay affixed to one another for one year, reeling in a never-stopping dance:

As sone as þe preste hadde so spoke
 Euery hand yn ouþer so fast was loke
 þat no man myȝt with no wundyr
 þat tweluemonth þe parte hem asundyr.²

(As soon as the priest had so spoken
 Each hand in the other so securely was locked
 That no man could with any miraculous deed
 That year part them asunder.)³

Robert's son Azo foolishly attempts to separate his sister from the interdicted band:

Aȝone wende weyl for to spede,
 Vnto þe karolle as swyþe he ȝede,
 Hys systyr by þe arme he hente,
 And þe arme fro þe body wente.

²Robert Mannyng of Brunne, "The Dancers of Colbek," Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose, ed. by Kenneth Sisam (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 7.

³Throughout this dissertation, all translations enclosed within parentheses are my own.

Men wundred alle þat þere wore,
 And merueyle mowe 3e here more,
 For, seþen he had þe arme yn hand,
 Þe body 3ede furb karoland,
 And noþer (þe) body ne þe arme
 Bledde neuer blode, colde ne warme,
 But was as drye, with al þe haunche,
 As of a stok were ryue a braunche. 4

(Azo thought well for to prosper,
 Unto the carol so quickly he went,
 His sister by the arm he seized,
 And the arm from the body went.
 All men that were there wondered,
 And a marvel may you hear more,
 For, after he had the arm in hand,
 The body went forth caroling,
 And neither the body nor the arm
 Bled any blood, cold or warm,
 But was as dry, up to the shoulder,
 As if from a stock were torn a branch.)

Like those examples of the grotesque cited in chapter one, the tongue of Typhon, the Dance of Death, the gargoyle, this passage pits laughter against terror. The unnatural mutilation of Aue's body instills terror. The human arm, traditionally thought of as cohesive, snaps apart from the trunk of the body. The human body has stepped toward dissolution. And yet the dancing of the mutilated body, like that of the skeleton in the Dance of Death, also triggers laughter. So, too, does the predicament of Azo, who foolishly tried to circumvent God's power. He, instead, is left with a grim consolation prize, his sister's severed arm. To appreciate the discrepancy between Aue's arm so easily detachable and the arms of the other dancers inseparably affixed to each other heightens

⁴Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose, p. 7.

the humor with irony. Important here is the connection between the grotesque and sin. Aue has violated the propriety of the Christmas service by consorting with the raucous revellers. Her sin occasions another sin: Robert's impetuous cursing of the merry-makers. The grotesque image of Aue's dismemberment reflects the confusion inherent in any sin.

But Mannyng's use of the grotesque as an image for sin was itself traditional. Writing at the end of the tenth century, Aelfric had used it in his life of "King Edmund."⁵ Edmund was a victim of the Viking maraudings. After riddling him with arrows, the Vikings beheaded him. Edmund's people later recovered both the body and the severed head that a wolf had guarded from the other animals. They built a resplendent church over these remains. Eight thieves later tried to rifle the church of its treasures. Aelfric suggests the spiritual condition of these eight thieves:

*bā cōmon on sumne s̄aēl unges̄aēlge þ̄ēofas eahta
on ānre nihte tō þ̄āem ar-weorþan hālgan: 6*

(Then came at a certain time eight unhappy thieves
one night to that venerable saint:)

The epithet "unges̄aēlge" implies that the thieves are wretched because they have alienated themselves from God.

⁵Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer, revised by Norman Davis, 9th ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953).

⁶Ibid., p. 85.

They function not as human sinners, but as surrogate devils, embodiments of rapacity itself. Because they are the reprobate, they are fit objects of ridicule. In describing their punishment, Aelfric exploits their comic potential. Each thief is suspended in the particular task at which he was occupied:

ac hie swuncon on idel, and earmlīce fērdon,
 swā ðaet se hālgā wer hie wundorlice ge·band,
 aēlcne swā he stōd strūtiende mid tōle, ðaet
 hiera nān ne mihte ðaet morþge·fremman
 ne hie þanon ā·styrian; ac stōdon swā oþ
 mergen. Menn þā ðaes wundrodon, hū þā
 weargas hangodon, sum on hlāedre, sum lēat tō
 ge·delfe, and aēlc on his weorce waes faeste ge·bunden.⁷

(But they worked in vain, and miserably fared, in that the holy man them wonderfully bound, each as he stood standing rigid with tool, that of them none could that violent deed commit nor themselves thence stir; but they stood so until morning. Men then about that wondered, how those reprobates hung, one on a ladder, one bent to dig, and each in his work was firmly bound.)

As in the dismemberment of Aue, laughter confronts terror here, generating the grotesque. Frozen in ridiculous attitudes, the reprobate deviate from the proper dignity of the human form. This deviation is comic. Because the human body has become immobile and rigid, however, it verges toward the monstrous. In undermining the traditional conception of the human form, the completely paralyzed thieves produce terror. Almost four centuries before Mannyng then, Aelfric linked the grotesque with sin. The confused reac-

⁷Ibid.

tion that the grotesque generated reflected the confusion characteristic of sin itself.

But how did the grotesque become the technique for reflecting the confusion wrought by sin? "The Dancers of Colbek" alludes to the general tradition from which the use of the grotesque in the Middle Ages derives; namely the tradition of the Christian marvelous:

Yn o^ber stedys hyt ys ful dere
And for grete merueyle ^bey wyl hyt here.⁸

(In other places it is much prized
And as a great marvel they will it hear.)

Saint Augustine upheld this tradition as useful to Christian apologetics. In defending the credibility of the Biblical account of Jonah, he asserts that the marvelous displays the magnitude of God's power:

Our opponents again prefer to ridicule rather than to believe these facts, yet they believe the story that appears in their own literature, how Arion of Methymna, a most famous lyre player, when he was cast out of a ship, was received on a dolphin's back and borne to land. But that story of ours about the prophet Jonah is more incredible, and more incredible evidently because more miraculous, and more miraculous because it displays greater power.⁹

The more marvelous the feat, the greater the testimony to the omnipotence of God. By narrating marvelous occurrences, the Christian writer could demonstrate the superiority of

⁸Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose, p. 12.

⁹The City of God Against the Pagans, I (Books 1 - 111), trans. by George E. Mc Cracken, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 67.

God over the pagan deities. For instance, when the people exhume the body of King Edmund for reburial in the new church, they discover that God has healed the wounds made by the pagan Vikings:

þā waes micel wundor þæt hē waes eall swā ge·hāl swelce hē cwic wære, mid clāenum lichaman, and his swēora waes ge·hālod, þe aer waes for·slaegen, and waes swelce an seolcen þraed ymbe his swēoran read, mannum tō sweetolunge hū hē of·slaegen waes. Eac swelce þā wunda, þe þā waelhrēowan hāepnan mid ge·lōmum scotungum on his liče macodon, wæron ge·hælde þurh þone heofonlican God; 10

(Then was much wonder that he was all as whole as if he alive were, with pure body, and his neck was healed, that before was cut through, and was as a silken thread around his red neck, to men for a sign how he was slain. Moreover those wounds, that those cruel heathens with frequent shootings on his body made, were healed by the heavenly God;)

Unlike the grotesque, the marvelous generates neither terror nor laughter. It instills awe at the workings of God's power, thereby fostering the worship of God. This power does not threaten man. It, on the contrary, works for his benefit, assuring him that God is superior to the forces of evil.

The tradition of the marvelous, demonstrating the greater power of God, is found in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy. Satan, for instance, in the guise of a dragon,

¹⁰ Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer, p. 85.

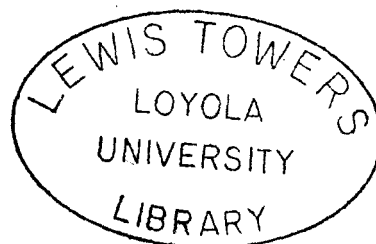
was wont to suck the blood from a girl. By covering her head with a swaddling cloth once worn by Jesus, however, the girl routed the dragon.¹¹ Again, two sisters dutifully cared for a mule, into which a sorceress had transformed their brother. One day the sisters met Mary and her servant, a girl cleansed of leprosy by the bath-water of Jesus. By placing the Christ-child upon his back, Mary cured their brother. Expelled from the boy, Satan fled in the shape of a mad dog.¹²

This association of the devil with animals, a dragon, a mad dog, crops up in the tradition of the Christian marvelous. It has, indeed, a Biblical precedent. Matthew, for instance, recounts how the demons exorcised by Jesus assumed the form of swine:

et cum venisset trans fretum in regionem Gerasenorum
 occurrerunt ei duo habentes daemonia
 de monumentis exeuntes
 saevi nimis ita ut nemo posset transire per viam illam
 et ecce clamaverunt dicentes
 quid nobis et tibi Fili Dei
 venisti huc ante tempus torquere nos
 erat autem non longe ab illis grex porcorum multorum
 pascens
 daemones autem rogabant eum dicentes
 si eicis nos mitte nos in gregem porcorum
 et ait illis ite
 at illi exeuntes abierunt in porcos
 et ecce impetu abiit totus grex per praeceps in mare

¹¹Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science During the First Thirteen Centuries of Our Era, I (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), pp. 391-92.

¹²Ibid., pp. 390-91.



et mortui sunt in aquis.¹³

(And when He had come across the strait into the region of the Gadarenes, two having demons ran to meet Him, going forth from the monuments, raging very much in this fashion so that no one was able to cross through that way.

And behold they called to Him, saying:

'What is there between us and You, Son of God? Have You come hither before the time to torture us?' There was, moreover, not a long way off from them a herd of many sows feeding.

The demons, however, asked Him, saying:

'If You drive us out, send us into the herd of sows.' And He said to them, 'Go.'

But they going forth went away into the sows.

And behold from the onset the whole herd went away by way of a steep place into the sea.

And they died in the waters.)

The story of Blessed Paul the Simple, for example, found in The Paradise of Palladius, features the traditional link between the devil and the dragon. Like Jesus before him, Paul the Simple casts out a devil from a possessed person:

And whilst these words were yet in his mouth the devil cried out by reason of his tribulation, and said, 'By Hercules, by whom am I ruled, by Hercules, I am being persecuted with violence, for the simplicity of Paul pursueth me; whither shall I go?' Paul saith unto him, 'To the uttermost depths of the abyss'; and straightway the devil went forth from the man, and he

¹³Matthew 8: 28-32. Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatum Versionem, II, ed. by Bonifatius Fischer OSB, Iohanne Bribomont OSB, H. F. D. Sparks, W. Thiele (Stuttgart: Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969), 1537.

transformed himself and became like unto a mighty dragon seventy cubits long. ¹⁴

Pictorial art confirms the pervasiveness of this association of sin with animality. For instance, in miniatures depicting the life of Saint Guthlac (British Museum Harley Roll Y. 6, late twelfth century), the demons appear as composite animals.¹⁵ The Bourges representation of the Last Judgment uses animals as symbols for sins:

A toad vomited from the mouth of a boiling sinner denotes that evil entered him as a concrete element. The toad being suckled by a woman is a mark of her lewdness. The jaws of Hell are usually represented by the head of a monster Leviathan. ¹⁶

This pairing of sin with animality, frequent in the tradition of the Christian marvelous, easily leads to the grotesque. By reducing the demonic to the animal level, this tradition had already debased the horrifying, had begun to educe from the terrible a comic potential:

¹⁴The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers Being Histories of the Anchorites Recluses Monks Coenobites and Ascetic Fathers of the Deserts of Egypt Between A.D. CCL and A.D. CCCC Circiter compiled by Athanasius Archbishop of Alexandria: Palladius Bishop of Helenopolis: Saint Jerome and Others, trans. by Ernest A. Wallis Budge (London: Chatto and Winders, 1907), Book I, p. 128.

¹⁵Morton W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature (Michigan: State College Press, 1952), p. 108.

¹⁶Lester Bridaham, Gargoyles, Chimeras, and the Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture (New York: De Capo Press, 1969), p. xiii.

The superstitions which represented the devil as assuming various contemptible forms or disguises in order to accomplish his purposes aided the gradual degredation of conception; and directed the study of the workman to the most strange and ugly conditions of animal form, until, at last, even in the most serious subjects, the fiends are oftener ludicrous than terrible. 17

Drawing upon this equation between sin and animality, the exemplum frequently created the grotesque, comparing Satan to an ape. The distortion of the human form seen in the ape triggers laughter and terror simultaneously. John Bromyard, for example, uses the ape as a figure of the devil. An evil bailiff encounters the devil in a storm:

In the midst of the tempest, the Devil in the form of an ape perched himself on his horse's neck, and, grinning derisively at him, exclaimed in English, 'Welcome to wicke; welcome to wicke!' meaning 'welcome to your bailiwick' or bailiff's office. The panic-stricken man made a vow, then and there, that never would he perform that office again; and only thus was he liberated by God's grace from the monster. 18

A legend dealing with the origin of the ape associates this grotesque creature with sin and its punishment:

Once upon a time, Christ and Saint Peter stopped at a blacksmith's shop, where they were hospitably received. To show his gratitude, Christ took the blacksmith's old and ugly wife and placed her in the fire of the forge, from which she emerged young and strong as a girl of fifteen. As soon as the two travellers had taken their leave, the blacksmith tried to rejuvenate another old woman by the same

¹⁷Ruskin, Stones of Venice, III, p. 145.

¹⁸Summa Predicantium, quoted by G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 169.

procedure, but when he thrust her into the flames she screamed so pitifully that he had to take her out again. Two pregnant women, who witnessed all this, were so shocked when they saw the old woman hideously blackened and shrivelled like an ape that shortly thereafter they gave birth to two apes. These escaped into the forest, where they multiplied and thus became the progenitors of the entire simian tribe. 19

This use of the grotesque as a reflection of sin and its punishment dominated the Middle Ages. An early instance is in the fifth-century life of Saint Martin by Sulpicius Severus. Like the revellers at Colbek, the pagans grotesquely turn in a perpetual round:

The saint sees a train of pagans approaching and commands them to halt. They become paralyzed. As they strain their strength to the utmost to advance, they are forced to turn in a circle . . . 20

An exemplum depicts the appearance after death of Pope Benedict IX, with the head of an ass and the body of a bear, a grotesque image for the bestiality of his life. 21

John Mirk in his Festial recounts that Jesus gave the apostles specific directions for the burial of His mother's body:

And soo Cryst toke her sawle yn his armys,
and bade þe apostols bere her body ynto a

¹⁹H. W. Janson, Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (London: The Warburg Institute, 1952), p. 97.

²⁰Ernst Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Bollingen Series, 1953), p. 428.

²¹Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 284.

place þat was cald Gethsemany, and bury
 hur þer yn a tombe þat þay schuld fynd þer,²²

(And so Christ took her soul in His arms, and
 ordered the apostles to bear her body unto a
 place that was called Gethsemane, and to bury
 her there in a tomb that they should find there,)

The Jews, therefore, who attempt to impede the apostles,
 define themselves as the reprobate, deserving of mockery:

and þe toþer apostols comen syngyng wyth
 angels, soo þat þe song of hom was herd
 ynto þe cyte. And when þay of þe cyte
 herd hom make such melody, þay ren toward
 hom wyth bottys, and staues, and oþer wepon,
 yn ful purpos forto haue drawyn downe þe
 bere, and cast þe body yn þe fenne.²³

(And the other apostles came singing with
 angels, so that the song of them was heard
 in the city. And when they of the city
 heard them make such melody, they ran toward
 them with war clubs, and staves, and other
 weapons, with foul intention to have drawn
 down the bier and cast the body in the fen.)

The punishment of the most audacious of these Jews occasions
 both terror and laughter:

But he þat layde fyrst hond on þe bere,
 anon boþe hys hondys wern puld of by þe
 elboues, and hongyt soo styll on þe bere;
 and he wyth hys stompes stode soo, cryng
 and 3ellyng for ake and sorow þat he suffyrd.²⁴

(But he who first laid hand on the bier, at
 once both his hands were pulled off at the
 elbows, and hanged so still on the bier; and
 he with his stumps stood so, crying and yelling
 for ache and sorrow that he suffered.)

²²Mirk's Festial: a collection of homilies, ed. by
 Theodor Erbe (London: Early English Text Society, 1905),
 e. s., no. 96, p. 223.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

The mutilation of the body produces terror. Yet, precisely because this Jew embodies sin, obstinate opposition to Jesus, he triggers not compassion, but laughter. This interplay of contrary emotions, this confusion between laughter and terror, constitutes the grotesque, a reflection of the confusion produced by sin.

The magical function of the grotesque, to ward off the destructive forces in the universe by means of laughter, so marked in the masks of the primitive, informs Prudentius' account of the martyrdom of Saint Laurence. Roasting on a burning grill, Laurence gives cooking directives to his torturers:

Converte partem corporis
 Satis crematum iugiter
 Et fac periculum, quid tuus
 Vulcanus ardens egerit.
 Praefectus inverti iubet.
 Tunc ille: coetum est, devora:
 Et experimentum cape,
 Sit crudum an assum suavius.²⁵

(Turn around the part of the body
 Burned sufficiently long
 And test, what your
 Burning Vulcan has done.
 The overseer orders him to be turned.
 Then Laurence (said): it has been cooked, so eat:
 And test,
 Whether it is more tasty uncooked or roasted.)

In this passage, laughter is pitted against terror. The roasting of Laurence instills terror. As in the example of the burning woman adduced in chapter one, the monstrous takes

²⁵Curtius, European Literature, pp. 425-26.

center stage. The cruelty of these torturers monstrously distorts human nature. Unlike the burning woman, however, Laurence triumphs. His torturers, therefore, become ridiculous. He, not they, superintends the martyrdom. They cannot ruffle the composure of this man of God. They function as inept pupils corrected by their master. The laughter directed at the torturers controls the terror they inspire. Evil is not unchecked. This use of laughter to distance terror will be crucial to the dramatic technique informing the York Passion Sequence. There, only the laughter inspired by Jesus' torturers makes aesthetically tolerable the horrendous cruelty they mete out to Him.

One can speculate as to how the tradition of the Christian marvelous created the grotesque. The writer or homilist resorted to the marvelous to instill awe at the greater exhibition of power on the part of God or His saints. At the same time, he had to decrease the terror surrounding God's adversary Satan. Otherwise a Manichean metaphysics would have ensued. A tendency to debase Satan consequently characterized Christian literature. The Bible set the precedent for this tendency. Had not Satan taken the form of a pig to scurry from Jesus? The association of Satan with animals reflects this tendency to debase the forces of evil. This association is the nexus between the grotesque and the Christian marvelous. The more laughter heaped upon Satan, the less terror he awakened. Corres-

pondingly, the majesty of God became more demonstrable.

This tradition of the Christian marvelous set off a chain reaction of the grotesque upon medieval expression. The legend of Saint Romain, for example, demonstrates the greater power of the saint by having him vanquish Gargouille, the grotesque dragon of the Seine. This legend, in turn, gave rise to a religious procession in which the Brotherhood of Gargouillards carried an effigy of the dragon.²⁶ These effigies, in turn, influenced the craftsmen at work on the cathedrals:

In the western Europe of the Middle Ages much of the grotesque decoration of ecclesiastical architecture was directly inspired by the monsters carried in effigy in popular festivals and processions. Thus the stonemasons who carved the gargoyles on churches in the Ile de France were thoroughly familiar with the legend of the great dragon Gargouille, which ravaged the Seine and neighboring areas until sent forth to another sphere by the trusty weapon of Saint Romain. 27

Once the grotesque had become associated with sin, an outcome of the common practice of equating sin and animality in the tradition of the Christian marvelous, the mutual influence of the arts and crafts produced an abundance of grotesque images. That the York playwright was aware of the grotesque as a technique reflecting the very nature of evil is a justifiable conclusion:

²⁶Bridaham, Gargoyles, Chimeras, and the Grotesque, pp. ix - x.

²⁷Daniel, Devils, Monsters, and Nightmares, p. 45.

It[the grotesque] appeared in stained glass, in wood carving, in wall painting, and even in the decoration of ecclesiastical vessels, as well as in the margins of manuscripts. Much of the grotesque material in wall painting has been effaced, but the technique of the grotesque must have been commonplace to any literate man of affairs in the last half of the fourteenth century. 28

²⁸D. W. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 250-51.

CHAPTER III

THE GROTESQUE: ITS FOUNDATION IN MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

The last chapter has stressed that the grotesque in the Middle Ages developed within the tradition of the Christian marvelous. The convention of associating sin with animality, hallmarking that tradition, proliferated an abundance of grotesque images. This chapter attempts to reconstruct the implications of the grotesque for medieval man. As a reflection of sin, what particular insight concerning the very nature of sin did the grotesque convey? To sharpen the grotesque as a tool for criticizing the York plays, one must assess its meaning to those for whom it was intended.

That the grotesque was not accidental, but integral, to medieval Christianity is tenable. There is no need to trace the abundance of grotesque images to the outbreak of a latent paganism, successfully resisting all efforts by the Church to uproot it. E. K. Chambers' antithesis, that sets a harsh, repressive church against a fun-loving pagan spirit,¹ overlooks the expansiveness of the religion of that period:

¹Chambers, Mediaeval Stage, I, p. 90.

We have come to realize -- and one reads this in almost all studies of English religious drama -- that to medieval man, religion encompassed all of life, its moments of awe, its staggering horrors, even its idiotic jokes. 2

Church decoration reflects this expansiveness. The medieval craftsman readily juxtaposed the farcical to the sacred:

We talk of the inimitable grandeur of the cathedrals; but indeed it is rather their gaiety that we do not dare to imitate. We should be rather surprised if a chorister suddenly began singing 'Bill Bailey' in church. Yet that would be only doing in music what the medievals did in sculpture. They put into a Miserere seat the very scenes that we put into a music-hall song; comic domestic scenes similar to the spilling of the beer and the hanging out of the washing. 3

Medieval religion was thus sufficiently expansive to sustain the grotesque.⁴ To conceive of the grotesque as an offshoot of paganism, springing up within Christianity, overlooks the didactic function it subserved.

To appreciate this didactic function, one must consider the church's defence for the use of pictures and

²Prosser, Drama and Religion, p. 81.

³G. K. Chesterton, "The Architect of Spears," quoted by Kolve, Corpus Christi, p. 174.

⁴Defending the tolerance of the church at the turn of the thirteenth century, Randall (Gothic Manuscripts, p. 5) adduces a seal commissioned by the abbot Guy de Munois. "It was to represent an ape attired as abbot encircled by the inscription: 'abbe de singe air main d' os serre,' an ingenious reference to the ecclesiastic's position as abbe de Saint-Germain d' Auxerre from 1285 to 1309." In this connection the custom of the risus paschalis should be noted. After the days of Lenten penance, the priest could titillate his congregation with funny stories. "The jokes and stories concerned especially material bodily life, and were of a carnival type." Bakhtin, Rabelais, pp. 78-9.

and images. Attempting to edify a people for the majority of whom written expression was unintelligible, the church turned to visual aids -- pictures, statues, processions, and plays themselves -- to inculcate its tenets. The doctrine of libri laicorum, holding that pictures were books to the unlettered, underlay this exploitation.⁵ Gregory the Great strongly emphasized the educative value of images:

Aliud enim est picturam adorare, aliud per picturae historiam quid sit adorandum addiscere. Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa etiam ignorantes vident quid sequi debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt. Unde et praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est. 6

(Indeed, it is one thing to adore a picture, another to learn through the story of the picture what should be adored. For what writing is to those reading it, a picture performs even to those ignorant ones perceiving it, because in a picture the ignorant also see what they ought to follow, in a picture they who do not know letters read. In that it teaches, a picture is in place of a reading to the people.)

Embodied in images, the grotesque thus functioned as a book to the unlettered. Its visible form taught a spiritual meaning. Augustine illustrated this basically Platonic correspondence between the physical and the spiritual:

⁵For a list of some writers who expounded this view of images see Rosemary Woolf, The English Mystery Plays (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 87-8.

⁶Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Patrologia Latina, LXXVII (Paris, 1849), 1128.

Sacrifice then is the visible ritual of an invisible sacrifice, that is, it is a sacred symbol. That is why the penitent man according to the prophet, or perhaps the prophet himself, seeking forgiveness from God for his sins, says: 'If thou hadst wished for a sacrifice, I would indeed have given it, but thou wilt take no delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit; a contrite and humbled heart God will not despise.' [Psalm 51. 16-17.] Let us consider how in the same passage, where he said that God does not desire sacrifice, he also made it clear that God does desire sacrifice. That is, what God does not want is the sacrifice of a slaughtered beast; what he does want is the sacrifice of a contrite heart. 7

Similar to the visible sacrifice, symbolizing the invisible sacrifice of the heart to God, the grotesque conveyed a spiritual truth, suggested a complex of tenets bearing upon the nature of evil.

Formally considered, a grotesque work is singular because it contradicts its own structure. Its elements collide, subverting its order, subverting its proportion. Tillich's conclusions about primitive art point up this destruction of form peculiar to the grotesque:

They bear forms, human, animal and plant, which we understand as such, recognizing their conformity to artistic laws. But with these organic forms are combined other elements which shatter our every conception of organic form. 8

The grotesque work seemingly violates the principle of non-contradiction, fundamental to rational thinking. It

⁷The City of God Against the Pagans, III (Books viii-xi), trans. by David S. Wiesen, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 269.

⁸"The Demonic," pp. 77-8.

embodies confusion. Laughter and terror interact. The grotesque inhabits an amorphous realm, with comedy leaving off, with horror beginning. Kayser's definition of it formulates this effect:

The grotesque is a structure . . . The Grotesque is the Estranged World . . . It is our world which has to be transformed . . . 9

The dismemberment of Aue, for instance, by Azo, attempting to free her from the cursed revellers of Colbek, precipitates confusion. Her mutilation, on the one hand, evokes horror. An arm as easily detachable as a twig from a tree trunk undermines one's preconceptions of the body's cohesion. The threatening has surfaced, ruining the predictability of our world. But Aue's predicament, on the other hand, calls forth laughter. Instead of shrieking in grisly pain, her deformed body merrily cavorts with her fellow revellers. Not quite cancelling terror, this laughter does provide an outlet for tension. This laughter derives from the mind's need to defend itself, to re-orient itself in the world, by distancing the threatening.

Evoking confusion, the grotesque was the vehicle that medieval man used to convey his understanding of sin and of the place of sin in the universe. To grasp the function of the grotesque, therefore, one must reconstruct that very conception of sin.

⁹The Grotesque, p. 184.

Augustine set medieval thought upon a Manichean foundation. That is, he looked at the universe from the vantage of dualism. He compared the universe to a poem and God to a poet. If a poet skillfully uses antithesis, his poem is all the more beautiful. The listener discerns how the structure of the entire poem patterns the opposition between individual words and phrases, brings order out of apparent disharmony. In building up the beauty of the universe, God, the supreme poet or maker, also uses opposition. Light counters darkness; goodness, evil; Jerusalem, Babylon; the city of God, the city of man. Like a wonderful poem, the structure of the whole universe balances the opposition between its individual parts:

So, just as beauty of language is achieved by a contrast of opposites in this way, the beauty of the course of this world is built up by a kind of rhetoric, not of words but of things, which employs this contrast of opposites. This is very clearly stated in the Book of Ecclesiasticus as follows: 'Good is the opposite of evil, and life the opposite of death; so the sinner is the opposite of the godly. And so you are to regard all the works of the Most High: two by two, one the opposite of the other. [Ecclesiasticus 33. 14-15.] 10

This idea of balanced opposition permeated medieval thinking. It determined, for instance, the contrapuntal structure of St. Thomas' Summa Theologiae. There, the arguments supporting a proposition balance and refute those against it. In the morality play genre, a balance is struck

¹⁰The City of God, III, p. 497.

between opposites. The Castle of Perseverance features a debate between the Four Daughters of God over a man's soul. The pleas of Mercy and Peace for the man's salvation offset those of Righteousness and Truth for his eternal ruin.¹¹ In his De fructibus carnis et spiritus, Hugh of St. Victor opposes "two trees, the tree of vices, springing from the root of pride and called the vetus homo (or vetus Adam) and civitas Babylonis; and the tree of the virtues, springing from the root of humility and called the novus homo (or novus Adam) and civitas Hierosolymae."¹²

Opposed to Jerusalem then, Babylon symbolized confusion, the want of order:

Then the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city and the tower. For this reason the name 'Confusion' was given to the city, because it was here that the Lord confused the speech of the whole world. From that place the Lord God scattered the people over the face of the whole earth. [Gen. xi, 1-9.] This city named 'Confusion' was none other than Babylon, to whose marvelous construction pagan history also pays tribute. For Babylon means 'Confusion.'¹³

Anagogically, Babylon typifies hell, the eternal place of confusion. John Bromyard gave this conception of hell, as

¹¹Albert C. Baugh, editor, A Literary History of England (2d ed.; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), p. 285.

¹²Bloomfield, Seven Deadly Sins, p. 84.

¹³Augustine, The City of God Against the Pagans, V (Book xvi -- Book xviii, chapters i-xxxv), trans. by Eva Matthews Sanford and William McAllen Green, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 27.

a place devoid of order, a sociological application. Those who refuse to occupy a position in the quadripartite social structure of laborers, merchants, knights, and clergy are forced to endure the condign punishment of eternal disorder:

The Devil, however, finds a certain class, namely the slothful, who belong to no Order. They neither labour with the rustics, nor travel about with the merchants, nor fight with the knights, nor pray and chant with the clergy. Therefore they shall go with their own Abbot, of whose Order they are, namely, the Devil, where no order exists but horror eternal. ¹⁴

This stress upon hell as a place of confusion is consonant with the typical medieval view of sin as a violation of order. A man sins when he refuses to conform his will to the proper subordination obtaining between the created and the Creator. That is, he confers upon a created good the precedence that rightfully belongs to God alone. Augustine set forth this equation of sin with disorder:

So it is with every created thing. For though it is good, it can be loved both in a good and in a bad way -- in a good way, when due order is preserved, in a bad way, when due order is disturbed. I expressed this thought briefly in a poem celebrating the paschal candle:

These things are thine and are good, for thou
 who art good didst create them.
 Nothing of ours is in them save our sin in
 neglecting due order,
 When in thy stead we have love for that which
 by thee is created.

¹⁴ Summa Predicantium, trans. by Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 554.

. . . Hence, in my opinion, a short and true definition of virtue is 'a due ordering of love'; and this is why in the holy Song of Songs Christ's bride, the City of God sings: 'Set affection in due order within me.' [Song of Songs 2. 4.] Thus the sons of God disturbed the due ordering of this affection, that is, of attachment and love, when they became detached from God and attached to the daughters of men. 15

Such a violation of order, such a preference of a lesser to a greater good, vitiates the harmony existing within the sinner's own being. Sin damages the sinner's nature, upsetting the proper subordination of the lower flesh to the higher spirit:

But his [Adam's] human nature was so corrupted and changed within him that he suffered in his members a rebellious disobedience of desire, was bound by the necessity of dying and thus reproduced what he himself had come to be through vice and punishment, that is, offspring liable to sin and death. 16

By sinning, Adam produced within himself chaos, warfare between flesh and spirit, a sharing in the eternal confusion of hell.

Two common metaphors for sin, embodying this conception that sin vitiates the nature of the sinner, were those of animality and disease. The last chapter has insisted upon the importance of the nexus between sin and animality in the tradition of the Christian marvelous as the seedbed of the grotesque. In his Mirour de l'omme,

¹⁵The City of God Against the Pagans, IV (Books xii-xv), trans. by Philip Levine, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 545, 547.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 145.

John Gower siphons from this tradition to describe the seven daughters of sin en route to marriage:

Orguil is mounted on a lion and carries in her right hand an eagle. Envy rides on a dog and holds a sparrow hawk in her right hand. A boar carries Wrath bearing a cock in her hand. Sloth is seated on an ass and holds an owl. A horse is Avarice's steed. In her hands are a hawk and a falcon. Gluttony is on a wolf, and in one hand is a kite and in the other a flagon for wine. Lechery rides on a goat and holds a dove. 17

If sin and animality are one, then the sinner, consigning himself to vice, exchanges his humanity for bestiality. He prefers the flesh, his property in common with the animal, to the spirit, his property in common with God. This idea informs a miniature from the twelfth century

Adam Naming the Animals:

Adam, seated on the left, faces a large number of beasts arranged in five overlapping horizontal layers that fill the remaining area of the picture; directly in front of him there sits an ape with an apple in its hand, mockingly anticipating the act which will be the cause of Adam's fall . . . 18

The ape foreshadows the consequence of Adam's sin, the bestiality that will be his, the degradation of his humanity.

An equally cogent metaphor, encapsulating this idea that sin vitiates the sinner, is that of disease. Just as disease distorts the body, sin ulcerates the soul. Again, in his Mirour de l'omme, Gower, for example, compares each

¹⁷Bloomfield, Seven Deadly Sins, p. 195

¹⁸Janson, Apes and Ape Lore, p. 109.

of the deadly sins to a specific disease. He likens pride to frenzy, envy to fever, wrath to cardiacle, sloth to lethargy, avarice to dropsy, gluttony to "loup roial," and lechery to leprosy.¹⁹ Significantly, the recurrent metaphor for Jesus in the York mystery cycle is "leche." Jesus is the doctor who can minister to the sin-sickened soul. For example, in play xx, "Christ with the Doctors in the Temple," Jesus proclaims Himself as the physician of the spirit:

The holy gost has on me light,
And has anoynted me as a leche,²⁰

(The Holy Ghost has alighted on me,
And has anointed Me as a doctor,)

These metaphors of disease and animality, employing a distortion of the human body to suggest the ravages of sin, easily become grotesque. The suitability of the grotesque as an image of sin is thus apparent. To teach that sin violates order, the grotesque collapses the border separating the comic and the terrible. The ensuing confusion teaches that all sin shares in the eternal confusion of hell. The denial of form at the core of the grotesque suggests the vitiation of nature consequent upon sin. All

¹⁹Bloomfield, Seven Deadly Sins, pp. 195-96.

²⁰Lucy Toulmin Smith, editor, York Plays: The Plays Performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the Day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 160, ll. 101-02. All references to the York Plays are to this edition. In this dissertation, I refer to the plays by Roman numerals and to the lines by Arabic numerals. The translations are my own.

of these associations revolve about the grotesque as an image of sin.

The relation of the grotesque image, moreover, to the structure supporting it reflects the place of sin in God's total scheme. Augustine contends that the sinful, in spite of the deformity they bring to their own natures, still contribute to the order erected by God:

Nor did the evil will, evil because it did not choose to keep the right pattern of its nature, thereby escape the laws of a just God who orders all things well. For a beautiful picture is improved by dark colours if they are fitly placed, and just so the universe of real things, if it could be so contemplated, is beautiful, sinners and all. To be sure, if you consider sinners as they are in themselves, their ugliness is a disfiguring blemish. 21

The gargoyles, for instance, in their relation to the cathedral, reflect this Augustinian concept that the design of the whole subsumes the deformity of the individual part:

If you look at Notre-Lame de Chartres as it appears from the distance, you are assailed at once by the imaginative, the soaring magnificence of the original design. . . . Near to, or following more than unaided eyes can reach save in photographs, you are absorbed in the quaint, phantasmagoric more-than-world of the carvings which are only seen when too near to master the design of the architecture. 22

God thus directs the sinful to a higher end, advancing the interests of the good:

But God did not create all the sons of men in vain, foreasmuch as he both liberates many from their vanity through the mediator Jesus, and, in the case

²¹The City of God, III, p. 517.

²²Rossiter, English Drama, p. 54.

of those who he knew beforehand were not such as to be freed, he created them for the advantage of those who were to be freed, and to show the contrast between the two opposed cities, certainly not in vain, but by a most beautiful and most righteous design embracing all rational creatures. ²³

As a reflection of this Augustinian concept that even sin paradoxically increases the beauty of the whole creation, the grotesque image must contribute to the overall structure in which it inheres. The gargoyle, for example, despite its deformity, performs the indispensable function of spewing water away from the cathedral's foundation. The torturers of Jesus in the York Passion Sequence, at once fiendishly sadistic and ridiculous, ironically further God's plan for the redemption of fallen man.

Sin, thus, is both horrible and laughable. From the standpoint of the sinner, it is horrible, deforming his nature. From the standpoint of God's total order, however, it is laughable. Because God can use evil to further the interests of the good, any attempt on the part of the sinner to disrupt His order is ridiculously impotent. Laughter at the damned, at those who failed to subvert God's order, is the proper Christian reaction, indicative of seeing evil in its true perspective. The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, for example, exemplifies this view that sin is laughable:

And whanne the masse was done, seint Martin asked hym whi he laughed, and he ansuered, that he saw the fende

²³Augustine, The City of God, V, 297.

write all the laughinges that were betwene the women atte the masse, and it happed that the parchemyn that he wrote in was shorte, and he plucked harde to haue made it lengger with his tethe, and it scaped oute of hys mouthe, and hys hede had a gret stroke ayenst the wall, '& that made me to laugh.' And whan seint Martin herde hym, he knewe that seint Brice was an holy man. 24

(And when the mass was done, Saint Martin asked him why he laughed, and he answered, that he saw the fiend write all the funny sayings that were between the women at the mass, and it happened that the parchment that he wrote on was short, and he plucked hard to make it longer with his teeth, and it slipped out of his mouth, and his head struck against the wall, 'and that forced me to laugh.' And when Saint Martin heard him, he knew that Saint Brice was a holy man.)

For the Middle Ages, then, the grotesque functioned as a book to the unlettered, inculcating the basic Christian position on the nature of sin. The distortion, inherent in the grotesque, taught that sin vitiates the nature of the sinner. The confusion, engendered by the grotesque, recalled that all sin shares in the confusion of hell. The role of laughter as a defensive mechanism distancing the horror has a religious analogue. Although a horrible deformation of the sinner's own nature, when it is referred to God's ultimate order, sin is fundamentally laughable.

This chapter began with a defence of the expansiveness of the religion of the Middle Ages. Fittingly, it concludes with Ruskin's panegyric to that religion for having developed the grotesque:

²⁴Thomas Wright, ed. (rev. ed.; London: Early English Text Society, 1906), o. s. 33, p. 42.

. . . I believe that there is no test of greatness in periods, nations, or men, more sure than the development, among them or in them, of a noble grotesque; and no test of comparative smallness or limitation, of one kind or another, more sure than the absence of grotesque invention, or incapability of understanding it. 25

²⁵Stones of Venice, III, 156.

CHAPTER IV

THE GROTESQUE AS A TOOL OF DRAMATIC CRITICISM

This dissertation has defined the didactic function of the grotesque. Indigenous to the religion of the Middle Ages, the grotesque developed within the tradition of the Christian marvelous, an offshoot of the equation between sin and animality. Like other images, its *raison d'etre* was to instruct the unlettered. Performing this function, it taught the orthodox Christian view of the nature of sin: that sin infects the nature of the sinner; that sin participates in the eternal confusion of hell; that God directs sin toward a higher good in the total order of His creation. In addition to this teaching function, however, the grotesque served an aesthetic end. Even though his plays have primarily a didactic aim, the York playwright was a skilled dramatist.¹ He used his dramatic skills, his sense of good theater, to make his religious instruction all the more cogent. The technique of the grotesque was one of his dramatic skills. Apart then from its didactic import, the grotesque was indispensable from an aesthetic standpoint to the York playwright.

¹Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "York playwright." The problem of the composition of these plays, of the number of hands who contributed to them, is not the concern of this dissertation.

The aesthetic function of the grotesque has important ramifications for the interpretation of medieval drama. A failure to understand it leads the critic to denigrate some plays as crude efforts, of antiquarian rather than literary interest. As sympathetic a critic as Eleanor Prosser finds the entire Passion Sequence, proportionally the bulk of the York cycle, aesthetically offensive:

The suggested re-evaluation of comedy would necessarily entail the need for re-evaluation of the many torture scenes. There the comedy and brutality cannot be separated. This strange mixture of humor and horror in what we assume to have been an act of worship seriously offends our modern taste, both esthetic and religious. ²

This criticism attests to the disturbing effect that the use of the grotesque in the Passion Sequence produces. The grotesque, indeed, catapults the feelings into that uncomfortable state where terror and laughter collide. Taking a more extreme position, A. P. Rossiter regards the incidence of the grotesque in the Passion Sequence not merely offensive, but a total negation of the value of Christ's sacrifice:

A devilish gusto is juxtaposed to the human agony in an ambivalence which the more durable medium of painting has preserved for us in Bosch and his greater successor, Bruegel. Not merely the macabre, the torturingly horrifying, as it can be seen in Grunewald's Isenheim altar-piece; rather, the presence of two rituals at once, of which the one is the negation of the faith to which the piece is ostensibly devoted. The very values of martyrdom -- of any

²Prosser, Drama and Religion, p. 83.

sacrifice as significant -- are implicitly denied by thus making game of it. ³

In pointing out the tonal dissonance effected by the grotesque, J. L. Styan supports Rossiter:

Even more difficult to disentangle are the contradictory springs of feeling present in the popular drama of medieval times in England. We saw how the soldiers who are set to crucify Christ in the York Pinners' and Painters' Play performed their task well in character as broad, insensitive sadists. The guilds' actors obviously saw their function as one of amusing their audience with horseplay, in spite of the grim seriousness of the moment. The element of near-blasphemy is common to all the medieval Mysteries . . . ⁴

But these critical positions assume that the York playwright botched the most important part of salvation history. Instead of fostering the worship of Christ, he unintentionally blasphemed Him. These critical positions, however, cannot be reconciled with the manifest popularity that the mystery cycles sustained for over two centuries. Plays with elements of "near-blasphemy" could never have enjoyed both clerical sanction and popular acclaim. Harold Gardiner has defended the mystery plays from the charges that they ceased to be in the sixteenth century because of the hostility of the Church toward them or because of the financial burden they placed on the individual guilds. In

³Rossiter, English Drama, p. 70.

⁴The Dark Comedy; the Development of Modern Comic Tragedy (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 10.

summarizing the attitude of the Church toward the mystery plays, Gardiner concludes:

. . . never, in legislation for the universal Church or in any appreciable number of local councils and synods, did the attitude adopted become one of opposition to the religious stage, as such; second, what few pronouncements can be shown to touch the miracula [Gardiner uses the term miracula as synonymous with mystery plays] directly, reprobate not the miracula but entirely extraneous abuses; . . . 5

In discounting the economic factor as a cause of the ending of the mystery plays, Gardiner underscores the acclaim that individual guilds received for undertaking a pageant:

. . . the burden upon the guilds as corporate bodies . . . was never so widespread or intensive but that other guilds were always ready and willing to contribute toward or fully take over the embarrassed pageants. And the guilds, too, we must remember, got their reward in fame and prestige, as well as in the sense of having performed a communal duty and even a religious action. 6

It is not logical to conclude that the Church and the guilds would have supported plays that verged on the blasphemous.

Evidence from the fourteenth century, in addition, undermines the positions of Prosser, Rossiter, and Styan. The Lollard zealot, who wrote A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyings, cites as an argument put forth by the defenders of the mystery plays the emotional intensity of the Passion Sequence: "By seeing the sufferings of Christ people are

⁵Mysteries' End, p. 19.

⁶Ibid., p. 45.

moved to compassion and devotion, and they weep bitter tears."⁷ Apparently, the contemporaries of the York playwright found values in the torture scenes, both religious and dramatic, that escape the modern critic. A defence of the technique of the grotesque is thus tantamount to a defense of the dramaturgy informing most of the York cycle.

One problem confronting the critic trying to apply the grotesque to a piece of literature, however, is that of isolating the source of the comedy:

. . . any discussion of grotesque texts, if one is to show that they are grotesque, and why, must include the uncovering of comic patterns and structures. One must be able to see why a piece of literature is not just horrifying or disgusting or frightening, but comic as well. Whereas the reasons for the horrifying or frightening qualities of a text are usually obvious, the source of its comic effect may not be so clear. This is likely to be the case with those instances of the grotesque which are particularly brutal and hideous. ⁸

As a reflection of sin, the grotesque image in medieval literature must be both horrible and laughable. From the particular standpoint of the sinner, sin is horrible, a distortion of his nature. From the universal standpoint of God's total order, however, sin is ridiculous. The sinner, in the last analysis, has only damaged himself.

⁷Paraphrased from Altenglische Sprachproben, II, ed. by E. Matzner (Berlin, 1869), 229 by Woolf, English Mystery Plays, p. 85.

⁸Thomson, Grotesque, p. 54.

He has utterly failed to subvert the order against which he rebelled. In The Knight of Tour-Landry, the devil, for example, is laughable. Attempting to stretch the parchment to record the unseemly levity of the women at church, he damages his head, thereby triggering the laughter of St. Brice. A stock comic device renders the devil laughable in that anecdote:

Not infrequently comedy sets before us a character who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught. The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy, or the cheat cheated, forms the stock-in-trade of a good many plays. . . . In every case the root idea involves an inversion of roles, and a situation which recoils on the head of its author.⁹

Sentenced to eternal confusion following his abortive attempt to usurp God's throne, the devil was consequently a target of laughter. His attempt to overthrow God's order only redounded to his own punishment. As "the cheat cheated," he merited mockery, derision. He became the grotesque character par excellence. Willard Farnham maintains that art history reflects the progressive degradation given to representations of the devil:

. . . infernal devils are given forms that are more and more monstrous after having had early representation as fallen angels with somber hues but without deformity. They suffer progressive degradation as they are brought down from the realm of evil spirituality into the realm of imperfect nature. They

⁹Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), pp. 94-5.

are given bodies formed of human and animal parts, and as the share of animality in these is increased so is their grotesquery. 10

The Augustinian concept of sin as the vitiator of nature underlay this progressive degradation of the demons in the visual arts.

The Christian reaction to the devil then, exemplified in the conduct of St. Brice, is straightforward. Notwithstanding the horror he inspires as the marplot out to ensnare mankind, the devil is also comic, the butt of laughter. But what stance should the Christian assume toward his fellow sinner? The proper reaction here was not laughter, but grief. Cautious not to presume his own salvation in this, the time of trembling, the Christian must defer his derision of the reprobate until the Last Judgment, the time of exultation.¹¹ Gregory the Great formulated this distinction between the respective Christian attitudes toward the sinner now, at the time of trembling, and in the future, at the time of exultation:

Discernamus igitur tempora tremoris et exultationis. Vident etenim nunc injustos justis, et de eorum nequitia tabescunt. Cumque eos feriri conspiciunt, de sua quoque vita suspecti fiunt. Quando ergo videbunt justis iniquorum interitum, et laetabuntur, nisi cum districto judicii perfecta jam securitate exultationis inhaeserint, cum in illo extremo examine illorum damnationem conspicient, et de se jam quod metuant non habebunt? Nunc itaque reprobos aspiciunt

¹⁰ Shakespearean Grotesque, pp. 38-39.

¹¹ Engelhardt, 'De contemptu mundi,' p. 111.

et gemunt, tunc aspicient et subsannabunt, quia eos exultando despicient, quos mode nec sine gemitu iniqua perpetrantes, nec sine metu vident pro iniquitate morientes. 12

(Let us separate therefore the times of trembling and of exultation. For indeed, now, the just ones see the unjust ones and pine at the badness of them. And when they catch sight of them struck dead, they are made suspicious about their own lives. When, therefore, will the just ones see the destruction of the iniquitous and be joyful, except henceforth when with the busy judge they will cling to the perfect security of exultation, when in that last testing they will see the damnation of them, and they will not have fear about themselves? Now therefore they look at the false ones and groan, then they will look and mock, because while exulting they will look down on them, whom now they without a groan neither see performing unfair acts, nor without fear dying for their unfairness.)

Strictly speaking then, the devil alone is a vehicle for the grotesque, simultaneously horrid and comic. According to Christian orthodoxy, one cannot yet laugh at the children of perdition. But the York playwright had to build comedy into certain scenes in which the devil did not appear. Without comedy, he would have had no means of controlling the horror that those scenes aroused. The horror in the torture sequences, those very scenes that Rossiter and Styan find blasphemous, would have been aesthetically unendurable without the release of tension that laughter affords.

The staging of the Passion was indeed immediate

¹²Moralia XVI. 18, Patrologia Latina, LXXV, ed. by J. P. Migne (Paris, 1849).

and vivid. The York playwright tapped the new realism making inroads upon Christian art:

By the end of the fourteenth century, however, Christ was portrayed as human sufferer, rather than as triumphant king or teacher. Death, with all its brutal reality, suddenly infused Christian literature (witness the many graphic meditations on the Passion and treatises on the art of dying) and Christian art . . . The mystery cycles are a counterpart of this Late Gothic art with its unflinching realism. 13

The conventions of the medieval stage, moreover, contributed to the vividness and, hence, to the terror inspired by certain scenes. That pageant wagon, for example, precluded a separation between spectator and actor because the actors utilized the street as an unlocalized platea.¹⁴ Like the apron stage of the Globe, jutting out among the groundlings, the pageant wagon insured physical closeness between actor and spectator. No proscenium arch, no footlights, framed a play world at a safe remove from the spectators. The use of contemporary, rather than period, costuming augmented this immediacy.¹⁵ Not in first century Jerusalem, but in fourteenth century York, Jesus suffered for Adam's sin.

The York playwright thus faced a problem. He had to dramatize the horror of sin as vividly, as forcefully as

¹³Prosser, *Drama and Religion*, pp. 13-4.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 51

¹⁵Ibid., p. 53.

possible. But to make the horror aesthetically tolerable, to keep it from spilling over into vulgar sensationalism, he had to turn to comedy as his regulator. The official Christian position, however, excluded everyone but the devil as a target of laughter. The problem was to insert comedy into those scenes in which the devil could not appear.

By patterning the sinners in the plays upon the model of Lucifer, the York playwright resolved this problem. That is, he presented not human sinners, but surrogate devils. The notion that sin vitiates the nature of the sinner, that a man given over to win, in effect, surrenders his humanity, theologically supported this dramatic device. To render the evil characters in his cycle not just horrid, but comic as well, or grotesque, the York dramatist had to suggest to his audience that he was characterizing not fallen human nature, but the diabolic:

In all these, from Herod onward, the ordinary medieval man as spectator is obviously not to find fallible humanity such as he can with amusement see in himself. He is not even to do so by thinking of his own fallibility as similar but milder. For in these there is only humanity that has deserted to join Satan and has left the fellowship of ordinary sinful mankind entirely. Those of this evil company who can be laughed at as fantastic, in the way a boasting and ranting Herod or Pilate certainly can be, may be taken as especially amusing. All can be enjoyed, just as devils

are, as good subjects for derision when their actions do not manage too many feelings of uneasiness. 16

Thus, in pointing out instances of the grotesque, one particularly has to indicate the source of the comedy, less apparent than the source of the terror. One must, furthermore, determine how the playwright suggests that certain characters, namely those that carry the comedy, are not merely sinners, but devil figures. Performing a didactic function, that of teaching the Christian position on the nature of sin, the grotesque will be crucial to the dramatic technique of those plays that deal with sin and its consequences.

¹⁶Farnham, Shakespearean Grotesque, p. 42. This notion that a man may surrender his humanity through vice occurs in non-dramatic literature before the composition of the York cycle. "The devil is spoken of as actually entering Judas, as is recorded in the New Testament; thus in Aelfric: 'Huaet se deofol into Judan bestap.' According to the Cursor Mundi the Savior gave Judas a morsel of bread and with that morsel 'crep in Sathanas,' and after Judas had hanged himself, the fiend hurled him into hell." L. W. Cushman, The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature Before Shakespeare (New York: The Humanities Press, 1970), p. 6.

CHAPTER V

THE GROTESQUE IN THE PLAYS OF THE FALL (I-VII)

The first seven plays in the York cycle comprise a unit, thematically held together by the Augustinian notion of sin. In them, first Lucifer, then Adam, and finally Cayme rebel against the order sustained by God, thereby plummeting into that condition of sin for which the grotesque is an image. Because the first play sets up a pattern for the grotesque that recurs throughout the cycle, it has particular importance.

Informing the first play is the notion that sin is that which violates order. As the source of all order, Deus creates nine distinct states of angelic bliss:

In þe whilke blys I byde at be here
Nyen ordres of aungels full clere,
In louyng ay lastande at lowte me (I, 22-24).

(In the which bliss I bid to be here
Nine orders of angels very bright,
In praise ever lasting to praise me.)

In this ordered hierarchy, Lucifer sustains the first place:

Of all þe mightes I haue made most nexte after me,
I make þe als master and merour of my mighte,
I beelde þe here baynely in blys for to be,
I name þe for Lucifer, als berar of lyghte (I, 33-36).

(Of all the powers I have made next after me,
I make thee as master and mirror of my might,
I set thee up here directly in bliss to be,
I name thee Lucifer, as the bearer of light.)

Recognition of one's place in this hierarchy manifests goodness, exemplified in the response of the first seraphim:

Ay loved be þat lufly lorde of his light,
That vs thus mighty has made, þat nowe was righte noghte
(I, 43-44);

(Ever praised be that lovely lord because of his light,
Who has made us thus mighty, who now were nothing at
all.)

Lucifer, contrariwise, rebels against the order that God has created. He craves to ascend higher than his created station; that is, to usurp the throne of God:

Abowne 3 hit sall I be beeldand,
On heghte in þe hyeste of hewuen
(I, 87-88).

(Yet above I shall be building,
On high in the highest of heaven.)

Because Lucifer has attempted to violate the order of the universe, to subvert the subordination of creature to creator, the grotesque, the image of disorder, of confusion, depicts his condign punishment. His fellow demon emphasizes the terrors of hell, realm of confusion, the eternal dungeon for Lucifer and his band:

Owte! owte! I go wode for wo, my wytte es
all wente nowe
(I, 105),

(Out! out! I go mad for woe, my wit has
entirely gone now,)

Lucifer himself recoils from the total vitiation of that beauty about which he vaunted:

Whare es my kynde be-come, so cumly and clere,
 Nowe am I laytheste, allas! at are was lighte.
 My bryghtnes es blakkeste and blo nowe

(I, 99-101);

(What has my nature become, so comely and bright,
 Now am I most loathsome, allas! who before was light.
 My brightness is blackest and blue now.)

The comedy in this scene comes from the squabbling between Lucifer and the inferior demons. Having failed to overturn the order created by God, Lucifer appropriately must endure the disallegiance of those formerly his subordinates. That stock comic device of the villain suddenly victimized by his own machinations sets off the laughter here:

Lucifer in inferno. Walaway! wa! es me now, nowe es
 it war thane it was.
 Vnthyruandely threpe 3he, I sayde but a thoghte.

Secund. diab. we! lurdane, þu lost vs.

Luc. in inf. 3he ly, owte! allas!
 I wyste noghte þis wo sculde be wroghte.
 Owte on how! lurdans, 3he smore me in smoke.

Secund. diab. This wo has þu wroghte vs.

Luc. in inf. 3he ly, 3he ly!

Secund. diab. Thou lyes, and þat sall þu by,
 We lurdans haue at 3owe, lat loke

(I, 113-120).

(Lucifer in inferno. Alas! woe! is to me now,
 now is it worse than it was.
 You chide in vain, I said but a thought.

Secund. diab. Oh! sluggard, you lost us.

Luc. in inf. You lie, out! alas!
 I knew not this woe should be wrought.
 Out on you! sluggards, you smother me in smoke.

Secund diab. You have wrought us this woe.

Luc. in inf. You lie, you lie!

Secund. diab. You lie, and you shall pay for that.
(We sluggards have at you, do look.)

Like the devil in The Knight of Tour-Landry, who smacked his head trying to stretch a parchment, Lucifer, attacked by those who formerly revered him, becomes ridiculous. The audience mocks his predicament. The grotesque effectively depicts the fallen state of Lucifer. His punishment produces terror in recalling to the audience what lies in store for those who rebel against God's order. At the same time, however, Lucifer's struggle with the other demons, who no longer allow him precedence, is comic. Our laughter at Lucifer's plight, indicative of our observing him from the Christian perspective, holding that sin is laughable, restrains the horror arising from the threat that his punishment could be ours.

Plays two, three, and four, dramatizing God as the omnipotent creator, do not draw upon the grotesque. In general, any play that does not focus upon sin or its consequences precludes the grotesque. The playwright does use these plays, however, to reiterate that idea of order as the essential characteristic of any handiwork of God's:

Also vp in þe ayre on hyght
I byd now þat þore be ordande,
For to be foulis fayre and bright,
dewly in þare degre dwelland

(II, 69-70),

(Also up in the air on high
I bid now that there be ordained,
Birds fair and bright
Duely in their degree dwelling,)

Play four, for instance, stresses the prelapsarian subordination of all earthly creation to man:

Beastes, fewles, all that ye see,
Shall bowe to you, more and myn.
This place hight paradyce,
Here shall your joys begynne
(IV, 5-8),

(Beasts, birds, all that you see,
Shall bow to you, more and less.
This place called paradise,
Here shall your joys begin,)

Play five, "Man's disobedience and fall from Eden," begins with a soliloquy by Sathanas in which he discloses his internal confusion. This soliloquy dramatically foreshadows that state into which Adam and Eve will topple:

For woo my witte es in a were,
That moffes me mykill in my mynde
(V, 1-2),

(Because of woe my wit is in a confusion,
That moves me much in my mind,)

Carefully, the playwright draws a parallel between the sin of Adam and Eve in this play and Lucifer's in the first play. The cajolery, for instance, leading Eve to sin recalls Lucifer's boast, "I sall be lyke vnto hym þat es hyeste on heghte":

For right als god yhe shalle be wyse,
And pere to hym in all-kyn thyng
(V, 68-69).

(For just as God you shall be wise,
And equal to him in everything.)

By making her goading of Adam echo Sathanas' exordium to her, "Byte on boldly" (80), the playwright equates Eve with the devil. This equation forces the audience to consider both Eve and Adam from the standpoint that they have assumed the evil of Lucifer by sin. This consideration primes the audience to respond to the comic potential of their fallen state realized in the next play:

Byte on boldely, for it es trewe,
 We shalle be goddis and knawe al thyng
 (V, 102-103).

(Bite on boldly, for it is true,
 We shall be gods and know everything.)

Focusing upon the effects of Adam's sin, the next play uses the grotesque in its traditional association as a punishment for sin. Terror issues from the confusion that Adam has brought to the earth, making it a miniature of hell. It has suddenly become a threatening place. Subordination of the lesser to the greater has ceased. The brute creation no longer recognizes Adam as superior. Adam's attempt to overturn God's order has precipitated his own confusion, with lower creatures now pitted against him:

And nowe is alle thyngge me agayne,
 That gois on grounde
 (VI, 96-97).

(And now everything is against me,
 That walks on the ground.)

Like Lucifer, Adam shrinks in terror from the physical change that has occurred to him:

We bothe þat were in blis so brighte,
 We mon go nakid euery-ilke a nyght
 (VI, 130-131).

(We both who were in bliss so bright,
 We must go naked every single night,)

The discord between Adam and Eve recalls that altercation in hell, in which the lesser demons berated Lucifer. Their mutual recrimination is basically comic. It culminates in Eve's masterful undercutting of her self-exculpating husband:

Ad. Allas! what womans witte was light!
 þat was wele sene.

Eue. Sethyn it was so me knyth it sore,
 Bot sythen that woman wittes ware,
 Mans maistrie shulde haue bene more
 agayne þe gilte
 (VI, 133-138).

(Ad. Alas! how light was woman's wit!
 That was easily seen.

Eve. Since it was so it irritates me sorely,
 But since woman was witless,
 Man's mastery should have been greater
 Against the guilt.)

The comedy derives from this deflation of Adam. Appropriately, Eve takes down his pride. This pitting of laughter against terror constitutes the grotesque. The audience recoils from the confusion that Adam's sin has caused, yet laughs as Eve quips Adam. Eve's opposition is a reflection of the confusion Adam has wrought. Because he has refused to submit to God, Eve no longer meekly submits to Adam. This confusion appropriately culminates in the Noah play. There, Noah's

wife does Eve one better by pummeling her husband.

Patterned upon the fall of Lucifer is play seven, "Sacrificium Cayme and Abell." Skillfully, the dramatist models Cayme upon Lucifer. The angel prepares the audience for this likeness by preceding God's commandment to tithe, the problem of this play, with a narration of the fall of the angels:

And some þe tente part it was tried,
 And wente awaye, as was worthye,
 They heild to hell all þat meyne,
 þer-in to bide
 (VII, 19-22).

(And at once the tenth part was tested,
 And went away, as was worthy,
 All that company moved to hell,
 There to abide.)

By the use of expletives, the dramatist has Cayme characterize himself as a reprobate, a devil-figure:

Ya! daunce in þe devilway, dresse þe downe
 (VII, 52),
 Ya! deuell me thynkeþ þat werke were waste
 (VII, 60),

(Yes! Dance in the devil's way, make thee ready,
 Yes! devil, it seems to me that work were vain,)

Cayme's opposition to Abell, whose readiness to fulfill God's commandment identifies him as a Christ-figure, strengthens this Cayme-Lucifer parallel:

Abell. For to fulfille thy comaundement,
 þe teyne
 Of all þe gode sen I be-ganne,
 Thow shalle it haue, sen þow it sent
 (VII, 39-42).

(In order to fulfill thy commandment,
the tenth
Of all the goods, since I began,
You shall have it, since you sent it.)

Like Lucifer, Cayme will not accept his creaturely status.
His refusal to tithe becomes tantamount to a denial of
God's supremacy:

Nowe fekyll frenshippe for to fraste,
Me thynkith þer is in hym sartheyne.
If he be most in myghte and mayne,
what nede has he
(VII, 63-66)?

(Now fickle friendship to try,
It seems to me there is in him certainly.
If he be greatest in might and strength,
what need has he?)

Finally, the angel's curse upon Cayme, following his murder
of his brother, completes his identification with Lucifer:

God hais sent the his curse downe,
Fro hevyn to hell, maldictio dei
(VII, 86-87).

(God has sent thee his curse down,
From heaven to hell, the curse of God.)

As a devil-figure, Cayme has a comic aspect that
checks the terror he inspires. The terror arises from the
violence he metes out to Abell, innocent like Christ. The
comedy, on the other hand, derives from his two confronta-
tions, one with Brewbarret, his servant, and the other with
the angel, God's servant. Having just murdered his brother
over a quarrel about tithing, Cayme is disconcerted as his
own servant dashes across the stage carrying the best
sheaves to offer to God:

Brewb. Lo! Mr. Cayme, what shares bryng I,
Evyng of the best for to bere seyde.
And to the ffeylde I wyll me hye
To fetch you moo, if ye haue neyd.

Cayme. Come vp! sir knave! the devyll the speyd,
Ye will not come but ye be prayd.

Brewb. O! maister Caym, I haue broken my to
(VII, 73-79)!

(Brewb. Lo! Mr. Cain, what shares I bring,
Even from the best that bear seed.
And to the field I will hasten
To fetch you more if you have need.

Cayme. Come up! sir knave! May the devil prosper thee,
You will not come unless you are prayed to.

Brewb. O! Master Cain, I have broken my toe!)

Cayme's situation is comic. Even though he has silenced Abell, this issue of tithing still harries him. The laughter heaped upon the frustrated Cayme regulates the terror he has aroused by his brutal killing of his brother.

The angel's confrontation with Cayme builds this laughter. Realizing that his killing of Abell has only brought God's curse down upon him, Cayme loses his self-possession. Completely exasperated, he tries to retaliate by striking the angel on the head:

Take that thy self, evyn on thy crowne,
Quia non sum custos fratris mei
(VII, 88-89).

(Take that thy self, even on thy head,
Because I am not guardian of my brother,)

Eleanor Prosser attacks the slapstick involved in these confrontations with Brewbarret and the angel:

The mood is completely shattered by wholly irrelevant laughter. Typical is Brewbarret's hopping around the stage on one foot. . . . And why has God been changed to an angel? Clearly because our author confuses dramatic 'action' with violence and wants Cain to strike back physically at the curse-giver. Since he certainly could not strike God, God thus becomes an angel, and again the impact of omnipresence and swift vengeance by the Lord Himself is lost. If we are going to apply the terms 'primitive' and 'crude' to anything in the mystery cycles, this childish delight in blackening the eye of an angel at the moment of damnation seems most deserving of the term. ¹

But the respective encounters with Brewbarret and with the angel function both doctrinally and aesthetically. Doctrinally, Cayme's quarrel with Brewbarret and his assault upon the angel reflect the confusion he has produced by his violation of God's order. Aesthetically, these confrontations bring out Cayme's comic potential, restraining the horror flowing from his bludgeoning of Abell. The very deed that has aggravated his father's evil renders Cayme susceptible to laughter. Levelled at the comically-frustrated character, this laughter keeps the terror within bounds.

In these first seven pageants from York, the playwright uses the grotesque to depict the consequences of sin. The confusion in hell, in which the demons lambast their fallen leader, the quarrel between Adam and Eve, and the repeated frustrations of the first murderer involve the grotesque. In these scenes, the dramatist uses laughter to regulate the horror that sin has let loose.

¹Drama and Religion, p. 75.

CHAPTER VI

THE GROTESQUE IN THE PATRIARCHAL SEQUENCE (VIII-XI)

Having presented a series of plays about those who violated God's order, the playwright turns to the patriarchs. The plays in which they appear look ahead to the Nativity Sequence. That is, the protagonists in them, Noah and Moses, function as types of Christ. They therefore anticipate the coming intervention of God in human history. As in the last sequence, the embodiments of evil, Noah's wife and the Pharaoh, provide the grotesque.

Play eight, "The Building of the Ark," sounds a motif repeated in these plays. As in "Sacrificium Cayme and Abell," Noah, Abraham, and Moses will each receive a divine summons. The character of Noah, introduced in this play, establishes a norm by which the audience will judge his foil character, his wife, in the next play. Recalling such figures as the first seraphim and Abell, Noah exhibits the right attitude of a creature toward his creator. He accepts his place in the universe, his subordination to the God who made him:

Al lorde, I lowe þe lowde and still,
þat vn-to me, wretch vn-worthye,
þus with thy worde, as is þi will,
Lykis to appere þus propyrly
(VIII, 41-44).

(Lord, I praise thee loud and still,
 Who unto me, an unworthy wretch,
 Thus with thy word, as is thy will,
 Pleases to appear thus properly.)

Unlike the sinners about to die in the flood, a natural upheaval that fittingly will put an end to those who have rebelled against the order set up by God, Noah emerges as the true servant of God. In this capacity, he typifies Christ. This parallel between Christ and Noah, that the dramatist will develop in play nine, is important for the characterization of Noah's wife.

Dramatically, this parallel makes Noah's antagonist, his wife, a type of the devil, and, thereby, a figure of comedy. Once a character is viewed not as a human sinner, but as a type of the devil, he becomes a target of laughter. The dramatist develops this Christ-Noah parallel convincingly. Like Christ, for example, Noah is the product of a miraculous birth. Doddering Lamech, in his seven hundredth and seventy-seventh year, sired him through the grace of God:

He prayed to god with stabill steuene,
 Þat he to hym a sone shuld sende,
 And at þe laste þer come from heuen
 Slyke hettyng þat hym mekill amende
 (IX, 19-22);

(He prayed to God with firm voice,
 That he would send to him a son,
 And at last there came from heaven
 Such promise that gave him much satisfaction;)

Lamech's prophecy that Noah would be a comfort to mankind strengthens this parallel:

When I was borne Noye named he me,
 And saide þees wordes with mekill wynne,
 'Loo,' he saide, 'þis ilke is he
 That shalle be comforte to man-kynne
 (IX, 29-32).'

(When I was born he named me Noah,
 And said these words with great joy.
 'Lo,' he said, 'this same is he
 Who shall be a comfort to mankind.')

Like Christ, Noah functions as a saviour. He salvages a remnant from the destruction inflicted upon the peccant human race. Prefiguring those within the church, those few within the ark are saved. Those outside of it are lost.

This parallel between Christ and Noah increases the gravity of his wife's recalcitrance. By this parallel, the dramatist implies that in addition to being a rebel against her husband she is an enemy of Christ's. As His enemy, she anticipates those who steel themselves against His mercy dispensed freely in this time of grace. Like Lucifer, upon whom she is patterned, this woman violates order. She refuses to accept her place as her husband's subordinate. She, consequently, stubbornly sets herself against his entreaties to board the ark. As she squabbles with Noah, the raging waters tower about the ark. Nature itself, symbolizing the disorder that sin has wrought, is wracked with confusion:

Dame, fowrty dayes are nerhand past,
 And gone sen it be-gan to rayne,
 On lyffe salle noman lenger laste
 Bot we allane, is nought to layne
 (IX, 85-88).

(Lady, fourty days have almost passed,
And gone since it began to rain,
No one shall longer remain alive
Except us alone. That is not to be hidden.)

At the very moment when Noah declares that he is God's servant, and thus by extension a figure of Christ, his wife internalizes the chaos surrounding the ark and strikes him:

Noe. Dame, þou holde me excused of itt,
It was goddis wille with-owten doutte.

Vxor. What? wenys þou so for to go qwitte?
Nay, be my trouthe, þou getis a clowte
(IX, 117-120).

(Noah. Lady, hold me excused of it,
Without doubt it was God's will.)

Wife. What? Think you thus to be excused?
No, by my truth, you get a clout.)

Symbolizing those sinners perishing in the flood, Noah's wife rebels against the proper subordination of wife to husband. She distorts the character of a wife to such an extent that she becomes grotesque, engendering both horror and laughter. By striking her husband, she, like Cayme who cuffed the angel, sets herself against the task that God has given His servant. She ultimately threatens the salvation of man. Realizing that her stubbornness may bring about the destruction of Noah and his sons, the audience experiences fear. In spite of its familiarity with the Biblical account of Noah, the audience fears because the structure of the events builds up that emotion. Pushing the discord between Adam and Eve to this farcical ex-

treme, Noah's wife, disobeying him just as the drowning sinners have disobeyed God, has this element of the terrible about her. But the laughter she provokes militates against the fear she arouses. Her slapping of Noah partakes of that broad humor preserved for us in the many miserere carvings featuring a husband and a wife battling for the breeches, for the right to wear the pants in the household. She incarnates the topsy-turvy gospel promulgated by the Wife of Bath:

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves,
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;¹

(And also I pray Jesus to shorten their lives
Who will not be governed by their wives;)

She is comic, moreover, in her total misreading of the situation. Ironically, she strikes the one person who is able to help her. Her obstinacy, in addition, is comically ineffectual. Eventually, she must acquiesce to board the ark, to resume her proper place as Noah's subordinate:

When Noah's wife belligerently resists Noah in plays of the Chester, York, and Towneley cycles and in a Newcastle play, she rises defiantly not only against the presumed lord and master who is her husband but also, by implication, against the God who is her husband's lord and whose will is being carried out in the building and using of the ark. . . . Her beating of him goes beyond that [comedy of an ordinary incongruity] to the comedy of an extraordinary incongruity in a reversal of the accepted order of things, threatened by the low. 2

¹The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. by F. N. Robinson (2d ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 88, ll. 1261-1262.

²Farnham, Shakespearean Grotesque, p. 35.

This play proceeds to dramatize Noah's re-establishment of order. As a consequence, Noah's wife, fomenter of discord, assumes less prominence as a character. Having boarded the ark, she ceases to function as a type of the devil. She fits into the new order that Noah, the servant of God, creates. By resuming his proper role as superior, Noah restores order to the world of the ark, evident in his delegation of duties:

My sonnes, se 3e, myd day and morne
 To these catelles takes goode hede.
 Keppes þam wele with haye and corne;
 And, women, fanges þes foules and feede,
 So þat þey be nozt lightly lorne,
 Als longe as we þis liffe sall lede

(IX, 171-176).

(My sons midday and morn see that you
 Take good heed to these cattle.
 Keep them well with hay and corn;
 And, women, take the fowls and feed them,
 So that they be not carelessly lost,
 As long as we this life shall lead.)

Paralleling this re-establishment of order within the microcosm of the ark is the change in the macrocosm without:

O! barnes, it waxes clere aboute,
 þat may 3e see ther wher 3e sitte

(IX, 183-184).

(Oh! children, it grows bright about,
 You can see that where you sit.)

Unlike the Noah play, "Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac" does not draw upon the grotesque. Its subject matter in no way involves sin. The play, however, does balance the "Sacrificium Cayme and Abell." That is, the dramatist de-

picts Abraham as the antithesis of Cayme, in his willingness to sacrifice to God what he holds most dear. Isaac, in this play, becomes a type of Christ. His age, like Christ's, is "thirty ere and more sum dele." As a Christ-figure, he must shoulder a burden to the place of execution:

My sone, þis wode behoues 3e bere,
Till þou come high vpon yone hill
(X, 151-152).

(My son, it behooves you to bear this wood,
Until you come high upon that hill.)

Finally, fettered as a victim, Isaac utters words of forgiveness:

For-giffe me fadir, or I dye þis daye
(X, 257).

(Forgive me, father, before I die this day.)

The technique that created the grotesque in the Noah play recurs in play eleven, "The Departure of the Israelites from Egypt, the ten plagues, and the passage of the Red Sea." That is, the playwright sets up Moses as a Christ-figure. This equation of Moses with Christ aggravates the evil of Pharaoh, Moses' antagonist, making him not a fallible human sinner, but a type of the devil himself. Because he is a devil-figure, the Pharaoh can function as a comic character.

Like Christ then, Moses will triumph eventually over the wicked:

Lorde we have herde oure ffadres telle,
 Howe clerkis, þat ful wele couthe rede,
 Saide, a man shulde wax þam emell,
 That suld for-do vs and owre dede
 (XI, 63-66).

(Lord, we have heard our fathers tell,
 How clerks, who very well could read,
 Said, a man should grow among them,
 Who would ruin us and our deeds.)

To suggest a connection with Christ the Good Shepherd, the playwright introduces Moses tending "the bisshoppe Jetro schepe." Reinforcing this parallel, he dramatizes the incident of the burning bush, traditionally a figure for Mary's giving birth to Jesus while preserving her virginity.³ Finally, Moses' rescuing of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt prefigures Christ's escorting of the good from hell in play thirty-seven, "The Harrowing of Hell."

Conversely, the dramatist suggests a Pharaoh-Lucifer parallel. In his oaths the Pharaoh repeatedly invokes the devil:

Why, devill, what gawdes haue they begonne
 (XI, 37)?

Fy on þam! to þe devell of helle
 (XI, 67)!

What deuyll ayles you so to crye
 (XI, 291)?

³Jean Danielou, S. J., From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers, trans. by Dom Wulstan Hibberd (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1960), p. 224.

(Why, devil, what tricks have they begun?

Fie on them! to the devil of hell!

What the devil ails you so to cry?)

Pharaoh, moreover, utters an anachronism that suggests his allegiance with Satan. He exhorts his soldiers, pursuing the fleeing Israelites, to honor Mahomet:

Hefe vppe youre hartis ay to Mahownde,
He will be nere vs in oure nede

(XI, 401-402).

(Lift up your hearts ever to Mahomet,
He will be near us in our necessity.)

Pharaoh's initial speech characterizes him as one opposed to God's order. In this speech he arrogates to himself those prerogatives over life and death, rightly appertaining to God alone:

And takes gud heede to hym β at hasse
Youre liff all haly in his hande

(XI, 3-4).

(And take good heed to him who has
Your life entirely in his hand.)

The playwright also presents Deus as a foil character to the Pharaoh. Deus emphasizes the threat that Pharaoh's systematic genocide poses to His plan for the redemption of fallen man:

But Abraham and Ysaac,
And Jacob, saide I, suld be bliste,
And multyplye and β am to mak,
So β at β er seede shulde nocht be myste.
And nowe kyng Pharo,
Fuls β are childir ful faste
If I suffir hym soo,
 β are seede shulde sone be past

(XI, 113-120).

(But Abraham and Isaac,
 And Jacob, said I, should be blessed,
 And multiply and procreate,
 So that their seed should not be lost.
 And now king Pharaoh,
 Defiles their children very quickly
 If I allow him,
 Their seed would soon be passed.)

Finally, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh anticipates that between Christ and Satan in the Harrowing of Hell. Rosemary Woolf has detailed the linguistic parallels between these two plays:

Pharaoh's connection with Satan in the Harrowing of Hell is displayed . . . by a small nexus of vocabulary which is conspicuously used in both plays: lads, lurdans, boyes (as terms of contempt), gawdes (to refer to the supposed trickery of the good), and maistris (as a derogatory term for God's power). In the scene with Moses there are also larger stylistic resemblances. Pharaoh's dismissal of the claims of Moses, 'Nay, nay, þat daunce is done, / þat lordan leryd ouere late' and 'But þis boyes sall byde here in oure bayle, / For all þair gaudis sall nocht þam gayne,' have precisely the jeering tone that Satan was later to use in rejecting the idea that Christ would release the souls from hell; and the calm asseverations of power with which Christ then responded are similarly anticipated in the speeches of Moses to Pharaoh. ⁴

Having set up the Pharaoh as a devil figure, the playwright develops him as a comic character. What happens in this play is horrid. But because it happens to Pharaoh, comedy undercuts the horror. Analogously, the strife in hell in the first play, in which the lesser demons assault their fallen leader, is horrid, but also comic precisely because Lucifer suffers. Whenever a devil is dis-

⁴ English Mystery Plays, p. 154.

comfited, laughter makes up part of the audience's reaction. Thus as a sequence of messengers reports the incidence of the twelve plagues, the dramatist, by staging Pharaoh's reaction, creates the grotesque:

i Egip. We! lorde, new harme is comon to hande.

Rex. No! devill! will itt no bettir be?

i Egip. Wilde wormes is laide ouere al this lande,
 þai leve no frute ne floure on tree;
 Agayne þat storme may no thyng stande.

i Egip. Lord, ther is more myscheff thynke me,
 And thre daies hase itt bene durand,
 So myrke þat non myght othir see.

i Egip. My lorde, grete pestelence
 Is like ful lange to last.

Rex. Owe! come þat in oure presence?
 Than is oure pride al past

(XI, 337-348).

(i Egip. Oh! lord, new harm has come to hand.

Rex. No! devil! will it be no better?

i Egip. Wild worms are laid over all this land,
 They leave no fruit or flower on tree;
 Against that storm nothing can stand.

i Egip. Lord, it seems to me that there is more
 hardship,
 And it has been lasting for three days,
 So dark that no one could see another.

i Egip. My lord, great pestilence
 is likely to last very long.

Rex. Oh! Does that come in our presence?
 Then has our pride entirely passed.)

The messengers' reports of "wilde wormes," of "pestelence," induce terror in the audience. Fourteenth century man suffered a like devastation, the Black Death. And yet, to

regulate the terror, the audience can laugh at the Pharaoh, his devilish pride humbled. Laughter undercuts the terror, making the grotesque. The Pharaoh's last line produces the same effect:

Owte! ay herrowe! devill, I drowne
(XI, 403)!

(Out! help! devil, I drown!)

This line echoes Lucifer's as he plunged down to hell in the first play:

Owe! dewes! all goes downe
(I, 92).

(Oh! deuce! all goes down.)

The staging of the Pharaoh's drowning produces terror. Violent death in the state of sin is a possibility that confronts every member of the audience. Like Pharaoh, they too may die in enmity to God. But the mere fact that the Pharaoh, a type of the devil, drowns permits the audience to distance the terror it feels by laughing at him. The playwright thus uses the grotesque to reflect the nature of sin in this play. The drowning of the Pharaoh provokes both terror and laughter.

CHAPTER VII

THE GROTESQUE IN THE NATIVITY SEQUENCE (XII-XIX)

After staging Moses' rescue of the Israelites, the playwright dramatizes Mary's visit to Elizabeth. This gap in the representation of salvation history reveals the York playwright's sense of dramatic structure. He selected only those Old Testament events that he could use for the purpose of motivating or foreshadowing the coming of Christ.

Like the other extant mystery cycles, Wakefield, Chester, the Ludus Coventriae, the York plays center upon the redemption of the entire human race. Herein, the mystery cycles as a dramatic type formally differ from the morality plays. The morality play does not dramatize the steps whereby Jesus redeemed the human race. It focuses, instead, upon the individual, viewed as an everyman figure, journeying toward salvation. The structure of the morality play reworks one basic pattern: the individual falls from innocence into sin; through repentance, he reattains the state of grace. The mystery cycles, on the other hand, stage how Jesus atoned for Adam's sin, how He reconciled man and God.

Working within this dramatic tradition, the York playwright subordinates everything to the great sacrifice whereby Jesus made satisfaction for man's sin. Eleven plays, almost one fourth of the cycle, detail His sufferings, comprising the dramatic center of the whole. Everything either leads up to or away from the crucifixion, the central event of Christianity. The playwright, therefore, selected only those Old Testament events that he could structure as dramatic preparation for the Passion. There had to be plays of the fall, of course, to motivate Jesus' death on the cross. The playwright, consequently, staged the fall of Lucifer in the very first play. Upon it, he modelled the later falls of Adam and of Cayme. Those plays showed how the evil embodied in Lucifer came to infect mankind. Once evil had corrupted man's nature, the contagion spread from generation to generation. Having motivated the Passion of Jesus, the playwright foreshadowed His coming. That is, he presented the patriarchs as types of Christ, the perfect servant of God. The sensus allegoricus, the figurative interpretation of the Scriptures, provided the exegetical basis for this technique of dramatic foreshadowing.¹ Noah, for instance, saves his family through his ark; Jesus will save His spiritual family through His

¹The preacher of the Middle Ages resorted to the four senses of the Scriptures as a means of dilatatio, of expanding the skeletal design of a homily. The four senses are the following: sensus historicus or literalis, the lit-

church. Isaac subordinates his own will to die at Abraham's command; Jesus, obedient even unto death, will endure the pain of Calvary at His father's behest. Moses frees the enslaved Israelites from their tormentor Pharaoh; Jesus will liberate the faithful in hell from their tormentor Lucifer. Having sufficiently motivated Jesus' Passion and dramatically foreshadowed it, the playwright had exploited the Old Testament for its dramatic relevance. It was time to build toward the Passion, time to stage the coming of Jesus.

These plays that center about the birth of Jesus rework those patterns introduced in the plays of the fall and in the Patriarchal Sequence. King Herod, for instance, allies himself with the reprobate, with such prototypes as Lucifer, Adam, and Cayme, those who rebel against the order that God sustains. Mary functions as the exemplar of God's faithful servant. She allies herself with such characters as Abell, Noah, Isaac, and Moses. In this sequence, only Joseph develops as a character. Although he begins as one of the reprobate, his stature grows until he emerges as a true servant of God. In that the sinners are so few, the use

eral meaning of the Scriptural text; sensus tropologicus, the moral application of the text; sensus allegoricus, the figurative interpretation of the text; sensus anagogicus, the mystical interpretation of the text. For example, literally, "Jerusalem" is the earthly city itself; tropologically, the faithful who seek peace; allegorically, the church of Jesus Christ; anagogically, the blessed in heaven enjoying the vision of peace. Harry Caplan, "The Four Senses of Scriptural Interpretation and the Medieval Theory of Preaching," Speculum, IV (July, 1929), 282-283.

of the grotesque is consequently limited in this sequence. It does occur, however, in the first play involving Joseph and in the Herod plays.

In play twelve, the York dramatist modifies the Ordo Prophetarum. Developed within the Christmas liturgy, the Ordo Prophetarum paraded a series of prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, to witness that Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies.² Dispensing with this parade of prophets, the York playwright gives these prophecies to a single prologue. This play accomplishes two purposes: first, it emphasizes that the preceding plays prepare for the advent of Jesus; secondly, it presents Mary as the exemplar of God's servant. Commenting on the action of the play, Elizabeth points out that perfect conformity between God's will and Mary's:

þou trowed and helde þe payed
 Atte his wille for to bee
 (XII, 227-228).

(You believed and held yourself satisfied
 To be at his will.)

Elizabeth's characterization of Mary confirms the devilish nature of Joseph's calumnation of her in the

²For a list of the prophets who appeared in the Ordo Prophetarum see J. Q. Adams, Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas: A Selection of Plays Illustrating the History of the English Drama from its Origin Down to Shakespeare (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), p. 41.

next play. That is, Joseph vilifies not just a guiltless woman, but God Himself whose perfect servant Mary is. This technique is similar to that used in the Noah play. By beating her husband, Noah's wife became a type of the devil because Noah functioned as a representative of God. Similarly, by abusing the innocent Mary, God's perfect servant, Joseph becomes the devil-figure.

The terror in play thirteen "Joseph's trouble about Mary," derives from Joseph's jealous fury that his discovery of Mary's pregnancy detonates. This wild jealousy threatens the audience empathic to the cruelly slandered Mary. The audience does not know if this fit of jealousy will lead to physical violence, perhaps to murder. In spite of its conversance with the Biblical source, the audience, swept into this theatrical moment in which a man brands his wife an adulteress, cannot foretell the upshot of Joseph's rage. Othello-like, he fulminates against Mary and her two servants:

Jos. Thy wombe is waxen grete, thynke me,
 Thou arte with barne, allas! for care!
 Al maidens, wa worthe thou!
 At lete hir lere swilke lare.

ii Puella. Joseph, ge sall nojt trowe,
 In hir no febill fare.

Jos. Trowe it nojt arme! lefe wenche, do way!
 Hir sidis shewes she is with childe.
 Whose is't Marie

(XIII, 95-103)?

(Jos. Your womb has grown large, it seems to me,
 You are with child, alas! for grief!
 Oh! maidens, may woe become you!
 Who let her learn such lore.

ii Puella. Joseph, you shall not believe,
 Concerning her any base action.

Jos. Believe it is not harm! stop, wench, have done!
 Her sides show that she is with child.
 Whose is it, Mary?)

Still the playwright regulates the degree of terror accruing from Joseph's rage. In spite of the terror he arouses, Joseph, like Cayme before him, becomes an object of derision. To find Joseph laughable, however, the audience has to see him as a type of the devil, as sin itself rather than as a sinner. Seeing him as a mere sinner insulates him from derision. Now, in this time of trembling, the Christian cannot laugh at other sinners. The questionable character of his own salvation precludes laughter at a fellow sinner.

The playwright, therefore, must gear his audience to regard Joseph as a type of the devil. The last play has dramatized that Mary is the exemplar of the servant of God. In that play, Elizabeth explicitly characterized her as such. Any antagonist of Mary's, therefore, defines himself as an enemy of God's, as one of the reprobate, as a devil-figure. The playwright, in addition, takes pains to confirm this definition. Repeatedly, he underscores the evil in Joseph. Before denigrating Mary as an adulteress, for example,

Joseph discloses his awareness of the prophecy that a virgin would conceive the Messiah:

But wele I wate thurgh prophicie,
A maiden clene suld bere a childe,
But it is nought sho, sekirly
(XIII, 61-63),

(But I know well through prophecy,
A pure maiden should bear a child,
But it surely is not she,)

This awareness makes him culpable for the slander of Mary. The alternative of her innocence is open to him. His own lack of spiritual insight makes him hastily discount it. The audience's first glimpse of Mary sets her up as one of supernal holiness. In tableau, she intercedes with heaven on behalf of sinful men:

Sho sittis at hir boke full faste prayand
For you and us, and for all þa
þat oght has nede
(XIII, 81-83).

(She sits at her book very devoutly praying
For you and for me, and for all those
Who have any need.)

Joseph's insensitivity to this dramatic signal betrays his Satanic perspective. He is blind to all manifestations of holiness. Lastly, Joseph emphatically rejects the truth vouched for by Mary's servants; namely, that the Holy Ghost has impregnated her:

Wharfore we ne wate how it shulde be,
But thurgh þe haly gaste allone.
For trewly we trowe þis,
Is grace with hir is gone,

For sho wroght neuere no mys,
we wittenesse euere ilkane.

Jos. þanne se I wele youre menyng is,
þe Aungell has made hir with childe.
Nay, som man in aungellis liknesse
With somkyn gawde has hir begiled;
And þat trow I
(XIII, 128-138).

(That is why we do not know how it should be,
Except through the Holy Ghost alone.
For truly we believe this,
His grace has gone with her,
For she never wrought any evil,
Each one of us witnesses ever.

Jos. Then I see well what your meaning is,
The angel has made her pregnant.
No, some man disguised as an angel
With some trick has deceived her;
And that I believe.)

Joseph's slander of Mary, then, has wider ramifications. It is tantamount to a denial of God's power to intervene in the doings of men.

Having established Joseph as a type of the devil, the playwright develops him as a comic character. The basis for the comedy is the incongruity that a man as old as Joseph should be married to a girl as young as Mary, the Januarie-May situation that Chaucer exploited in The Merchant's Tale:

That þus-gates nowe on myne alde dase
Has wedded a yonge wenche to my wiff,
And may noȝt wele tryne over two strase
(XIII, 11-13)!

(Who thus now in my old days
Have wedded a young woman as my wife,
And I myself can not well walk over two straws!)

Joseph's awareness of his own impotence adds to his frustration and, therefore, to his development as a figure of derision. Mary's pregnancy painfully underscores his own sexual inadequacy. The strength of his fulminations against his wife belies his true virility as a man:

þou art yonge and I am alde,
 Slike werkis yf I do walde,
 þase games fra me are gane
 (XIII, 195-197).

(You are young and I am old,
 Even if I wished to do such works,
 This amorous dalliance from me has gone.)

Finally, after berating Mary, the crotchety Joseph, having failed to determine the identity of the man who supposedly has cuckolded him, searches in the wilderness for a resting place. But an angel comically frustrates him by aborting that longed-for rest:

Ang. Rise vppe! and slepe na mare,
 þou makist her herte full sare.
 þat loues þe alther best.

Jos. We! now es þis a farly fare,
 For to be cached bathe here and þare,
 And nowhere may haue rest
 (XIII, 251-256).

(Ang. Rise up! and sleep no more,
 You make her heart very sore,
 Who loves you best of all.

Jos. Oh! now is this a wondrous proceeding,
 To be caught both here and there,
 And nowhere can have rest.)

Joseph's frustration echoes that of Cayme. After killing his brother, Cayme had to face first Brewbarret and then the angel as antagonists. Joseph has to take on the angel

who cuts short his nap. Play thirteen thus uses the grotesque. That it, it educes the comedy inherent in the devil-figure Joseph. This comedy, in turn, is pitted against the terror that Joseph's fit of jealousy arouses. The audience not only recoils from the terror that this passion-driven man inspires. It also distances him with laughter. The defensive mechanism of laughter checks the withdrawal response of fear.

In the subsequent plays featuring Joseph, the playwright signals the change in his character. Discarding the role of Mary's antagonist, of surrogate devil, Joseph becomes his wife's support. In play fourteen, "The Journey to Bethlehem; the birth of Jesus," for instance, that Joseph who had petulantly whined about his own decrepitude, his incapacity to "tryne over two strase," forgets self to pray for suffering people. His words are resonant with the compassion of Lear:

Al lorde, what the wedir is colde!
 Ae fellest freese þat euere I felyd,
 I pray God helpe þam þat is alde,
 And namely þam þat is vnwelde,
 so may I saie

(XIV, 71-75).

(Oh! Lord, how cold the weather is!
 The sharpest cold that I ever felt,
 I pray God to help them who are old,
 And especially them who are infirm,
 so may I say.)

Play eighteen also dramatizes this turnabout in Joseph. In his initial prayer, he characterizes himself as God's servant:

For all þis worlde I haue for-saken,
 And to thy seruice I haue me taken.
 With witte and will,
 For to fulfill
 þi commaundement
 (XVIII, 5-9).

(For I have forsaken all this world,
 And have taken myself to your service.
 With mind and will,
 In order to fulfill
 Your commandment.)

He who had excoriated his wife is now her bastion. Hysterical because of Herod's intent to kill Jesus, Mary relies upon the comforting strength of her husband:

Jos. I pray þe Marie, happe hym warme,
 And sette hym softe þat he noght syle,
 And yf þou will ought ese thyn arme,
 Gyff me hym, late me bere hym awhile.

Mar. I thanke you of youre grete goode dede
 (XVIII, 195-199),

(Jos. I pray you, Mary, dress him warmly,
 And set him softly so that he does not drop,
 And if you wish to ease your arm in any way,
 Give him to me, let me carry him a while.

Mar. I thank you for you great good deed.)

The characterization of Joseph in the Nativity Sequence thus confirms a fundamental point about the incidence of the grotesque in the York cycle. When the dramatist depicted Joseph as a devil-figure, he induced terror and laughter, that emotional welter marking the grotesque. When the dramatist characterized him as Mary's protector, however, he obviously could not arouse these emotions. That traditional use of the grotesque as an image for sin determines when this technique occurs in

the York cycle.

The plays involving King Herod, therefore, should feature the grotesque. Patterning him immediately upon Pharaoh and ultimately upon Lucifer, the playwright uses Herod as his surrogate devil. Herod, thereby, acquires a comic potential. His first monologue to the audience, for instance, displays arrogance too extravagant to be human, indeed, Lucifer-like in its pretentiousness:

þe prince of planetis þat proudely is pight
 Sall brace furth his bemes at oure belde blithes,
 The mone at my myght he mosteres his myght
 (XVI, 13-14);

(The prince of planets that proudly is set,
 The one that enjoys our support shall press forth
 his beams,
 The moon shows his power through my might;)

Denying his creatural status in God's ordered whole, Herod thus vaunts that the sun and the moon stoop to his bidding. That pride in physical beauty flagrant in Lucifer also infects Herod:

For I am fairer of face and fressher on folde
 (þe soth yf I saie sall) seuene and sexti sithis,
 þan gloriūs gullēs þat gayer [is] þan golde
 in price
 (XVI, 17-20);

(For I am fairer of face and fresher on the field,
 If I shall say the truth, seven and sixty times,
 Than beautiful gulls that are more splendid
 Than gold in value;)

These lines echo Lucifer's before his fall:

And I so semely in syghte my selfe now I se,
 For lyke a lorde am I lefte to lende in þis lighte,
 More fayrear be far þan my feres
 (I, 51-53).

(And now I see myself so semely in appearance,
For I am left to remain in this light like a lord,
Fairer by far than my companions,)

Rosemary Woolf points out the thematic function of Herod's
vaunting about his own beauty:

Perhaps no specific signal was necessary to make clear to the audience that Herod in his claims to be like God was an express image of the devil, but, if one were needed, his praise of his own beauty would certainly provide it. The dramatists have thus resumed the theme of the Fall of the Angels by making Herod repeat the sin of Satan, and the ambition to be as God is shown in its full emptiness and folly.³

Other signals to the audience, indicating that Herod is a type of the devil, are his frequent use of the devil's name in swearing and his affirmation that Mahomet is his god. Herod, for example, silences his messenger in this way:

Pees! dastard, in þe develes dispite
(XVII, 74).

(Silence, good-for-nothing, in the devil's spite.)

Similarly, in questioning the kings, he invokes Lucifer:

(Rex. Lorde, we aske noght but leue,
Be youre poure to passe.

Herod. Whedir? in þe deuyls name
(XVII, 131-133).

(King. Lord, we ask nothing but permission,
By your power to pass.

Herod. Where? in the devil's name.)

His reply to the first king's greeting brands him as one of the damned. Like the Pharaoh, he adores Mahomet as his god:

³English Mystery Plays, p. 204.

1 Rex. A! lorde, þat lenys þis lastand light,
 Whilke has vs ledde oute of oure lande,
 Kepe þe, sir kyng, and comly knyght,
 And all þi folke þat we here fande.

Herod. Mahounde, my god and most of myght,
 þat has myn hele all in his hande,
 He saffe you sirs

(XVII, 97-103)!

(1st king. May the Lord, Who grants this lasting light,
 Which has led us out from our land,
 Keep you, sir king, and comely knight,
 And all your people whom we find here.

Herod. May Mahomet, my god and most of might,
 Who has my health entirely in his hand,
 Save you, sirs!)

This devil-figure Herod triggers terror in play
 nineteen, "The Massacre of the Innocents." Discovering that
 the kings have evaded him, he vents his rage upon his mes-
 senger. A prey to wild extremes of emotion, this man Herod
 is threatening. Forces of annihilation, let loose from
 hell, have enhoused themselves in his person:

Thou lyes! false traytoure strange,
 Loke neuere þou negh me nere.
 Vppon liffe and lyme
 May I þat faitour fange,
 Full high I schall gar hym hange

(XIX, 125-129),

(You lie! false, strange traitor,
 See that you never approach me nearer.
 Upon life and limb
 If I can catch that pretender,
 I shall make him hang so high,)

As the brutal murder of the innocent babes is
 staged, these forces overwhelm the play:

Allas! þis lothly striffe!
 No blisse may be my bette,
 þe knyght vppon his knyffe

Hath slayne my sone so swette;
 And I hadde but hym allone
 (XIX, 210-214).

(Alas! this hateful strife!
 No joy can be my remedy,
 The knight upon his lance
 Has slain my son so sweet;
 And I had only him.)

This lament, "And I hadde but hym allone," echoes Mary's in the previous play as she recoils from the dreadful contingency of Jesus' death:

I ware full wille of wane
 My son and he shulde dye,
 And I haue but hym allone
 (XVIII, 144-146).

(I would be very wild of thought
 If my son should die,
 And I have only him.)

This literary echo aggravates the horror in this scene. By it, the playwright suggests that the soldiers are killing not just any children, but figures of Christ. The disconsolate mothers dramatically foreshadow Mary grieving at the foot of the cross. Significantly, the expression "þe knyght vppon his knyffe/ Hath slayne my sone so swette" describes what will happen at the crucifixion. The blind centurion Longinus will cut open Jesus' side.

But the derision levelled at the executioners and, by extension, at Herod himself checks the horror that this scene arouses. Their pusillanimity, dramatized in their backing away from weaponless women, comically undercuts them as figures of horror. Even while they are viciously butchering the little children, these quaking soldiers are them-

selves the butt of laughter:

As armes! for nowe is nede,
 But yf we do yone dede,
 Ther quenys will quelle us here
 (XIX, 207-209).

(To arms! for now they are necessary,
 But if we do this deed,
 These sluts will kill us here.)

The laughter that these terror-stricken soldiers trigger is like that aroused by the miles gloriosus, the soldier whose deeds fall far short of his unbridled boasting.

The dramatic irony that underlies this scene also controls the horror. The audience knows that Joseph has spirited Jesus beyond the reach of these soldiers. No matter how horrendous the violence they perpetrate, it is ultimately ineffectual. One of the grieving mothers comments upon this fact:

And certis, þer nott is nocht,
 The same þ at þei haue soughte,
 Schall þei neuere come till
 (XIX, 231-233).

(And certainly, their business is worthless,
 They shall never come to
 That one whom they have sought.)

For his final scene, the playwright spotlights Herod's reaction to the soldiers' report of their failure to kill Jesus. The discomfiture of Herod, the vexation of this devil-figure, releases laughter. Just as it mocked Lucifer, pummeled by tortured demons in the first play, the audience laughs at the frustrated devil-figure in this play:

Ye lye, 3oure note is nought!
 Be deueles of helle ou droune!
 So may that boy be fledde,
 For in waste haue 3e wroght
 Or that same ladde be sought
 Schalle I neure byde in bedde

(XIX, 268-273).

(You lie, your business is worthless!
 May the devils of hell drown you!
 Thus that boy may have fled,
 For you have worked in vain.
 Until that same lad is sought and found,
 I shall never stay in bed.)

What have his machinations gained but sleepless nights for himself? By setting himself against God, Herod precipitates his own ruin. The laughter directed at this devil militates against the terror that he and his soldiers arouse. Laughter pitted against terror, the fundamental conflict that the grotesque sets up, informs the Herod plays of the Nativity Sequence.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GROTESQUE IN THE PLAYS OF JESUS' MINISTRY (XX-XXV)

Plays twenty to twenty-five, extending from "Christ with the Doctors in the Temple" to "The Entry into Jerusalem upon the Ass" dramatize the public ministry of Jesus. Preluding the Passion, they highlight Jesus' credentials as the saviour of the world. Among the doctors, those expositors of the Old Law, for example, Jesus perfects the Mosaic code. In play twenty-one, He proclaims Himself as the exemplar for man:

And sithen my selffe haue taken mankynde
For men schall me þer myrroure make,
I haue my doying in ther mynde,
And also I do þe baptyme take
(XXI. 92-95).

(And because I have taken man's nature
So that men will make Me their mirror,
What I do is for their remembrance,
And I also will be baptized.)

As the mirror for man, in the next play Jesus shows how to side-step the cajolery of the devil. In play twenty-three, "The Transfiguration," Moses, Elias, and finally God Himself witness the divinity of Jesus. That divinity, in the next play, remits the sin of adultery and restores the dead Lazarus to life. The last play of this sequence features

Jesus as the physical healer, a metaphor for his role as spiritual physician. It also shifts the action into Jerusalem, the setting for the Passion.

In three plays, "The Temptation of Jesus," "The Woman Taken in Adultery; the Raising of Lazarus," and "The Entry into Jerusalem upon the Ass," the playwright makes use of the grotesque. That is, he constructs a comic scene to regulate the terror that the play arouses. Although "Christ with the Doctors in the Temple" has elements of terror and comedy, it does not pit one against the other to precipitate the grotesque. An inspection of this play, however, will sharpen one's understanding of those conditions requisite for its occurrence in the York cycle.

The first scene of the play produces terror. The audience identifies with the stricken Mary, whose sorrow is the universal situation that the play puts forth. It, consequently, shares her dread over the loss of Jesus:

Of sorowes sere schal be my sang,
 My semely sone tille I hym see,
 He is but xij 3 ere alde.
 What way som euere he wendis

(XXI, 43-46).

(My song shall be of many sorrows,
 Until I see my semely son,
 He is only twelve years old,
 Whatever way he goes.)

By echoing the motif of "Massacre of the Innocents," that of inconsolable grief over the loss of a child, the playwright siphons some of its terror into this play. The fear that Jesus is lost forever engulfs both Mary and the audience

empathic to her.

The playwright, however, does not allow the structure of the play to intensify the terror. Indeed, the very next scene, showing Jesus tutoring the learned men of the Jewish law, completely dissipates the terror. Jesus is alive, having forsaken the protection of family to inaugurate His ministry. Because the plot itself has totally dispelled the terror, laughter need not function to control it. Consequently, that usual technique for comic characterization, the patterning of character upon the archetype of Lucifer, is absent. No surrogate devil triggering laughter appears. The closest approximation to a devil-figure is the third doctor, discomfited by Jesus' natural learning:

3a! late hym wende fourth on his wayes;
 For and he dwelle, withouten drede,
 The pepull schall full sone hum prayse
 Wele more þan vs for all oure dede
 (XX, 197-200).

(Ya! let him go forth on his way;
 For if he tarry, doubtless,
 The people shall immediately praise him
 Much more than us for all our accomplishments.)

The vexation of this pompous man, ruffled by a mere boy of twelve years, is comic. It recalls the disarray of the executioners scampering from the fists of the lamenting mothers in the last play. In both instances, the reversal of one's expectations of the probable stimulates the laughter. That is, one expects the soldiers to terrify the women, the learned doctor to overwhelm a boy of twelve. The overthrow of these expectations sets up a topsy-turvy condition, funda-

mentally comic. This technique suggests the inversion of roles found in le monde bestorne:

This satire consists in reversing the position of man with regard to the animals over which he had been accustomed to tyrannise, so that he was subjected to the same treatment from the animals which, in his actual position, he uses toward them. This change of relative position was called in old French and Anglo-Norman, le monde bestorne, which was equivalent to the English phrase, 'the world turned upside down. . . . The tiles found on the site of the priory at Derby are believed to be of the thirteenth century, and one pattern . . . presents a subject taken from the monde bestorne. The hare, master of his old enemy, the dog, has become hunter himself, and seated upon the dog's back he rides vigorously to the chase, blowing his horn as he goes. 1

"The world turned upside down" leads to the question of the relationship between inversion and the grotesque. By definition, inversion, like the grotesque, involves distortion, a deviation from a norm. Women rout armed warriors; a boy tutors a graybeard; a rabbit mounts a dog. If the distortion that it sets up is not controlled, inversion approaches the grotesque. In other words, the distortion can reach that middle ground, that amorphous realm, neither purely comic, nor purely terrible, but both. Consider the overwrought mothers lambasting the butchers of their children. This inversion that sets up the mothers as the aggressors, the soldiers as their victims, yields only laughter. Because this distortion has limits, it does not tend toward the terrible. The grieving mothers, after all,

¹Wright, History of Caricature and Grotesque, pp. 88-90.

do not mutilate the soldiers. They merely pummel them, thereby pointing up their laughable cowardice. Evil forces have not caused this inversion. Consequently, it does not threaten. Because the distortion is controlled, this inversion releases only laughter, letting the audience discharge some of the terror that the brutal slaughtering of little children has pent up. This interplay between laughter and terror, the tension between a controlled and a monstrous distortion, is the grotesque.

The boundary, the limitation, placed upon the distortion, determines whether the inversion produces only laughter or laughter upon which fright impinges. Once the audience feels that the distortion is without bounds, terror will arise. The realization that evil, that which disturbs order, has destroyed the harmony in the real world will generate this feeling. But there is nothing threatening about the boy Jesus lecturing an old man on the salient points of God's law. Similarly, how can a rabbit mounted on a dog's back threaten anyone? An artist's imaginative rearrangement of the real world has produced this inversion. It in no way, however, suggests the incursion of destructive forces. The terror that the grotesque produces is caused by the sense that annihilative forces have been set free. These forces transform the usually ordered world into something strange and alarming.

In play twenty, Joseph also becomes laughable. After three days filled with agonized searching for his son, at last he spots Jesus teaching the doctors. But his childish awe of them utterly immobilizes him. Too timid to go near them, he pushes Mary into the temple to retrieve their son:

Gange on, Marie, and telle thy tale firste,
 Thy sone to þe will take goode heede;
 Wende fourth, Marie, and do thy beste,
 I come be-hynde, als God me spede
 (XX, 245-248).

(Go on, Mary, and tell your tale first,
 Your son will take good heed to you;
 Go forth, Mary, and do your best,
 I will come behind, as God may prosper me.)

The timid Joseph deviates from the norm of manly courage. In displaying such womanish diffidence, he becomes laughable. That his diffidence comes from frailty, however, marks off the laughter he occasions from that which the grotesque precipitates. The latter mocks vice, not human weakness. It always derides the devil or his surrogate, embodiments of evil itself. In "Joseph's Troubles About Mary," Joseph functioned as a type of the devil. The laughter he thereby released combatted the extreme terror he first aroused. In this play, however, he generates no terror. His frailty is bounded, hence comic. From the standpoint of the havoc that it wreaks upon man's nature, vice, however, is unbounded, hence terrifying. The grotesque fixes not upon frailty, but upon vice, out of which it educes a comic potential.

If the diffidence of Joseph is not threatening, the malice of Diabolus in "The Temptation of Jesus" certainly is. Anticipating Richard of Gloucester, Diabolus displays his real nature in his opening soliloquy. Ever since the fall, he has successfully frustrated the redemption of man:

For sithen the first tyme þat I fell
 For my pride fro heuen to hell,
 Euere haue I mustered me emell
 emonge manne-kynde,
 How I in dole myght gar tham dwell
 þer to be pynde.
 And certis, all þat hath ben sithen borne,
 Has comen to me, mydday and morne,
 And I haue ordayned so þam forne,
 none may þame fende;
 þat fro all likyng ar they lorne
 withowten ende
 (XXII, 7-18).

(For since the first time when I fell
 From heaven to hell on account of my pride,
 I have always showed myself
 Among mankind,
 How I could cause them to dwell in grief,
 There to be tortured.
 And certainly, all who have been born,
 Have come to me all the time,
 And I have ordained before them,
 That none may defend them;
 So that they are bereft of all pleasure
 Without end.)

For this play to succeed, Diabolus must evoke terror in the audience. The threat he mounts against Jesus must be felt as formidable; the outcome of their conflict, problematical. This soliloquy raises the stature of Diabolus so that he becomes a worthy antagonist to Jesus. He has never failed to corrupt men. This past success makes the audience wonder whether he will also ruin Jesus. The danger facing Jesus

a dramatist can evoke certain emotions by the way he structures a scene. The retelling of the Oedipus legend by his contemporaries did not prevent Sophocles from shaping his material to induce the emotions he wished to arouse. Similarly, in this play, that protracted soliloquy by Diabolus builds in the audience terror for Jesus.

The comedy in this play recalls that technique previously exhibited in the characterization of Lucifer, Cayme, Pharaoh, and Herod. The devil-figure, purposing to subvert the order that God sustains, merely precipitates his own downfall. The villain falls victim to his own machinations. Diabolus' intent to violate God's order informs his presumption that he is the sovereign over Jesus:

þan may þou se sen itt is soo
 þat I am souerayne of vs two,
 And 3itt I graunte þe or I goo,
 withouten fayle,
 þat, if þou woll assent me too,
 it schall avayle
 (XXII, 139-144).

(Since it is so, then can you see
 That I am the sovereign of us two,
 And still I grant you before I go,
 without fail,
 That, if you will assent to me,
 it shall profit you.)

The failure of his stratagems to lure Jesus into sin redounds upon Diabolus to aggravate his suffering. This intensified suffering, the outcome of the plot itself, renders Diabolus comic. Like Saint Brice, mocking the

3e nedis non othir bokes to bring,
 But fandis þis for to fulfill.
 The secounde may men preve
 And clerly knawe, wher by
 Youre neighbours shall 3e loue
 Als youre selffe, sekirly
 (XX, 151-156).

(You need bring no other books,
 But try to fulfill this one.
 Men can establish and clearly
 Know the second, by which
 You shall love your neighbors
 As your self, surely.)

Even though the woman's sin is vile, Jesus emphasizes that
 the evil of her accusers eclipses it:

I schall 3ou saie encheson why,
 I wote it is my ffadirs will,
 And for to make þam ware þer-by,
 To knawe þam-selffe haue done more ill
 (XXIV, 79-82).

(I shall tell you the reason,
 I know it is My father's will,
 And in order to make them aware
 That they themselves have done more evil.)

Repelled by the malice of these accusers and, therefore,
 siding with the defendant, whose silence foreshadows that
 of Jesus in the coming Passion Sequence, the audience fears
 for her safety. Will these ice-hearted litigants invoke
 the full force of the law upon this defenceless woman?

3a! Sir, 3e saie wele þore,
 By lawe and rightwise rede,
 Ther falles nocht ellis þerfore,
 But to be stoned to dede
 (XXIV, 45-48).

(Yes! you make a good point there, sir,
 By law and righteous counsel,
 Nothing else can happen,
 But that she be stoned to death.)

The intensity of fear that these men inspire determines the degree of laughter that their discomfiture triggers. Like that of Diabolus in the play of The Temptation, this discomfiture is based upon the pattern of the villain receiving his condign punishment. Attempting to channel the full force of the law upon the adulteress, they bring about Jesus' disclosure of their own concealed evil:

111 Jud. He shewes my mysdedis more and myne,
I leue 3ou here, late hym allone.

1v. Jud. Owe! here will new gaudes begynne;
3 a, grete all wele, saie β at I am gone.

1 Jud. And sen 3e are nocht bolde,
No lengar bide will I.

11 Jud. Pees! late no tales be tolde,
But passe fourth preuylie
(XXIV, 55-62).

(3rd Jew. He showes my misdeeds both more and less,
I will leave you here; let Him alone.

4th Jew. Oh! new tricks will begin here;
Yes, greet all well, say that I have gone.

1st Jew. And since you are not bold,
I will no longer abide.

2nd Jew. Quiet! let no tales be told,
But pass forth secretly.)

The self-righteous judges become the guilty defendants:

See how yond Justice rails upon yond simple thief,
Hark, in thine ear. Change places and, handy-dandy,
which is the Justice, which is the thief? 2

Previously threatened by the forces of destruction about to

²King Lear IV. vi. 156-158.

ruin the hapless adulteress, the audience now mocks her accusers. The development of the plot has comically undercut them.

This clash between laughter and terror informs the structure of "The Entry into Jerusalem upon the Ass." By dramatically foreshadowing His capture, Jesus' initial words evoke terror. Empathic to Him, the audience assumes His dread over His inevitable torture and death:

To me takis tent and giffis gud hede,
 My dere discipulis þat ben here,
 I schalle 3ou telle þat shalbe in dede,
 My tyme to passe hense, it drawith nere,
 And by þis skill,
 Mannys sowle to saue fro sorowes sere,
 þat loste was ill

(XXV, 1-7).

(Pay attention and take heed to Me,
 My dear disciples who are here,
 I shall tell you what shall happen,
 My time to pass from here draws near,
 And for this reason,
 In order to save man's soul from many sorrows,
 That was ill lost.)

Unlike "Christ with the Doctors in the Temple," the structure of this play does not cancel the terror. Even while it sees Peter and Philip fetching the ass, Jesus curing the physically-ill, the blind Cecus, the lame Claudus, and then the spiritually-diseased Zache, the audience cannot dispel the terror that Jesus' words have induced. Each event is taking Him closer and closer to death. Finally, catching sight of Jerusalem, Jesus again adverts to His ensuing torments. He thereby intensifies the terror instilled in the audience:

My dere discipulis, beholde and see,
 Vn-to Jerusalem we schall assende,
 Man sone schall þer be-trayed be,
 And gevyn in-to his enmys hande,
 With grete dispitte.
 Ther spitting on hym þer schall þei spende
 And smertly smyte
 (XXV, 462-468).

(My dear disciples, behold and see,
 There is Jerusalem where we shall ascend,
 The son of man shall be betrayed there,
 And given into His enemies' hands,
 With great anger.
 They shall spit on Him,
 And painfully smite Him.)

Terror-stricken at the anticipation of Jesus' pain,
 the audience watches a farcical scene. To fulfill the
 prophecy, Jesus must ride toward Jerusalem upon an ass.
 Consequently, he orders Peter and Philip to procure one.
 Carrying out Jesus' order, they appropriate one, much to
 the chagrin of the Janitor, who irately assails them:

Saie, what are 3e þat makis here maistrie,
 To loose þes bestis with-oute leverie?
 Yow semes to bolde, sen noght þat 3e
 Hase here to do, þerfore rede I
 such þingis to sesse,
 Or ellis 3e may falle in folye
 and grette diseasse
 (XXV, 64-70).

(Say, what are you who play the masters here,
 To unloosen these beasts without wearing any livery?
 You seem very bold, since you have
 Nothing here to do, therefore I advise
 That you stop these doings,
 Otherwise you may fall into folly
 And great harm.)

This brief tug of war for control of the ass recalls those
 domestic battles for the breeches carved on misericords.
 Like Noah's wife, the Janitor impedes the execution of God's

command. By that action, he defines himself as a type of the devil. Consequently, laughter is meted out to him. His double take upon seeing the apostles insouciantly untying the animals, his tugging upon them to retain ownership of them make him a comic figure. The laughter that he evokes enables the audience to release some of the terror that its anxiety over Jesus has built up.

Play twenty-five thus features that tonal disharmony that marks the grotesque. Jesus' apprehensions about the horrid death awaiting Him instill terror in the audience. Terrible, devastating forces are priming themselves to destroy Him. But the playwright uses the ass, the very means that will convey Jesus into the city of His enemies, to occasion a farcical scene. The tug of war for the ass triggers laughter that controls the terror aroused by the play. At the very moment when its terror for Jesus has grown acute, the audience laughs at the Janitor squabbling with Peter and Philip.

In dramatizing Jesus' ministry then, the playwright drew upon the technique of the grotesque. That is, he set laughter against terror. He characterized Diabolus, the merciless judges, and the Janitor comically. The laughter they touch off combats the terror coursing through these plays.

CHAPTER IX

THE GROTESQUE IN THE PASSION SEQUENCE (XXVI-XXXVI)

That a sensitivity to the function of the grotesque is needed if one is to appreciate the dramatic powers of the York playwright is no where more demonstrable than in the Passion Sequence. The staging of the protracted torturing of Jesus demanded the use of this technique. If the playwright had not constructed comic scenes to break the mounting terror, a surfeit of that emotion would have glutted the sensibilities of the audience. In addition to its aesthetic necessity, however, this undercutting of terror with laughter completed the two-fold perspective by which the Christian should regard sin. From the standpoint of the sinner, sin is terrifying, a vitiation of his nature. From the standpoint of the total order of creation, however, sin is laughable, a completely ineffectual rebellion against the order that God supports.

A controlling irony informs this sequence of plays. Apparently, the suffering of Jesus signals victory for those evil forces most inimical to human value. In reality, however, it frustrates the scheming of Lucifer. For the third time in this cycle, Lucifer's machinations boomerang. He failed to usurp the throne of God in play one; he failed to

cajole Jesus into sin in play twenty-two; and now he fails to prevent the death of Jesus. That death will ruin his kingdom, end his dominion over the human soul:

Owte! owte! harrowe! in-to bale am I brought,
 This bargayne may I banne,
 But yf y wirke some wile, in wo mon I wonne,
 This gentilman Jesu of cursednesse he can
 Be any syngne þat I see, þis same is goddis sonne.
 And he be slone, oure solace will sese,
 He will saue man saule fro'oure sonde,
 And refe vs þe remys þat are rounde
 (XXX, 159-165).

(Out! out! harrow! I am brought into sorrow,
 I may curse this enterprise,
 Unless I work some wile, I must dwell in woe,
 This gentleman Jesus knows much misfortune
 By any sign that I see, this one is God's son.
 If He is slain, our pleasure will cease,
 He will rescue man's soul from our message,
 And tear from us the kingdoms that are around.)

This admission injects dramatic irony into the entire Passion Sequence. The audience understands that those agents of Lucifer, Pilate, Caiphas, Annas, and their sadistic underlings actually promote the destruction of their master's kingdom. In spite of the terror that it lets loose, the structure of the Passion Sequence is comic.¹ That is, the Passion moves through adversity to joy. Henceforth, man will have an opportunity to work out his redemption. In addition to reflecting through its structure this medieval definition of comedy, the sequence also dramatizes Augustine's notion of the place of evil in God's universe.

¹For a discussion of the medieval notion of comedy, see John R. Elliott, "The Sacrifice of Isaac as Comedy and Tragedy," Studies in Philology, LXVI (January, 1969), 37-39.

The order of the whole subsumes the deformity of the individual part. God's total plan for man's redemption directs even the brutal sadists toward a good end.

The Conspiracy to Take Jesus. The grotesque is crucial to the dramatic technique shaping this play. That opening scene in Pilate's hall develops a conflict pitting Pilate against Caiphas and Annas. For a time, Pilate masquerades as Jesus' defender, immensely relishing the growing perturbation of his two antagonists. Finally, seeing in Jesus a threat to his own authority, Pilate discards that role of public defender to mobilize the awesome force that he wields:

11 doc. 3 a, sir, and also þat caytiff
He callis hym oure kyng,
And for þat cause our comons are casten in care.

Pil. And if so be, þat borde to bayll will hym bryng,
And make hym boldely to banne þe bones þat hym bare
(XXVI, 114-118).

(2nd doctor. Yes, sir, and also that wretch
Calls himself our king,
And because of that our people are cast in care.

Pilate. If it be so, that jest will bring Him to sorrow,
And cause Him to curse the bones that bore Him.)

Scene two aggravates this terror for Jesus' safety that Pilate has aroused. A well-motivated character, Judas confesses in soliloquy the rapacity that drives him to destroy Jesus. Because Jesus once deprived him of thirty silver pieces, Judas' take if the oil lavished by Magdalene had been sold, Judas will now sell his master:

But nowe for me wantis of my will,
 þat bargayne with bale schall he by
 (XXVI, 139-140).

(But now because I lack my desire,
 He shall pay for that proceeding with sorrow.)

This Iago-like rancor toward Jesus defines Judas as one of
 the damned, as a type of the devil:

hym Jesus, þat Jewe
 Vn-iust vn-to me, Judas, I juge to be lathe
 (XXVI, 127-128);

(Jesus, that Jew,
 Who was unjust to me, I judge to be loathsome;)

Before Judas can arrange the terms for the sale of
 Jesus, however, the playwright introduces the Janitor to
 undercut him, to hold him up as a target of derision.
 Laughter will thus impinge upon the horror that Judas occa-
 sions. Functioning as the audience's representative, the
 Janitor for a time forestalls Judas from gaining entry to
 Pilate, Caiphas, and Annas. Skilled in physiognomy, he de-
 tects in Judas' face the marks of an evil nature:

For I fele by a figure in youre fals face,
 It is but foly to feste affeccioun in þou.
 For Mars he hath morteysed his mark,
 Eftir all lynes of my lore,
 And sais 3e are wikkid of werk,
 And bothe a strange theffe and a stark.
 * * * * *

Say on, hanged harlott,
 I holde þe vn-hende,
 Thou lokist like a lurdayne
 His liffelod hadde loste.
 Woo schall I wirke þe away but þou wende
 (XXVI, 161-176)!

(For I perceive by an image on your false face,
That it is only folly to set affection on you.
Because Mars has mortised his mark,
According to all the lines of my knowledge,
And says that you are wicked in your doings,
And both a strange and a strong thief.

* * * * *

Say on, hanged harlot,
I regard you as ignoble,
You look like a sluggard
Who had lost his livelihood.
If you don't go, I shall forcefully drive you away!)

Why did the playwright construct this scene, utterly without Biblical precedent? The harassment of Judas, as the Janitor pokes fun at his face, checks the terror arising from the crucial action in this play, the betrayal of Jesus. For the time being, the devil-figure, responsible for the terror, has become an object of derision. Near the end of the scene, the attendants upon Pilate echo the Janitor, taunting the disloyal Judas who has spitefully bartered his master:

i Mil. Go forthe, for a traytoure ar 3e.

ii Mil. 3a, and a wikkid man.

i doc. Why, what is he?

ii doc. A losell sir, but lewte shuld lye vs,
He is trappid full of trayne &e truthe for to trist,
I holde it but folye his faythe for to trowe
(XXVI, 264-269).

(1st soldier. Go forth, for you are a traitor.

2nd soldier. Yes, and a wicked man.

1st doctor. Why, what is he?

2nd doctor. A worthless fellow, sir, unless loyalty
should lie to us,
To trust the truth, he is squeezed full of deceit,
I hold it mere folly to trust his faith.)

This ridicule heaped upon Jesus' betrayer checks the audience's terror. The laughter that riddles Judas relieves the backdrop of terror, the irrevocable betrayal of Jesus.

The Last Supper. In that the grotesque does not inform its technique, "The Last Supper" is singular. All the other plays detailing the events of Jesus' Passion undercut the terrible with the comic. As in the last play, Judas aggravates the audience's terror. He advances the death of Jesus another step:

Now is tyme to me to gang,
 For here be-gynnes noye all of newe,
 My fellows momellis þame emang
 þat I schulde alle þis bargayne brewe.
 And certis þai schall nojt wene it wrang.
 To þe prince of prestis I schall pursue,
 And þei schall lere hym othir ought long
 That all his sawes sore schall hym rewe

(XXVII, 104-111).

(Now it is time for me to go,
 For here trouble begins all anew,
 My fellows mumble among themselves
 That I have stirred up all this strife.
 And certainly they shall not misconstrue.
 To the prince of priests I shall go,
 And they shall teach Jesus something else before long,
 So that He shall sorely regret all His sayings.)

But laughter does not ward off the terror that Judas augments. No character frustrates him here, brings out the potential for comedy lurking in this devil-figure. Laughter would have detracted from the solemnity of this play. The playwright needed this majestic tone to counterpoint the raucous violence that will dominate the coming plays.

The Agony and the Betrayal. The basic aesthetic principle that underlies the use of the grotesque is that

the terrifying loses some of its terror if one can distance it with laughter. This principle determines the structure of "The Agony and the Betrayal." Two scenes pyramid the terror, arising from the audience's painful realization that Jesus is moving closer to horrendous torture. In the first scene, the audience shares with Jesus His frightful agony that His impending torture occasions:

Vnto my fadir of myght now make I my mone,
 As þou arte saluer of all sore som socoure me sende.
 Þe passioun they purpose to putte me vppon,
 My flesshe is full ferde and fayne wolde defende
 (XXVIII, 102-105),

(I now make My moan unto My mighty father,
 In that you are the healer of all pain, send Me some
 relief,
 They intend to inflict suffering on Me,
 My flesh is greatly afraid and gladly would defend
 itself from it.)

The staging of the frenetic preparations for the nocturnal capture builds the terror:

Goode tente to hym, lorde, schall we take,
 He schall banne þe tyme þat he was borne,
 All his kynne schall come to late,
 He schall nocht skape withouten scorne
 fro vs in fere
 (XXVIII, 221-225).

(Lord, we shall take good heed to Him,
 He shall curse the time that He was born,
 All His kinsmen will come too late,
 He shall not escape without scorn
 from us in company.)

This juxtaposition of scenes cumulates the audience's terror. Nothing can retard the juggernaut about to overwhelm Jesus. In the staging of the actual arrest of Jesus in the next scene, however, the playwright momentarily

relieves this terror by frustrating His captors. Just as the Janitor frustrated Judas' entry, thereby making him the object of the audience's derision, so, too, the resplendent light radiating from Jesus paralyzes His captors, delaying the arrest:

iii Mil. Allas! we are loste, for leme of þis light.

Jesus. Saye þe here, whome seke 3e?
Do saye me. late see!

i Jud. One Jesus of Nazareth
I hope þat he hight.

Jesus. Be-holdis all hedirward, loo!
her, I am hee!

i Mil. Stande! dastarde, so darfely
Thy dede schall be dight,
I will no more be abashed
For blenke of thy blee.

i Jud. We, oute! I ame mased almost
In mayne and in myght.

ii Jud. And I am ferde, be my feyth,
And fayne wolde I flee;
For such a sigt haue I not sene

(XXVIII, 254-262).

(3rd soldier. Alas! we are lost, because of the ray
of this light.

Jesus. Say here, whom do you seek?
Do tell me, let see!

1st Jew. One Jesus of Nazareth
I think that He is called.

Jesus. Look this way!
Here, I am He!

1st soldier. Stand! good-for-nothing, so cruelly
Your death shall be prepared,
I will no more be cast down
Because of the brightness of your color.

1st Jew. Oh! alas! I am almost giddy
In strength and in might.

2nd Jew. And I am afraid, by my faith,
And gladly would I flee;
For I have never seen such a sight.)

Laughter distances the incrementing terror that the two preceding scenes have built. The exasperation of Jesus' captors, sent sprawling by the light emanating from Him, is funny. A similar incident in play thirty-three involves soldiers who cannot prevent their banners from bowing to Jesus. Whenever a devil-figure is restrained or frustrated, the audience laughs. This laughter reassures the audience that the threatening, the terrifying, has not unlimited sway over human life. Whether the devil-figure is a soldier frustrated in his arrest of Jesus, or a black-mustachioed lecher prevented by the hero from sawing the girl in half, the reaction is the same. The frustration of evil invariably detonates laughter. This laughter relieves the emotions of the terror that evil has previously stored up.

Peter Denies Jesus; Jesus Examined by Caiphas. As the playwright represents the sufferings of Jesus, the terror increases. Pageants of excessive brutality succeed each other. This play, for instance, stages the soldiers pitilessly punching Jesus:

111 Miles. Playes faire in feere, and I schall
fande to feste it
With a faire flappe, and þer is one and þer is ij;
And ther is iij, and there is iij.

iii Miles. Say nowe, with an nevill happe,
Who negheth þe nowe? not o worde, no!

iv Miles. Dose noddil on hym with neffes
That he nocht nappe

(XXIX, 364-370).

(3rd soldier. Play fair in company, and I shall
try to land a blow,
And there is one and there is two,
And there is three, and there is four.

3rd soldier. Say now, with an evil fortune,
Who nears you now? not one word, no!

4th soldier. Rap on Him with fists
So that He doesn't nap.)

The need for laughter to function as a controlling mechanism, to ward off the terror that the staging of such violence generates, becomes increasingly more evident. The playwright must create a comic character.

Caiphas, the chief interrogator of Jesus, functions as the surrogate devil. Not only his malice toward Jesus, but also his utterance of the term "Mahounde," defines him as a type of the devil:

A! this makes he by the myghtis of Mahounde
(XXIX, 267).

(Oh! He does this by the powers of Mahomet.)

Having given Caiphas a potential for comedy by setting him up as the devil-figure, the playwright develops it: he characterizes Caiphas as a luxury-loving, self-indulgent hedonist. That first scene, for instance, shows him downing a nightcap before retiring:

1 Miles. My lord! here is wyne
 þat will make you to wynke,
 Itt is licoure full delicious,
 My lord, and you like,
 Wherefore I rede drely
 A draughte þat 3e drynke,
 For in þis contre, þat we knawe,
 I wisse ther is none slyke
 (XXIX, 75-78).

(1st soldier. My lord! here is wine
 That will put you to sleep,
 It is a very delicious liquor,
 My lord, if you please,
 That is why I advise
 You to drink a draft slowly,
 Because in this country, that we know,
 I know there is none like it.)

Next, Annas must tuck into bed his grossly effeminate master:

Do on dayntely, and dresse me on dees,
 And hendely hille on me happing,
 And warne all wightis to be in pees,
 For I am late layde vnto napping
 (XXIX, 81-84).

(Lift me up daintily, and ready me on the dais,
 And kindly cover me with my coverlet,
 And warn all creatures to keep still,
 For I have gone to bed late.)

The interruption of Caiphas' sleep, which he relishes as
 only an inordinate pleasure-lover can, is funny. The plot
 has discomfited the evil Caiphas:

11 Miles. My lord! my lord! my lord! here is
 layke, and 3ou list!

Caiph. Pees! loselles. leste 3e be nyse.

1 Miles. My lord! it is wele, and ye wiste
 (XXIX, 192-194).

(2nd soldier. My lord! my lord! my lord! here is
 game, if you please!

Caiphas. Silence! worthless men, it pleases you to
 be foolish.

1st soldier. My lord! it is well, if you knew.)

During this interlude, the audience mocks Caiphas, rudely jostled from sleep. Although brief, this interlude highlights another facet of Jesus' torturer. Caiphas is not just horrid, but also laughable. The laughter trained upon him will regulate the intensity of terror that his underlings induce by their brutal pummeling of Jesus.

The Dream of Pilate's Wife; Jesus Before Pilate.

As in the previous pageant, excessive violence sets off terror in this play. In particular, the binding of Jesus releases those sadistic impulses lurking within the soldiers:

Cay. Sir Knyghtis, þat are curtayse and kynde,
We charge you þat chorle be wele chyned,
Do buske you and grathely hym bynde,
And rugge hym in ropes, his rase till he rewe.

i Mil. Sir, youre sawes schall be served schortely
and sone,
Yha, do felawe, be thy feith, late vs feste þis
faitour full fast.

ii Mil. I am douty to þis dede, delyuer, haue done,
Latte vs pulle on with pride till his poure be paste
(XXX, 211-218).

(Caiphas. Knights, who are courteous and kind,
We order you to chain that churl well,
Bustle you and properly bind Him,
And pull Him with ropes, until He regrets His race.

1st soldier. Sir, we shall immediately carry out your
orders,
Yes, fellow, by your faith, let us fasten this trick-
ster securely.

2nd soldier. I am doughty for this deed, let's finish,
Let us pull with pride until His power is passed.)

But many comic incidents, centering about Pilate and Percula, modulate the terror. The playwright characterizes them both as devilishly proud. They participate in

that radical evil that corrupted Lucifer's nature. In a ranting harangue, Pilate boasts of his accomplishments to the crowd gathering around the pageant wagon:

Loo! Pilate, I am proued a prince of grete pride,
I was putte in to Pounce þe pepill to presse,
And sithen Sesar hym selffe with exynatores be his side,
Remytte me to þe remys, þe renkes to redresse
(XXX, 19-22).

(Look! I am Pilate, I have proved to be an exalted prince,
I was sent into Pontus to impress the people,
And afterward Caesar himself with senators by his side,
Sent me to these realms, to redress the warriors.)

Percula parallels Lucifer who adored his own bright beauty in play one. Her excessive vanity signals this parallel to the audience:

I am dame precious Percula, of prynces þe prise,
Wiffe to Sir Pilate here prince with-uten pere,
All welle of all womanhede I am, wittie and wise,
The coloure of my corse is full clere
(XXX, 37-41).

(I am lady Percula, the prize of princes,
Wife to lord Pilate, the peerless prince,
I am the wellspring of feminity, discerning and wise,
Think about my face so pretty and bright,
The color of my body is very bright.)

An interchange between Pilate and Percula paints the rampant sensuality that earmarks their relationship:

Pil. Howe! howe! felawys, nowe in faith I am fayne
Of theis lippis, so loffely are lappid,
In bedde is full buxhome and bayne.

Domina. Yha, sir, it nedith not to layne,
All ladise we coveyte þan
Bothe to be kyssed and clappid
(XXX, 50-54).

(Pilate. Fellows, now in faith I am glad
Because of these lips, surrounded with such loveliness,
In bed she is very obedient and ready.)

Lady. Yes, sir, it is not to be hid,
All ladies covet then
To be kissed and embraced.)

At this point, the dramatist puppeteers the meddlesome
Beadle who attempts to cut short this fondling between Pi-
late and Percula. According to custom, the lady must leave
the hall of judgement before nightfall. Percula's petulant
reaction to the Beadle's intrusion is comic:

Bed. I beseke you my souerayne, assente to my sawes,
As ye are gentill juger and justice of Jewes.

Dom. Do herke, howe þou, javell, jangill of Iewes!
Why, go bette, horosonne boy, when I bidde þe.

Bed. Madame, I do but þat diewe is.

Dom. But yf þou reste of thy resoune, þou rewis,
For all is a-cursed carle, hase in, kydde þe!

Pil. Do mende you, madame, and youre mode be amendand,
For me semys it wer sittand to se what he sais
(XXX, 57-65).

(Beadle. I beseech you, my sovereign, to agree to
what I said,
As you are the gentle judge and justice of the Jews.)

Lady. Listen, how you wrangle, prating of Jews!
Amend yourself, whoreson boy, when I command you.

Beadle. Madame, I am only doing my duty.

Lady. Unless you cease your argument, you will regret
it,
For you are a cursed churl, get in!

Pilate. Amend yourself, madame, and let your temper
be better,
It seems to me it would be fitting to see what he
has to say.)

Notwithstanding its anxiety, accruing from the realization that Jesus must soon sample the justice of this lust-dieted man, the audience mocks Percula. The haughty and sensual woman has been frustrated in that delight she most covets. She is one of those "sublunary lovers" who cannot stand to be deprived of physical gratification:

Dull sublunary lovers' love
 -- Whose soul is sense -- cannot admit
 Absence, because it doth remove
 Those things which elemented it.

Before she leaves, however, Pilate pampers her with his choicest wine:

Dom. Itt wolde gladde me, my lorde, if 3 e gudly begynne.

Pil. Nowe I assente to youre counsaille, so comely
 & clere;
 Nowe drynke [3c], madame: to deth all þis dynne!

Dom. Iff it like yowe myne awne lorde, I am not to
 lere;
 This lare I am not to lere.

Pil. Yitt efte to youre damysell, madame.

Dom. In thy hande, holde nowe, and haue here.

Anc. Gramercy, my lady so dere.

Pil. Nowe fares-wele, and walke on youre way
 (XXX, 100-108).

(Lady. It would make me happy, my lord, if you would
 begin.

Pilate. Now I consent to your counsel, so comely and
 bright;
 Now drink you, madame: to death with all this din!

Lady. If it please you my own lord, you need not
 teach me;
 I don't need to learn this lore.

Pilate. Yet also for your handmaiden, madame.

Lady. Hold this in your hand now.

Ancilla. Thank you, my lady so dear.

Pilate. Now farewell, and walk on your way.)

This detail of the wine-drinking prepares for a comic exchange between Pilate and the Beadle. Utterly helpless on his own, the bibulous Pilate, like Caiphas in the last play, commands the Beadle to lift him gently upon his couch:

I comaunde þe to come nere, for I will kare to my
couche,
Haue in thy handes hendely and heue me fro hyne,
But loke þat þou tene me not with þi tastyng, but
tendirly me touche

(XXX, 133-135),

(I command you to come near, for I will go to my couch,
Have me in your hands gently and lift me from hence,
But see that you hurt me not with your touching, but
touch me tenderly,)

Struggling beneath Pilate's bulk, the Beadle vents the funniest line in this entire cycle:

A! sir, yhe whe wele
(XXX, 136)!

(Oh! sir, you are very heavy!)

To save face, Pilate attributes his corpulence to the wine he has just swilled with Percula:

Yha, I haue wette with me wyne
(XXX, 136).

(Yes, I have wet myself with wine.)

The playwright further develops the comic potential of Percula. Attempting to prevent the execution of Jesus, the devil stresses the ruin of Pilate and Percula

consequent upon the death of Jesus:

Sir Pilate, for his prechyng, and þou,
 With nede schalle ye namely be noyed,
 Your striffe and youre strenghe schal be stroyed,
 Your richesse schal be refte you þat is rude,
 With vengeance, and þat dare I auowe
 (XXX, 172-176).

(Sir Pilate, for his preaching, and you,
 With necessity you shall be troubled,
 Your strife and your strength shall be destroyed,
 Your richness that is boasted about shall be bereft you,
 With vengeance, and I dare avowe that.)

The playwright thus motivates Percula's concern for Jesus:
 she tries to save Him not out of a regard for justice, but
 merely to safeguard her own selfish interests:

The devil's advice to Procula[sic] is morally
 ambivalent: in his eagerness to frustrate
 the Redemption he has to advise an action
 which is in itself right. But by establishing
 Pilate and Procula as an arrogant and
 luxurious couple he is able to make clear
 that Procula advises Pilate to do the right
 thing for the wrong reason. 2

The plot now frustrates this woman, intent upon keeping those
 luxuries she cherishes. Terrified because of the devil-
 inspired dream, she rustles Pilate's son from sleep to serve
 as a messenger to his father. But the son who has inher-
 ited his father's love of self-pampering turns over in bed,
 refusing to quieten Percula's fears:

Dom. And saie to my souereyne, þis same is soth
 þat I send hym.
 All naked þis night as I napped,
 With tene and with trayne was I trapped
 With a sweuene, þat swiftly me swapped,
 Of one Iesu, þe juste man þe Iewes will vndoo;
 She prayes tente to þat trewe man, with tyne be no3t
 trapped,

² Woolf, English Mystery Plays, p. 245.

But als a domes man dewly to be dressand,
And lelye delyuere þat lede.

Fil. Madame, I am dressid to þat dede;
But firste will I nappe in þis nede,
For he hase mystir of a morne slepe þat mydnyght is
myssand.

(XXX, 186-196).

(Lady. And say to my sovereign, this is the truth
that I send him.
As I slept naked this night,
With grief and with deceit was I trapped
By a dream, that struck me swiftly,
Concerning one Jesus, the just man whom the Jews will
destroy;
She prays you to take heed to that true man, be not
trapped with vexation.
But as a judge rightfully to be redressing,
And truly deliver that lad.

Son. Madame, I am prepared to do that,
But I will first nap out of necessity,
For that person who is not in bed at midnight has need
of a morning sleep.)

In that it vexes Percula, the scene is comic. Like Lucifer's, her hauteur precludes any empathy for her on the part of the audience. Her vexation can only trigger laughter. The playwright thus undercuts the growing terror by comic incidents. The aborted dalliance between Pilate and Percula, the Beadle's back-breaking effort to hoist Pilate onto the couch, Percula's vexation at Pilate's somnolent son break the terror stemming from the sadistic torturing of Jesus.

Trial Before Herod. As in previous plays, the dramatist patterns Jesus' tormentor upon Lucifer to set up the necessary condition for comic characterization. Herod's opening harangue, therefore, punctuated by a sword swishing over the heads of the audience, establishes him

as a type of the devil:

Traueylis no3t as traytours þat tristis in trayne,
 Or by þe bloode þat mahounde bledde, with þis blad
 schal ye blede.
 þus schall I brittyn all youre bones on brede, }æe,
 And lusshe all youre lymmys with lasschis
 (XXXI, 7-10).

(Work not as traitors that trust in deceit,
 Or by the blood that Mahomet bled, you shall bleed
 by means of this sword.
 Thus I shall cut up all your bones abroad, yes,
 And slash all your limbs with slashes.)

That term "mahounde" signals Herod's allegiance to Lucifer.

His parting words to his lackeys confirm this interpretation:

Wherefore I praye sir Satan, oure sire,
 And Lucifer moste luffely of lyre,
 He sauffe you all sirs, and giffe you goode nyght
 (XXXI, 55-57).

(That is why I pray to sir Satan, our sovereign,
 And Lucifer most lovely of face,
 That he will save you all sirs, and give you good
 night.)

Having primed the audience to laugh at the devil-figure, the playwright can proceed to characterize him comically. He first stages the effeminate delicacy of Herod, that trait which had debased both Pilate and Caiphas in previous pageants. Like Pilate, Herod commands his attendant to lift him gently into bed so as not to bruise his sensitive skin:

Ya, but as þou luffes me hartely,
 Laye me doune softely,
 For þou wotte full wele
 þat I am full tendirly hydid
 (XXXI, 48-51).

(Yes, but as you love me from the heart,
 Lay me down softly,
 For you know very well
 That I have tender skin.)

The "tendirly hydid" king is ridiculously effeminate. He again needs his attendant in order to rise from bed:

What! and schall I rise nowe, in þe deuyllis name?
To stighill among straungeres in stales of a state.
But haue here my hande, halde nowe
(XXXI, 74-76)!

(What! and shall I get up now, in the devil's name?
To establish order among strangers in conspiracies
of state.
But have here my hand, hold now!)

The trial scene ironically punishes Herod the judge, not Jesus the defendant. Jesus' lack of deference undercuts Herod:

Loo! sirs, he makis hym no more vnto me
þanne it were to a man of þer awne toune
(XXXI, 178-179).

(Look! sirs, He humbles Himself no more to me
Than to a man of their own town.)

Offsetting Herod's ranting, Jesus' silence manifests His real control of the situation. Instead of ruffling Jesus, Herod only discomfits himself in his cross-examination:

What þe deuyll and his dame schall y now doo?
Say may þou not here me? oy! man, arte þou woode
(XXXI, 237-238)?

(What the devil and his dam shall I now do?
Say can you not hear me? Listen! man, are you mad?)

Attempting to bait Jesus, Herod only exasperates himself. This exasperation culminates as a soldier points out the inconclusiveness of these proceedings:

1 Miles. We! wise men will deme it we dote,
But if we make ende of oure note.

Rex. Wendis fourth, þe deuyll in þi throte
(XXXI, 379-381)!

(1st soldier. Oh! wise men will judge that we act foolishly.

Unless we bring this business to an end.

King. Go forth, the devil in your throat.)

That basic comic technique, the frustration of the force of evil, of the embodiment of vice, again contributes to the grotesque. In spite of the terror he produces, Herod cuts also a ridiculous figure.

Second Accusation before Pilate: Remorse of Judas, and Purchase of Field of Blood. This time Pilate essays the role of the devil. His extravagant vanity, evocative of Lucifer's in the initial play, dramatizes the connection:

For I ame þe luffeliest lappid and laide,
 With feetour full faire in my face,
 My forhed both brente is and brade,
 And myne eyne þei glittir like þe gleme in þe glasse.
 And þe hore þat hillis my heed
 Is even like to þe golde wyre,
 My chekis are bothe ruddy and reede,
 And my colour as cristall is cleere
 (XXXII, 17-24).

(Because I am the loveliest embraced and led,
 With most fair features in my face,
 My forehead is both bright and broad,
 And my eyes glitter like the gleam in the looking glass.
 And the hair that covers my head
 Is even like the gold wire,
 My cheeks are both ruddy and red,
 And my complexion is as bright as cristal.)

His greeting to Caiphas and Annas clinches the parallel.

Pilate, Caiphas, and Annas merit derision as subjects of

Lucifer:

Sir Kayphas and Anna, right so nowe I thynke,
 Sittis in mahoundis blissing, and aske vs þe wyne
 (XXXII, 124-125).

(Sir Caiphas and Annas, as I now think,
Sit in Mahomet's blessing, and call for the wine.)

In this play, Pilate generates two conflicts: one with Judas, the other with the Armiger. Throughout, Judas' frustration, accruing from Pilate's repeated refusal to let him buy back Jesus, mounts. Finally, Judas explodes, damning Pilate, Caiphas, and Annas:

Sen 3e assente hym for to slaa,
Vengeaunce I crie on you ilkone!
Ilkane I crie, þe deuill for-do youe
(XXXII, 280-282)!

(Since you consent to slay Him,
I cry vengeance on each one of you!
On each of you I cry, may the devil destroy you!)

Caiphas' reply measures how much Judas' invective has affected him:

Say wote þou nocht who is I?
Nowe be my nociens, myght I negh nere þe,
In certayne, ladde, yitt schulde I lere þe,
To lordis to speke curtaisely
(XXXII, 290-293).

(Say don't you know who I am?
Now by my usefulness, if I could get near you,
Certainly, lad, I should teach you
How to speak courteously to lords.)

The secondary conflict echoes Judas' confrontation. Pilate's pettiness shows through in his confiscation of the Armiger's deeds to Calvary. Instead of acquiescing to the theft, however, the Armiger lashes out at these royal swindlers:

I tyne it vn-trewly by tresoune,
þer-fore nowe my way will I wende;

For 3e do me no right nor no resoune,
 I be-take you all to þe fende
 (XXXII, 364-367)!

(I lose it falsely through treason,
 Therefore I now will go my way;
 For you do me neither right nor reason,
 I commit you all to the devil!)

Judas and the Armiger deflate Pilate, Caiphas, and Annas, set them up as targets of derision. The audience, thereby, vents its pent up hostility against Jesus' torturers, the characters who arouse terror in the play. With Judas and the Armiger, the audience scorns to hell these tormentors of Jesus. The derision piled upon Pilate, Caiphas, and Annas checks the terror they arouse as the principal executioners of Jesus.

The Second Trial before Pilate Continued; the Judgment of Jesus. With each successive pageant, the terror intensifies. Here, after Jesus has collapsed, riddled with pain and shock, a soldier attempts to revive Him with redoubled whipping:

ii Mil. For all oure noy, þis nygard he nappes.

iii Mil. We sall wakken hym with wynde of oure whippes.

iv Mil. Nowe flynge to þis flaterer with flappes.

i Mil. I sall hertely hitte on his hippes
 and haunch

(XXXIII, 365-369).

(2nd soldier. In spite of all our hurt, this niggard
 sleeps.

3rd soldier. We shall awaken Him by the wind from
 our whips.

4th soldier. Now strike at this deceiver with scourges.

1st soldier. I shall heartily hit Him on his hips and haunch.)

Realistic anatomical description wrings the full measure of horror out of the scene:

i Mil. Now thryng to hym thrally with þis þikk þorne.

ii Mil. Lo! it heldes to his hede, þat þe harnes out hales.

iii Mil. Thus we teche hym to tempre his tales,
His brayne begynnes for to blede
(XXXIII, 399-402).

(1st soldier. Now press on Him eagerly with this thick thorn.

2nd soldier. Look! it holds to His head, so that the brain falls out.

3rd soldier. Thus we will teach Him to temper His tales,
His brain begins to bleed.

By shrinking from the sight of Jesus, cut to the brains, even Pilate conveys to the audience the terror aroused by Jesus' monstrous punishment:

Wele, bringe hym be-fore vs; A! he blisshes all bloo
(XXXIII, 4333),

(Well, bring Him before us; Oh! He blushes all blue.)

Dramatic irony and the incident of the banners keep this terror from becoming aesthetically intolerable. Dramatic irony provides the audience with a vantage superior to that of the characters on stage. By perceiving their stupidity, the audience can mock the torturers of Jesus. The fourth soldier, for instance, dragging Jesus off to be beaten, swears at Him:

Late vs gete of his gere, God giffe hym ille grace
(XXXIII, 349).

(Let us take off His clothing, may God give Him
ill grace.)

Deriving from the audience's awareness that God is standing before him, irony underscores the soldier's obtuseness. That he is totally ignorant of the situation in which he plays a part undercuts the soldier as a figure of terror. Far from being omniscient, this figure of terror displays ridiculous stupidity.

The playwright uses the incident of the banners to frustrate those about to inflict torture upon Jesus. Unable to prevent the banners from bowing to Jesus, Pilate orders the Beadle to recruit the most stalwart as standard bearers. To them, Caiphas announces the penalty for letting the banners swerve a hair:

3e lusty ledis, nowe lith to my lare,
Schappe 3ou to þer schaftis þat so schenely her schyne,
If 3ou barnes bowe þe brede of an hare,
Platly 3e be putte to perpetuell pyne
(XXXIII, 241-244).

(You strong lads, now listen to my lore;
Prepare yourselves for those shafts that so brightly
shine here,
If you boys let them bow a hair's breadth,
Plainly you shall be put to perpetual pain.)

Despite these measures, not only the banners, but also the mighty Pilate, bow to Jesus:

Cay. We! out, we are shente alle for shame,
þis is wrasted all wrange, as I wene.

An. For all þer boste, 3one boyes are to blame.

Pil. Slike a sight was neuere 3it sene!
 Come sytt;
 My comforth was caught fro me clene,
 I vpstritt! I me myght no3t abstene
 To wirschip hym in wark and in witte
 (XXXIII, 269-276).

(Caiphas. Oh! we are all disgraced for shame,
 This is wrested all wrong, as I think.

Annas. For all their boast, those boys are to blame.

Pilate. Such a sight was never seen before!
 Come sit;
 My comfort was snatched from me entirely.
 I started up; I could not stop myself
 From worshipping Him in deed and in thought.)

Like any other creature, Pilate cannot subvert the universal order over which God presides. He is compelled to bow to a nature superior to his in existential perfection. Their inability to steady the banners before Jesus comically points up the ineffectuality of these agents of evil. The audience mocks their vexation. This mocking laughter controls the terror that the audience must endure in the subsequent torturing of Jesus: for no matter how frightful the tortures they mete out to Him, the torturers themselves are targets of laughter. The audience's mockery has undercut them.

Christ Led Up to Calvary. The playwright gives to those torturers who escort Jesus to Calvary the potential for comic characterization. The use of Mahomet's name in swearing defines them as surrogate devils. That second soldier, for example invokes Mahomet to silence his strident comrade:

Pees, man, for mahoundes bloode,
 Why make 3 e such crying
 (XXXIV, 34-35)?

(Quiet, man, for Mahomet's blood,
 Why do you make such crying?)

The attempts of Symeon to excuse himself from carrying
 Jesus' cross prompt an oath to Mahomet:

Nay, faitour, þou schalte be fayne,
 þis forwarde to full-fille.
 Or, be myghty mahounde!
 þou schalte rewe it full ille
 (XXXIV, 275-278).

(Nay, trickster, you shall be glad,
 To fulfill this compact.
 Or by mighty Mahomet!
 You shall bitterly regret it.)

As surrogate devils, embodiments of sin, these men trigger
 both terror and laughter. Their use of realistic detail
 to describe the stripping of Jesus evokes terror:

1 Miles. All yf he called hym-selffe a kyng,
 In his clothis he schall no3t hyng,
 But naked as a stone be stedde.

11 Miles. That calle I accordand thyng,
 But tille his sidis I trowe þei clyng,
 For bloode þat he has bledde
 (XXXIV, 311-316).

(1st soldier. Although He called Himself a king,
 He shall not hang in His clothes,
 But be placed naked as a stone.)

2nd soldier. I call that a fitting thing,
 But to His sides I trust they cling,
 Because of the blood that He has bled.)

But even more evocative of terror than this detail of the
 blood-soaked cloth abrading the torn skin is the dispa-
 sionate attitude of the executioners, real professionals at
 this grim task of nailing a man to a tree. The second and

third soldiers, for instance, coldly appraise the nail-holes bored into the cross:

iii Miles. To loke þer-aftir it is no nede,
I toke þe mesure or I yode,
Bothe for þe fette and hande.

ii Miles. Be-holde howe it is boorede
Full euen at ilke an ende,
This werke will wele accorde,
It may not be amende

(XXXIV, 80-86).

(3rd soldier. There is no need to look after it,
I took the measure before I went,
Both for the hands and for the feet.

2nd soldier. Look how it is bored
Exactly even at each end,
This work is very proportionate,
It cannot be improved.)

In their professional detachment from the human significance of what they do, the executioners anticipate that singing sexton who dug Ophelia's grave, the fellow who had "no feeling of his business." The impersonality of evil, impervious to any compunctions, to any stirrings of fellow feeling, generates more terror than the horrendous details of Jesus' suffering.

The more frustration, therefore, that the playwright can heap upon these devil-figures, the more the audience can distance the terror they instill. Vexed in his scheming, a devil becomes comic. The audience is ever ready to release the tension that the agents of terror have built up. Its psychological defenses prime the audience to look for the ridiculous in the terrible. To regulate the terror they arouse, the playwright must frustrate these

Or by that lord we praise and reverence,
You shall dearly pay for it.

3rd Mary. This sign shall call vengeance
On you all in company.

3rd soldier. Go, hurry you from here,
Or else ill hail will come to you here.)

This scene parallels the conflict between the grieving mothers and Herod's underlings methodically killing their children.³ A character's strength depends upon the stature of his antagonist. Armed warriors combatting equal opposites can aspire to heroic heights. Armed warriors beating off defenceless women, on the other hand, are undercut, comically debased.

A final conflict frustrates the rapacity of that first executioner. Insensitive to the pain he inflicts by his brutal stripping of Jesus, he grabs for Jesus' garments. Yet, as the third executioner hints, Pilate will deprive him of this booty:

i Miles. Take of his clothis be-liffe, latte see,
a ha! þis garment will falle wele for mee,
And so I hope it schall.

ii Miles. Nay, sir, so may it nocht be,
þame muste be parte amonge vs thre,
Take euen as will fall.

iii Miles. ʒaa, and sir Pilate medill hym,
Youre parte woll be but small.

i Miles. Sir, and ʒe liste, go telle hym,
ʒitt schall he nocht haue all,
Butte even his awne parte and nomore
(XXXIV, 321-331).

³woolf, English Mystery Plays, p. 264.

(1st soldier. Take off His clothes quickly, let see,
A ha! This garment will fall to me,
And so I think it shall.

2nd soldier. No, sir, it can not be so,
They must be divided among the three of us,
You must take what falls to your share.

3rd soldier. Yes, if Pilate intervenes,
Your part will be but small.

1st soldier. Sir, if you please, go tell him,
Yet shall he not have all,
But even his own part and no more.)

Carefully, then, the playwright controls the degree of terror that the executioners let loose in this play. Their clinical attitude toward crucifixion and the sadistic pulling of the blood-drenched garments from Jesus' shoulders generate terror. Comic incidents, however, prevent the terror from becoming aesthetically intolerable. At odds with themselves, with the ministering women, and with their boss Pilate, these torturers have an element of the ridiculous about them that controls the terror they arouse.

Crucifixio Christi. As in the previous pageants, the dramatist resorts to the grotesque to accomplish two purposes; first, to convey the intense horror of sin; secondly, to regulate that horror, to prevent it from glutting the feelings of the audience. The laughter, that the grotesque releases, reassures the audience that the forces of darkness have not unlimited sway over this world. To build a grotesque scene, the playwright must establish his devil-figures, those agents of terror who yet become

laughable. To set up the executioners as types of the devil in this play, he has them utter the term "mahounde," which has previously characterized such devil-figures as Pharaoh and Herod:

A! pees man, for mahounde
(XXXV, 129),

(Oh! quiet man, for Mahomet,)

The playwright intensifies the horror already present in the Biblical source by developing two incidents: the stretching of Jesus and the ramming of the cross into the mortise. The executioners stretch Jesus to fit those holes previously chiseled in the wood:

iv Mil. Owe! þis werke is all vnmeete,
This boring muste all be amende.

i Mil. A! pees man, for mahounde,
Lette noman wotte þat wondir,
A roope schall rugge hym doune,
Yf all his synnous go a-soundre.

ii Mil. þat corde full kyndely can I knytte,
þe comforte of þis karle to kele.

i Mil. Feste on þanne faste þat all be fyttē,
It is no force howe felle he feele
(XXXV, 127-136).

(4th soldier. Oh! this work is entirely not fitting,
This boring has to be rectified.

1st soldier. Oh! quiet man, for Mahomet,
Let no man know that marvel,
A rope shall pull Him down,
Even if His sinews burst asunder.

2nd soldier. I can tie that cord very skillfully,
To cool the comfort of this churl.

1st soldier. Bind it then quickly so that all is fit,
It doesn't matter how pain-filled He feels.)

The insertion of the cross into the mortise jolts Jesus,
titillating the sadism of His executioners:

i Mil. Nowe raise hym nemely for þe nonys,
And sette hym be þis mortas heere.
And latte hym falle in alle at ones,
For certis þat payne schall haue no pere.

iii Mil. Heue vppe!

iv Mil. Latté doune, so all his bones
Are a-soundre nowe on sides seere.

i Mil. þis fallyng was more felle,
þan all the harmes he hadde,
Nowe may a man wele telle,
þe leste lith of þis ladde
(XXXV, 219-228).

(1st soldier. Now raise Him nimbly for the nonce,
And set Him by this mortise here.
And let Him fall in all at once,
For certainly that pain shall have no equal.

3rd soldier. Heave up!

4th soldier. Let down, so that all His bones
Break asunder now on many sides.

1st soldier. This dropping was more pain-filled
Than all the harms He had,
Now can a man easily count,
The smallest joint of this lad.)

Murray Roston estimates the effect that such a scene registered upon the spectator:

The concern with sadistic torture . . . in the Crucifixion play is part of the medieval attempt (of which Heironymus Bosch forms the Renaissance climax) to impress the Christian with a sense of horror which should lead him both to compassion and repentance. By association he was to recall the tortures of Hell which waited him if he failed to respond in time to the implications of Christ's suffering. ⁴

⁴ Biblical Drama in England from the Middle Ages to the Present Day (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 17-18.

Still, the laughter trained on the executioners relieves the terror. Between the stretching of Jesus and the raising of the cross, a scene displaying their frustration intervenes. The playwright highlights the struggle of these executioners to carry the cross to which Jesus has been affixed to the top of Calvary Hill. The audience laughs at them, bursting joints and tendons beneath the cross:

iv Mil. þe deuill hym hang!

i Mil. For grete harme haue I hente,
My schuldir is in soundre.

ii Mil. And sertis I am nere schente,
So lange haue I borne vndir.

iii Mil. This crosse and I in twoo must twynne,
Ellis brekis my bakke in sondre sone.

iv Mil. Laye doune agayne and leue youre dynne,
þis dede for vs will neuere be done.
* * * * *

i Mil. Lifte vppe, and sone he schall be þore,
Therefore feste on youre fyngeres faste.

iii Mil. Owe, lifte!

i Mil. We, loo!

iv Mil. A litill more.

ii Mil. Holde þanne!

i Mil. Howe nowe!

ii Mil. þe werste is paste.

iii Mil. He weyes a wikkid weght
(XXXV, 188-213).

(4th soldier. May the devil hang Him!

1st soldier. For I have received great injury,
My shoulder is wrenched asunder.

2nd soldier. And certainly I am nearly ruined
So long have I borne under.

3rd soldier. This cross and I must part in two,
Otherwise my back will break in pieces at once.

4th soldier. Lay it down again and leave off complain-
ing,
This deed will never be done by us.

* * * * *

1st soldier. Lift up and soon He shall be there,
Therefore fix on your fingers securely.

3rd soldier. Oh, lift!

1st soldier. Alas!

4th soldier. A little more.

2nd soldier. Hold then!

1st soldier. Now now!

2nd soldier. The worst is over.

3rd soldier. He weighs a wicked weight.)

This incident lacks Biblical precedent: if he had followed his Biblical source faithfully, the dramatist would have presented Jesus setting His cross down on the top of Calvary. But by staging the feeble struggles of the executioners beneath the cross, he undercut them, debased them comically. The incident approaches slapstick with the executioners groaning and cursing. In spite of the terror they unleash in stretching Jesus and in jolting the cross into place, the executioners themselves are also comic figures.

Mortificacio Christi and Burial of Jesus. The dramatist constructs this play so that the grotesque only

Cay. He called hym kyng,
 Ille joie hym wring!
Ja, late hym hyng,
 Full madly on þe mone for to mowe.

An. To mowe on þe moone has he mente,
 Wel fye on þe, faitour in faye,
 Who trowes you, to þi tales toke tente.
 þou saggard, þi selffe gan þou saie,
 þe tempill distroie þe to-daye
 Be þe thirde day ware done, ilk-a-dele,
 To rayse it þou schulde þe arraye.
 Loo! howe was þi falsed to feele,
 Foule falle þe!
 For thy presumpcyoun
 þou haste thy warisoune,
 Do faste, come doune,
 And a comely kyng schalle I calle þee
 (XXXVI, 75-91).

(Caiphas. He called Himself king,
 May ill joy twist Him!
 Yes, let Him hang,
 With utter madness to make faces at the moon.

Annas. To make faces at the moon He intended,
 Oh! fye on you, trickster in faith,
 Who trusts you, Who took heed to Your tales,
 You, sagging one, You Yourself did say,
 If the temple were destroyed today
 Before the third day was wholly finished,
 You should prepare Yourself to erect it.
 Lo! How Your falsehood was perceived,
 May evil things befall You!
 For Your presumption,
 You have Your final reward,
 Do quickly come down,
 And I shall call You a comely king.)

The frustration of these two, the surrogates of Lucifer, will project comedy upon the backdrop of Jesus' crucifixion. This frustration stems from their inability to induce Pilate to alter that inscription above the cross. Adamant in refusal, Pilate hurls at them a parting taunt:

Quod scripci, scripci.

3one same wrotte I

I bide þer-by,

What gedlyng will grucche there agayne

(XXXVI, 114-117).

(What I have written, I have written,

That which I wrote

I stand by it,

Whatever scoundrel will grumble against it.)

This epithet "gedlyng" comically undercuts Caiphas and Annas. Through Pilate, the audience mocks the two most responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Throughout these pageants, from the conspiracy of play twenty-six to Jesus' death in play thirty-six, the playwright has used the grotesque as a structural principle. To make the sufferings of Jesus as edifying as possible, he had to induce terror in his audience. But to keep the terror aesthetically tolerable, he had to undercut it with comic incidents. While Jesus painfully moves closer and closer to horrendous death, the audience jeers at one devil-figure after another. This laughter controls the terror of the entire sequence.

CHAPTER X

THE GROTESQUE IN THE PLAYS OF JESUS' TRIUMPH (XXXVII - XLVIII)

The grotesque is more important to the dramatic technique of the Passion Sequence than to that of the post-crucifixion plays. In the former, the grotesque conveyed the intense horror of Jesus' death and, at the same time, prevented it from numbing the feelings of the audience. By characterizing Jesus' torturers comically, the playwright undercut, and thereby controlled, the horror they aroused. But the focus of the post-crucifixion plays is Jesus' triumph over sin, manifested in His resurrection from the dead. This focus precludes any horror even remotely approaching that caused by the protracted torture of Jesus. As the horror diminishes, the need for laughter as a defensive mechanism lessens. The grotesque, therefore, almost entirely disappears from these plays. Even where it occurs, it is incidental, not central, to the dramatic technique. Its diminished importance corroborates the conclusion to chapter one. In that the grotesque reflects the nature of sin, the dramatist, when emphasizing Jesus' triumph rather than the character of sin, necessarily

makes limited use of it.

Peopled by supernatural agents of sin, "The Harrowing of Hell" should feature the grotesque. Yet even this play illustrates how the intensity of the grotesque wanes when sin is not given the central emphasis. The terror aroused never threatens the audience. A far cry from the staged horror of Jesus' execution is the prophets' narration of their pains. The dramatist does not make these pains integral to the plot: he does not, for example, build scenes that develop the sufferings of the prophets. The prophets merely tell the audience that they are suffering:

His light is on vs laide,
He comes oure cares to kele
(XXXVII, 83-84).

(His light is laid on us,
He comes to cool our cares.)

Besides this narration, the devils induce terror because of their traditional roles as the marplots of man's redemption. But, again, the structure of the plot does not reflect this terror. The audience never sees the devils torturing the caged prophets. Terror that arises from narration and from the presence of devils lacks the intensity of that wrought by the staged torturing of Jesus.

The comedy, consequently, preponderates. Besides its usual function of undercutting what little terror there is, the comedy here serves another, more important,

purpose. That is, it lets the audience share in Jesus' triumph. By heaping derision upon Satan, the audience assumes toward him a position of superiority comparable to Jesus' after His resurrection. Unlike the terror, moreover, the comedy is integral to the plot structure.

This plot singles out Satan as the principal target of laughter. Quaking at Jesus' approach, Belsabub blasts Satan as a cowering armchair general, too ready to slough off upon underlings his own responsibility to fight:

Sattan. I badde 3e schulde be boune
If he made maistries more,
Do dyngge þat dastard doune,
And sette hym sadde and sore.

Belsabub. 3 a, sette hym sore, þat is sone saide,
But come þi selffe and serve hym soo
(XXXVII, 201-206).

(Satan. I ordered that you should be ready
If He displayed more mastery.
Do knock that coward down,
And set Him sad and sore.

Belsabub. Yes, set Him sore, that is easily said,
But come yourself and serve Him such a turn.)

This comic deflation prepares for Satan's later defeat by Jesus. Intent upon detaining the prophets in hell, Satan adduces many arguments, each of which Jesus refutes. His allegation, for instance, that Jesus' humble parentage invalidates His pretensions to divinity really points up Satan's own gullibility:

My godhede here I hidde
In Marie modir myne,
For it schulde no3t be kidde,

To be nor to none of thyne
(XXXVII, 249-252)

(I hid My godhead
In Mary My mother,
So that it would not be shown
To you or to any of your companions.)

Repeatedly confuted, Satan turns to violence. Again, however, his violence redounds to his aggravated suffering. In action patterned upon the overthrow of Lucifer in the first play, Michael hurtles Satan deeper still into hell's pit:

Jesus. Mighill! myne Aungell, make be boune,
And feste yone fende, bat he not flitte.
And deuyll, I comaunde be go doune,
In-to thy selle where pou schalte sitte.

Sattan. Out, ay! herrowe! helpe mahounde!
Nowe wex I woode oute of my witte.

Belsabub. Sattan, his saide we are,
Nowe schall pou fele bi fitte.

Sattan. Allas! for dole, and care,
I synke in to helle pitte
(XXXVII, 339-348).

(Jesus. Michael! My angel, make yourself ready,
And fasten that fiend, so that he does not escape.
And devil, I command you to go down,
Into your cell where you shall sit.

Satan. Oh! help, Mahomet!
Now I grow mad out of my wits.

Belsabub. Satan, we said this before,
Now you have met your match.

Satan. Alas, for grief, and care,
I sink into hell's pit.)

The gloating Belsabub mocks the fallen Satan. Hell, a place where subordinates turn upon their leader, embodies confusion. By making him the butt of ridicule, the playwright obviously undercuts Satan. Had he, however,

first intensified the terror that Satan traditionally arouses and then undercut it with laughter, he would have structured an intense grotesque scene. Consider the play of the Temptation. There, the playwright set up Diabolus as a redoubtable threat to Jesus. His first soliloquy primed the audience's fear for Jesus' well-being. The laughter resulting from Diabolus' repeated failure to ensnare Jesus clashed against this initial fear. Here, on the other hand, Satan generates too much laughter, too little terror. As a result, only minimal tension between terror and laughter is sustained. This imbalance between the terrible and the ludicrous drains the grotesque of its intensity.

In the next play, the dramatist develops Pilate as a surrogate devil. Inimical to Jesus, he counsels Caiphas and Annas to countenance the murder they have contrived:

By oure assente sen we dyd dye
 Jhesus þis day;
 þat we mayntayne and stand þer-by
 þat werke all-way
 (XXXVIII, 9-12).

(By our consent since we did cause
 Jesus to die this day;
 We must maintain and stand by
 That work in every way.)

This speech channels some of the terror produced by the Passion Sequence into this play. As ultimate executioner, Pilate attracts to himself the terror that his brutal underlings have generated.

By vexing this surrogate devil, consequently, the

playwright sets off laughter in the audience. The frustration of a terror-arousing stimulus releases laughter to ward off the threatening emotion. Two incidents comically frustrate Pilate. First, Centurio refuses to second Pilate's official legerdemain. To Pilate's chagrin, he values truth more than his master's favor:

To mayntayne trouthe is wele wor~~si~~,
 I saide 3ou, whanne I saue hym dy,
 þat he was Goddis sone almyghty,
 þat hangeth þore;
 3itt saie I soo, and stande þerby
 For euermore
 (XXXVIII, 73-78).

(It is very worthy to maintain truth,
 I said to you, when I saw Him die,
 That He was God Almighty's son,
 Who hanged there;
 Still I say so, and stand by it
 For evermore.)

Secondly, the report of the soldiers stationed at Jesus' tomb detonates Pilate's rage, revealing his lack of self-possession:

11 Mil. þe prophete Jesu þat 3e wele knawe
 Is resen and gone, for all oure awe,
 With mayne and myght.

Pil. þerfore þe deuill hym selffe þe drawe,
 Fals recrayed knyght
 (XXXVIII, 360-364)!

(2nd soldier. The prophet Jesus, whom you well know,
 Has risen and gone, despite our power to excite fear,
 With strength and might.)

Pilate. Because of that may the devil himself drag you,
 False recreant knight!)

By thus staging the repeated frustration of Pilate, first by Centurio, then by the soldiers guarding the tomb, the play-

wright obviously debases him as an agent of the terrible. As in the previous play, however, the terror that Pilate arouses does not derive from the structure of the plot. Only by association with those brutes whose sadistic impulses he let loose, does Pilate become a devil-figure. In this play, however, the audience never sees him do anything that induces terror. The terror, consequently, remains on the periphery, in the audience's memory of what Pilate has done to Jesus: it does not grow from the structure of this play.

The next three plays ("Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene," "The Travellers to Emmaus Meet Jesus," and the mispositioned "The Purification of Mary; Simeon and Anna Prophecy") do not draw upon the grotesque as a structural principle. Instead of highlighting the nature of sin, they stage the proper response of the Christian to Jesus' resurrection. Reflecting the medieval notion of comedy, each centers upon the change from adversity to prosperity.

The contrast between Magdalene's opening and closing lines records this change in her lot. Despair, arising from her memory of Jesus' agony, prompts her initial lament:

Allas, in þis worlde was neuere no wight
 Walkand with so mekill woo.
 Thou dredfull dede, drawen hythir and dight,
 And marre me, as þou haste done moo
 (XXXIX, 1-4)

(Alas, there never was a creature in this world
 Walking with so much woe,
 You dreadful death, draw near and make ready

To mar me, as you have done to many others.)

But Jesus' resurrection changes this despair to ecstasy:

Alle for jole me likes to synge,
 Myne herte is gladder þanne þe glee,
 And all for jole of thy risyng
 That suffered dede vppone a tree
 (XXXIX, 134-137)

(All for joy it pleases me to sing,
 My heart is gladder than bliss,
 All for joy because of Your rising
 Who suffered death upon a tree.)

The travelers to Emmaus undergo a similar change.

The pain that human sin inflicted upon Jesus is the burden
 of their early colloquies:

i Pereg. þanne myghtely to noye hym withall,
 In a mortaise faste lete hym fall,
 To pynne hym þei putte hym and peysed hym.

ii Pereg. Thei peysed hym to pynne hym, þat pereles
 of pese,
 þus on þat wight þat was wise wrozt þei grete wondir,
 3itt with þat sorowe wolde þei nost sesse,
 They schogged hym and schotte hym his lymes all in
 sondir
 (XL, 94-100).

(1st traveler. Then greatly to hurt Him,
 In a mortise they suddenly let Him fall,
 To torture Him they pushed Him and weighed Him down.

2nd traveler. They weighed Him down to torture Him,
 that peerless one of peace,
 There they wrought a great wonder on that person who
 was wise,
 Still even with that pain they would not stop,
 They jogged Him and shot His limbs all asunder.)

Having recognized the risen Jesus, who re-enacts that mys-
 tery that the Feast of Corpus Christi celebrates, the trav-
 elers feel transports of joy:

ii Pereg. We saugh hym in sight, nowe take we entent,
 By þe brede þat he brake vs so baynly betwene,

Such wondirfull wais as we haue wente
Of Jesus þe gente was neuere none seene.

1 Peregr. Sene was þer neuere so wondirfull werkes,
By see ne be sande, in þis worlde so wide
(XL, 179-184),

(2nd traveler. We sa^w Him in sight, now let us take
heed,
By the bread that He broke so closely between us,
Such wonderful ways as we have gone
Concerning Jesus the gentle there was never seen.

1st traveler. Such wonderful works were never seen,
By sea or by sand, in this world so wide.)

The physical change from decrepitude to virility
in Simeon parallels these emotional changes. Like Joseph
in play thirteen, Simeon suffers from the debility of great
age:

For I ame wayke and all vnwelde,
My welth ay wayns and passeth away,
Where so I fayre in fyrth or feylde
I fall ay downe, for febyll, in fay
(XLI, 91-94);

(For I am weak and entirely infirm,
My well-being ever wanes and passes away,
Wherever I go in wood or field
I ever fall down, because of feebleness, in faith;)

Upon hearing about Jesus' coming, however, old Simeon sloughs
off these infirmities:

At lorde, I thanke þe euer and ay,
Nowe am I light as leyf on tree,
My age is went, I feyll no fray,
Me thynke for this that is tolde me
I ame not olde
(XLI, 345-349).

(Oh! lord, I thank you ever and always,
Now am I as light as a leaf on a tree,
My age has gone, I feel no terror,
It seems to me that because of what has been told to
me I am not old.

3 a, 3 e wotte neuere what 3 e mene,
 youre witte it wantis,
 Ye muste thynke sen 3 e me þ us tene
 and tulle with trantis
 (XLII, 165-168).

(Yes, you never know what you mean,
 you are lacking in intelligence,
 You must seem so since you thus grieve me
 and pull me about with tricks.)

And yet the laughter that riddles Thomas' arrogant blundering lacks the derisive quality of that characterizing the grotesque. Because he is not one of the damned, but one whose sorrow is every bit as profound as his doubt, the audience cannot unrestrainedly deride him. Thus, the playwright develops neither the horror of sin nor the absurdity of the sinner. The basic elements of the grotesque, therefore, are wanting.

As in "The Incredulity of Thomas," the terror that "The Ascension" evokes stays peripheral. Mary adverts to the threat posed by the hostile Jews:

To dwelle amonge þes Jewes kene,
 Me to dispise will þei not spare
 (XLIII, 191-192).

(To live among these bold Jews,
 Who will not spare to despise me.)

But no Jews appear on the stage to realize this threat. Narration thus safely distances the terror. Peter's confident reaction to this threat further delimits the terror associated with these Jews:

For þei are full of pompe and pride,
 Itt may no3t auaile to þe ne me,
 Ne none of vs with þame to chide.

Prophite to dwelle can I none see,
 For-thy late us no lenger bide,
 But wende we vnto seere contre,
 To preche thurgh all þis worlde so wide
 (XLIII, 252-258).

(For they are full of pomp and pride,
 It can not do you or me or any of us
 Any good to chide with them.
 I can see no profit in living here,
 Therefore let us remain no longer,
 But let us go into several countries,
 To preach through all this world so wide.)

Peter's assured leadership thus defuses any threat that these Jews can muster. That general tendency of the post-crucifixion plays to arouse only marginal terror reveals itself here. Not focusing directly upon sin, this play cannot sustain enough terror for the grotesque to occur.

Like "The Harrowing of Hell," play forty-four "The Descent of the Holy Spirit" uses the grotesque, but only incidentally. The grotesque does not inform this play's structure, which highlights the change from adversity to prosperity. Still, the playwright does display the terror that sin arouses. Those Jewish doctors, for instance, are devil-figures. Swearing by Mahomet, they echo Satan's exit line in "The Harrowing of Hell":

Harke man, for Mahoundis bloode
 (XLIV, 155),

(Hark, man, for Mahomet's blood,)

By having the speech of these Jews reflect Satan's, the playwright signals that they are his agents. The terror they generate charges the speech of the fourth apostle. His fear has kept him from fulfilling Jesus' injunction to spread

the good news:

þe Jewis besettis vs in ilke aside
 þat we may nowdir walke nor wende
 (XLIV, 55-56)

(The Jews beset us on each side
 So that we can neither walk or go.)

The plot intensifies this terror. The Jews appear, conspiring to murder the apostles once they emerge from hiding:

11 Doc. But samme oure men and make a schowte,
 So schall we beste yone foolis flaye.

1 Doc. Nay, nay, þan will þei dye for doute,
 I rede we make nojt mekill dray,
 But warly wayte whan þei come oute,
 And marre þame þanne, if þat we may
 (XLIV, 87-92).

(2nd doctor. But gather our men and make a shout,
 So we shall best frighten those fools.

1st doctor. No, no, then they will die because of fear,
 I counsel that we make not much disturbance,
 But warily watch when they come out,
 And mar them then, if we can.)

This terror is sustained throughout the next scene showing the apostles receiving the Holy Ghost. Fortified with divine strength, Peter then routs these Jews, just as Michael overthrew their archetype. That basic comic formula by which the undercutting of the agent of terror produces laughter recurs here. The audience mocks the scampering Jews:

Pet. þe Jewez þat in Jerusalem dwelle,
 Youre tales are false, þat schall þe fynde;
 þat we are dronken we here you telle,
 Be-cause þe hope we haue bene pynnyd.
 * * * * *

1 Doct. There men hase mekill myght,

Thurgh happe þei here haue tone.

11 Doct. Wende we oute of þer sight,
And latte þem even allone
(XLIV, 181-204).

(Peter. You Jews who live in Jerusalem,
You shall find that your tales are false;
We hear you say that we are drunk,
Because you think we have been starved.
* * * * *

1st doctor. These men have much might,
Through the fortune that they have taken here.

2nd doctor. Let us go from their sight,
And let them alone.)

These Jews seem a throwback to the Passion Sequence. Their apparent triumph there has turned to unmistakable defeat here. Embodiments of evil and, hence, productive of both terror and laughter, they generate the grotesque. To appreciate how incidental the grotesque has become, however, one need only count the number of lines apportioned to the Jewish doctors. Out of two hundred and twenty-four lines, they have only twenty. Clearly the dramatist is not emphasizing sin in this play. The basic comic structure of salvation history, the change from adversity to prosperity consequent upon Jesus' triumph over sin, has pushed the grotesque from a central to only a peripheral position in the York cycle.

A typical post-crucifixion play, "The Death of Mary" keeps the terror carefully controlled. This play spotlights Mary's role as the mediator between God and man. The playwright, for instance, stages the fulfillment of Mary's request to Gabriel. At her request, the apostles, scattered

in remote countries, miraculously convene. To satisfy her last wishes, even Jesus appears at His mother's bedside:

Mar. Also, my bliste barne, þou graunte me my bone,
All þat are in newe or in nede and nevenes me þe name,
I praie þe sone, for my sake, þou socoure þame sone,
* * * * *

Jesus. Marie, my modir, thurgh þe myght nowe of me,
For to make þe in mynde with mirthe to be mending,
þyne asking all haly here heete I nowe þe
(XLV, 143-153).

(Mary. Also, my blessed child, grant me my request,
Namely that all who are in harm or in need and who
name me by name,
I pray You son, for my sake, that You relieve them
at once.
* * * * *

Jesus. Mary, My mother, through My might,
In order to amende Your mood with joy,
What you ask I now entirely promise you.)

Only one request will Jesus not grant. Contrary to Mary's wishes, the devil must be present at the moment of her death:

But modir, þe fende muste be nedis at þyne endyng,
In figure full foule for to fere þe
(XLV, 154-155);

(But, mother, the fiend must necessarily be present at your death,
With a very foul face to frighten you;)

At the play's end, "vno diabolo" accompanies the caroling angels to Mary's bere. Yet, beyond his frightening appearance, how much terror can this demon inspire? He speaks no lines in this play. The power of Jesus, moreover, radically circumscribes him:

Myne aungelis schall þan be a-boute þe.
And þerfore, dere dame, þou thar noȝt doute þe,
For douteles þi dede schall noȝt dere þe
(XLV, 156-158);

(My angels shall then be about you,

And therefore, dear lady, you need not fear,
For without a doubt your death will not harm you;)

Surrounded by angels, that demon is powerless. If evil is felt to be powerless, how much terror can it induce? For the grotesque to occur, the terror must threaten the audience. In this play, the forces of goodness so hem in the devil that he cannot arouse threatening terror.

Characteristic of these post-crucifixion plays, the terror in "The Appearance of Our Lady to Thomas" comes from the narration of Jesus' pains. The narration recalls to the audience the terror it has experienced in the Passion Sequence:

Vndewly þei demed hym,
þei dusshed hym, þei dasshed hym,
þei lusshed hym, þei lasshed hym,
þei pusshed hym, þei passhed hym
(XLVI, 35-38),

(Without right they judged Him,
They pushed Him violently, they slapped Him,
They cut at Him, they lashed Him,
They pushed Him, they struck Him violently,)

Again, however, the medium of narration distances the terror.

The laughter, moreover, is not directed at devils or their surrogates, but at the apostles. Ironically, they commit the same fault for which they chide Thomas. Having presented Mary giving her girdle to Thomas, the playwright shares with the audience the authenticity of his vision. The irony that informs the apostles' churlish rejection of Thomas therefore provokes laughter:

Pet. For witte þou wele þat worthy is wente on hir waye.
In a depe denne dede is scho doluen þis daye,
Marie, þat maiden and modir so milde.

Thom. I wate wele i-wis.

Jacob. Thomas, do way.

Andr. Itt forse noȝt to frayne hym, he will not be
filde.

Thom. Sirs, with hir haue I spoken
Lattar þanne yee.

John. þat may not bee

(XLVI, 237-244)

(Peter. Know that that worthy one has gone on her way.
In a deep den her dead body is buried this day,
Mary, that maiden and mother so mild.

Thomas. I know well, indeed.

James. Thomas, leave off!

Andrew. It is no use to ask him, he will not be polite.

Thomas. Sirs, I have spoken with her
Later than you.

John. That cannot be.)

The narrated horror and the toned-down laughter never clash. That is, the perpetrators of the horror are not simultaneously the targets of the laughter. The grotesque, therefore, is absent from this play.

The presence or absence of the grotesque thus serves as some indication of the playwright's intent. When it occurs, he is dramatizing the nature of sin, terrible and yet laughable. When it does not occur, he is inculcating some other truth. In "The Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin," for instance, he teaches truths already promulgated

in this sequence. First, Mary's final reward reflects the essentially comic structure of salvation history, its progression from adversity to prosperity:

Nowe schall þou haue þat I þe hight,
 Thy tyme is paste of all þi care,
 Wirschippe schall þe aungellis bright,
 Of newe schall þou witte neuere more
 (XLVII, 93-96).

(Now you shall have what I promised you,
 The time of all thy care has passed,
 Bright angels shall worship you,
 You shall never again know any harm.)

Secondly, the dramatist underscores Mary's power to funnel grace from God to man:

Be-fore all opere creatours
 I schall þe giffe both grace and might,
 In heuene and erþe to sende socoure,
 To all þat servis þe day and nyght
 (XLVII, 145-148).

(Before all other creatures
 I shall give you both grace and might,
 To send relief in heaven and earth
 To all who serve you day and night.)

The final play of the York cycle is singular. Whereas the preceding plays dramatize the past, this play leaps ahead to the future: it stages the general judgment at the first instant of eternity. He who once redeemed the world now returns to judge it.

For those spectators who observed the Feast of Corpus Christi with the reception of the sacraments, the time of trembling had become, at least for the duration of this play, the time of exultation. Assured of their salvation, they could unreservedly jeer at the reprobate, who had trans-

gressed God's laws with impunity for so long:

We mon be sette for our synnes sake
 For euere fro oure saluacioune,
 In helle to dwelle with feendes blake
 (XLVIII, 141-143),

(We must be set for the sake of our sins
 For ever from our salvation,
 To live in hell with black fiends,)

These publicly damned trigger the grotesque. Their agony arising from the anticipation of their eternal punishment inspires terror:

Allas! wrecchis, dere mon we by,
 Full smerte with helle fyre be we smetyn,
 Nowe mon neuere sawle ne body dye,
 But with wikkid peynes euermore be betyne
 (XLVIII, 133-136).

(Alas! wretches, dearly must we pay,
 Very painfully with hell-fire we will be smitten,
 Now neither soul nor body can ever die,
 But must be beaten evermore with wicked pains.)

Yet the Christian should distance this terror by laughter. That perfect conformity between the will of the saved and God's will prompts derision at the agony of the reprobate. The Ancrene Riwe emphasizes the pleasure the saved derive from the torments of the damned:

. . . þe child 3ef
 hit spurneð onsumme þing. ofer hurteð me
 beateð þ ilke þing þ hit hurt on. ⁊ þ ch
 ild is ipai3et ⁊ for 3et alhis hurt. ⁊ stille ð
 hise teares. for þi frourið ow seoluen. leta
 bitur iustus cum uiderit uindictam. God schal
 adomesdei don as þach heseide. dochter hur
 te þes þe. dude he þe spurnen inwraðfe
 ofer inheorte sar. in scheome ⁊ in teone. lo
 ke dochter loke hu he hit schal abuggen
 ⁊ þer 3e schulde seon buncin him wið þeo
 se deosles betles. þ wa bið him hise liues
 ⁊ 3e schule wel beon ipai3et þrof. for ow
 er will ⁊ godes wil schal beon swa ifei3et

þ 3e schule wullen al þ god wule. ⁊ he
al þ 3e wulle. 1

(. . . If the child strikes its foot on something, either I hurt or I beat that very thing on which it hurt itself. And the child is pleased and forgets all his hurt and stops his tears. Therefore comfort yourselves. The just one will rejoice when he sees the vengeance. God shall act on the day of doom as though He said: 'Daughter, did this one hurt you? Did he spurn you in cruelty, did he make you sore in heart, in shame and in grief? Look, daughter, look how he shall pay for it.' And there you shall see him beaten with those devils' beetles so that woe will be to him with respect to his life. And you shall be well pleased because of that. For your will and God's will shall be so joined that you shall will all that God wills. And He shall will all that you will.)

Yet, like the other post-crucifixion plays, "The Judgment Day" uses the grotesque only incidentally. The central action points up the efficacy of charity in obtaining salvation. God the Father sets Jesus up as the paragon of this virtue:

For þame he shedde his harte and bloode
What kyndnesse myght I do þame more
(XLVIII, 31-32)?

(For them He shed His heart's blood,
What greater kindness could I do for them?)

Jesus presents His wounded body to show the plenitude of His charity:

Beholdis both body, bak, and side,
How dere I bought youre brotherhede
(XLVIII, 249-250).

¹The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe Edited from B. M. Cotton MS. Cleopatra C. VI, ed. by E. J. Dobson, Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 141-42.

(Behold both body, back, and side,
How dearly I paid for your brotherhood.)

Finally, charity is the standard separating the saved from
the damned:

What tyme *his* dede was to me done,
When any *that* nede hadde, nyght or day,
Askid *you* helpe and hadde it sone
(XLVIII, 310-312).

(That time this deed was done to Me,
When any that had need, night or day,
Asked help from you and had it at once.)

With respect to its use of the grotesque, the post-crucifixion sequence differs from the Passion Sequence. Integral to the latter as an image of sin, evoking both horror and laughter, the grotesque almost drops out of the post-crucifixion plays. Where it does occur, it is only incidental to the dramatic structure. The intent of the playwright to focus upon Jesus' triumph relegated the grotesque to a subordinate function in the post-crucifixion plays.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I tried to point out the dramatic values informing the York cycle of mystery plays. To appreciate these values, one has to understand the function of the grotesque. By overlooking its function, such critics as Prosser, Rossiter, and Styan have denigrated the Passion Sequence. Prosser, for instance, says that it offends the religious and aesthetic senses. This position denies that the major portion of the cycle has any dramatic merit. It limits the study of medieval drama to specific plays culled from the cycles, such as the perennial favorite Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play. The assumption, expressed or tacit, that only these plays have value disparages the dramatic skills shaping the cycle into an artistic whole.

To study the dramaturgy of the entire York cycle, I had to formulate a working definition of the grotesque. A good way to define it is to imagine two boundaries, the comic and the terrible. Both comedy and terror involve distortion. Comedy controls the distortion: the audience is ever aware of the norm from which the distortion departs. Terror, on the other hand, arises when the distortion is so radical that the norm itself is virtually annihilated: the

audience confronts a situation for which its usual categories, its pigeonholes for the real, are inadequate. Between these boundaries lies the grotesque, neither pure comedy, nor pure terror, but partaking of both. The grotesque fuses the terrible with the laughable. It contains a meaningful element, the comic, and a meaningless element, the terrible. In play thirty-five, for example, the dramatist stages the crucifixion of Jesus. Terror abounds: Jesus is stretched until His limbs are loosened from their sockets; the cross is bounced into the mortise to jolt the affixed body. How can the audience orient itself to this situation? The torturers deviate monstrously from the norm of human compassion. Yet even while it recoils in terror, the audience laughs at these torturers. They dislocate their shoulders lugging the cross to Calvary. The audience appreciates how their clumsiness deviates from the norms of competence and dignity. This awareness triggers laughter that discharges some of the pent up terror. At the very climax of the cycle, Jesus' sacrifice to atone for Adam's sin, the playwright constructs a grotesque scene. The crucial importance of the grotesque is apparent.

Having defined the grotesque, I then attempted to reconstruct what it meant for the medieval audience. Fusing the terrible and the laughable, the grotesque reflected the nature of sin. Augustine's understanding of sin underlay this use. From the standpoint of the sinner,

sin is terrible, a horrid deformation of his nature; from the standpoint of God's total order, sin is laughable. The sinner harms only himself. God directs even sin to a higher good end. As embodiments of sin, devils are subjects of derision. Aelfric had used the grotesque to characterize the vandals in his life of King Edmund. Manning had used the grotesque to characterize the revellers at Colbek. The York playwright used the grotesque to stage the fall and redemption of man.

To use the grotesque, the York playwright had to create comic characters. Horror was implicit in his subject matter: comedy was not. He modeled his comic characters upon Lucifer. The sinners in the York cycle, for the most part, are surrogate devils, types of Lucifer. The audience could unrestrainedly mock such devil-figures as Pharaoh, Herod, Caiphas, Annas, Pilate and his underlings.

The grotesque provides a good indication of the focus of an individual play. When it occurs, the playwright is dramatizing the nature of sin; when it does not occur, he is teaching some other truth. The grotesque, consequently, is most important to the Passion Sequence. In dramatizing what Jesus endured to redeem the sinner, the playwright evoked intense horror, yet kept that horror artistically controlled by breaking its flow with comic incidents.

The grotesque, then, had both a didactic and an aesthetic function. As a book to the unlettered, it taught the medieval understanding of sin: that sin distorts the nature of the sinner; that sin shares in the confusion of hell; that sin fails to subvert God's ultimate order. As a dramatic technique, it enabled the playwright to regulate the terror that a vivid dramatization of sin and its effects would necessarily generate. By laughing at sin, the audience discharged some of the terror that sin arouses. If one overlooks the function of the grotesque, he fails to appreciate the York mystery plays for what they were: works of art that conveyed moral instruction through a sophisticated dramatic technique.

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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