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On the Unruly Power of Pain in Middle English Drama

Susan Nakley

According to Biblical tradition, prelapsarian humans knew not pain. In Genesis's narrative of the Fall, pain follows fear, knowledge, and transgression into this world. Womankind's painful labor and mankind's painful toiling for food appear as divine punishments for the sin of consuming the forbidden fruit. Middle English drama cyclically plays out these performative forms of punishment. Such vernacular Biblical drama generally proceeds through episodes that the craft guilds produced and then performed repeatedly in sequence on feast days like Corpus Christi. Cycle plays were among the most common media through which ordinary Christian workers encountered the Bible and their religion in late medieval England, when the English Bible itself was not as widely available as it is now.

Elaine Scarry has engaged ancient texts in formulating theories of pain that insist on more ethical approaches to the present and future. She suggests that we might understand humankind's inheritable pain as a consequence "of the knowledge that comes with eating of the tree of good and evil."¹ Scarry reads Genesis's presentation of pain not as retribution, but rather as the "problematic knowledge" that accompanies Adam and Eve's new awareness of themselves "as creatures with bodies in the presence of one who has no body."² In doing so, Scarry posits that the capacity to feel pain has an important function beyond punishment. For Scarry, pain burdens humans with awareness of their own bodies and defines them as incarnate beings distinct from a carnally unencumbered divine.³ In other words, pain funds knowledge by hurting the knower.

This knowledge poses dangers to all who possess it and accept it precisely because of its interdependence with pain. According to both the narrative of the Fall in Genesis and Scarry's epistemology of pain, pain and the knowledge of good and evil are mutually inclusive. Pain is knowledge that disempowers humanity. Rather than

depict knowledge as equal to power, medieval drama reveals how pain reflects the subject's dependence upon patriarchy, both spiritual and temporal. In the case of Genesis, God's supreme patriarchy is clear; and, in Scarry's narrative, the hegemonic forces that determine how pain signifies truth indicate patriarchy. These distinctions and power dynamics bear heavily on medieval drama's central narratives. Individual dramas do not always accept this weight passively; rather, their performance of pain resists the idea that pain is directly related either to knowledge or to power.

The Fall's severe consequences inspire literature and commentary that links performative bodily experience with narrative, with the Biblical story of the Fall itself and with the human history it begets. Christian scriptures and commentaries take the Hebrew Bible's interest in the body and refocus it more narrowly on a sacrificial body of Christ both incarnate and divine. Scarry explains that Christianity's move away from Judaism requires belief in Christ's simultaneously human and divine suffering, which "subverts this severed relation between pain and power, assuring that sentience and authority reside at a single location."⁴ Christian scriptures add value and power to other human experiences of pain by amplifying pain's spiritual associations, even as they exacerbate tensions between spiritual and temporal values. Indeed, Middle English literature finds much meaning in pain.⁵ In medieval drama, as Marla Carlson writes, "pain creates order."⁶ Nevertheless, I argue that rather than consistently creating and reinforcing divine order, some representations of pain work subversively to reorder and to disorder medieval drama's conventional cultural politics, even challenging its dominant discourses of patriarchy and empire.

In this essay, I analyze selections from the *York Play of the Crucifixion*, a Passion play whose originality and subversive imagination derive from its acute focus on the process of crucifixion and its claustrophobic *mise-en-scène*; the *Second Shepherds' Play*, which adapts and innovates the form of the Nativity play, exceeding yet contributing to that tradition; and the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, a late fourteenth-century Lollard vilification of drama. Key moments in these works admit the unreliability of pain; and each, in its unique way, manages to harness the unruly power of pain in medieval Christian culture. My reading demonstrates how Middle English Biblical plays and commentary negotiate deep skepticism about pain's signifying power alongside abiding belief in pain's utility. Such skepticism and belief coincide with the medieval theater's pervasive and often self-conscious representations of suffering bodies, making drama a crucial medium

for studying the power of pain at the intersection of late medieval religious and political cultures.

The *Towneley Second Shepherds' Play* and the *York Play of the Crucifixion*, which are the most canonical and widely anthologized examples of medieval drama, boast the richest critical histories of all Middle English Biblical plays. Similarities beyond their shared popularity, however, are less obvious. The York cycle's long and well-documented production history ties it directly to the city of York. Meanwhile, scholars still debate whether or not Wakefield, the town most possibly associated with the Towneley cycle, ever attained the size or prosperity necessary to produce a massive cycle like York's.⁷ Pain is a more obvious focus in the *York Crucifixion* and related Passion representations; yet, the *Second Shepherds' Play* meditates just as deeply on more mundane pains, such as those associated with poverty, cold, and childbirth, departing from this meditation only in its anomalous concluding scene.

Both the *Second Shepherd's Play* and the *York Crucifixion* reorder pain's relationship with divine punishment. The former acknowledges pain's connection with the dangerous knowledge that Scarry notes, and yet insists on performing surprisingly subversive cultural power. Similarly, the *York Crucifixion's* perspective on capital punishment according with Roman colonial law disorders the standard Christian spiritual interrelation of pain with power and knowledge. This pageant's attention to pain felt by the crucifiers as well as by their victim further broadens its perspective to include the politics of oppression. Ultimately, the *Crucifixion* performs the very temporal and political knowledge of pain that conventional Passion representations avoid and sublimate. According to such representations, Christ's "murder, executed by the Roman state in its desire to quell possible 'terrorist actions' against its authority in Palestine, is sanctified and consequently depoliticized," as Anthony Kubiak observes.⁸ Referring to the Corpus Christi cycles generally, Kubiak evokes York, yet he does not analyze the *York Crucifixion*. My reading of the *York Crucifixion* emphasizes that this unique pageant is a deeply political performative act.

Robert Mills explains that pain in late medieval "secular discourse" generally "operated to buttress state power and social distinction"; meanwhile, in religious discourse, "it effected the transfiguration—the making sublime of death, suffering, and sacrifice. But sometimes, just sometimes, it also provided spaces in which to work through more subversive possibilities: empathy with and opposition to the pain of the punished, fantasies of resistance and empowerment, even forms of eroticism that transgress accepted norms."⁹ In the present essay, I follow

Mills to demonstrate how pain makes space for subversive possibilities within the *Second Shepherds' Play* and the *York Crucifixion*. The extent of this subversion may be read against the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, which carefully enumerates and scrutinizes drama's dangers generally, and the spiritual dangers of dramatizing pain in particular.¹⁰ Indeed, the *Tretise* implicates drama itself as a specific sort of transgression deserving punishment. The *Treatise*, however, reintroduces pain not simply as a hazard, but more fully as a tactic: the *Tretise* needs to represent pain and fear; that need then belies a desire not only to understand, but also to manipulate, pain's unruly power. This desire for control parallels that which drives drama's own investments in pain and clarifies pain's enduring political consequence in medieval drama, as this essay's final section explains.

From Punishment to Power

The *Second Shepherds' Play* devotes most of its time, poetry, and dramatic ingenuity to the story of married thieves, Mak and Gyll, and shepherds Coll, Gib, and Daw, all poor northerners as well as natural-born philosophers eager to critique sundry forms of temporal, as opposed to spiritual or eternal, oppression. The shepherds enter as suffering social critics poised for revolutionary action, but somehow exit as apolitical dreamers singing Christ's praises while visiting him and the Blessed Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. The play's ending, then, divorces itself from the work's subversive concerns with temporal suffering, conforming at the eleventh hour to medieval conventions of spiritual salvation yet appearing anomalous in relation to the rest of the play. Although all the characters complain poignantly of the worldly pain and injustice they suffer, Gyll best understands pain's nature, its utility, and the gender politics attached to it. This awareness equips her to demonstrate how easily one might fake pain to gain power; by lying down, groaning, and drawing attention to her female body, Gyll refuses to allow conventions of pain as womankind's punishment to rule her.

The play sharpens its point about the falsifiable nature of pain by allowing us to listen as Gyll concocts the plan and as she and Mak perform their parts. When Mak comes home with a lamb stolen from the three sleeping shepherds, Gyll predicts he will hang for the crime, but soon decides to hide the wooly beast in her cradle and to "lyg besyde in chyldbed, and grone" ["lie beside in childbed, and

groan"] (335).¹¹ So, Mak follows Gyll's lead and uses pain to transform theft into birth by returning to the shepherds, pretending to wake after they do, and fabricating a dream of Gyll in painful labor: "I was flayd with a swevyn, / My hart out of sloghe. / I thought Gyll began to crok and travell full sad, / Welner at the first cok, of a yong lad" ["I was flayed with a dream, / Cut my heart out. / I thought Gyll began to croak and labor very seriously, / Well-nigh at the first cock-crow, of a young lad"] (384–87). Mak seeks pity with this two-pronged appeal to sympathy for pain. He insists that the dream itself flays and torments *him* just as it reveals Gyll's pain to him; here he plays the deeply sympathetic husband who feels his wife's pain.¹² This self-presentation departs from Mak's initial commiseration with the shepherds through their shared trials as married men, where he complains bitterly about Gyll, even wishing her dead (236–52). Mak's lines above frame pain as a game-changing force: Gyll's pain endears her to him. After delivering them, Mak rushes home to rehearse the bogus labor plot with Gyll, lest we forget their deceitfulness.

Neither rascal can prevent the shepherds from seeking their sheep, but Gyll keeps them at bay with the charade of her body in pain. She exploits the fact that pain is subjective: there is no outwardly evident difference between pain felt and pain simulated for the observer, who must interpret reports or performance—whether staged or spontaneous—even to begin to understand another's pain. When the shepherds arrive as expected, they hear Mak sing a lullaby. Gyll moans, groans, and delivers important lines. She cries, "Ich fote that ye trede goys thorow my nese" ["Each foot that you tread goes through my nose"], calling attention to interactions between the actors' human bodies, and "I swelt!" ["I faint!"], which highlights the body's vulnerability (489, 525). And she exclaims, "A, my medyll!" ["Ah, my middle"] pointing directly to the sole female body that the pageant represents and its stomach/womb, which distinguishes it from the male bodies on stage (534). Mak responds accordingly and as the couple coordinate their grumbles with sympathetic rejoinders, the shepherds slowly accept this performance as evidence of pain, give up, declare themselves mistaken, and leave. Here, a mere spectacle of the female body in postpartum pain defends against the shepherds' suspicions, demonstrating the real efficacy of pain, with its easily simulated nature, to reshape social politics. By performing the female body fraught with its signature trauma, Gyll disguises the theft, distracts the shepherds, and forcefully ejects them from her home.

Although Mak's grand scheme to feast on the stolen lamb without being discovered ultimately fails, Gyll's contribution, the general appeal to pain, impressively succeeds, for the shepherds return only to offer a gift to the baby they believe she has delivered. When they do discover their sheep instead, they also show mercy to the thieves. Despite Gyll's earlier forecast of hanging and Mak's fears of terrible retribution, the shepherds neither report him to the authorities nor beat him. They simply toss him in a blanket, which Susan Deskis reads as a mild punishment for unworthy adversaries, and leave.¹³ Gyll suffers absolutely no punishment and is no worse off in the end than she is at the play's start; the text even fails to specify whether or not the shepherds carry away their sheep.¹⁴

Tensions between spiritual salvation and temporal survival are at the heart of the *Second Shepherds' Play's* representation of pain, birth, and the human condition. Mary Stearns offers useful insights on the pageant's presentation of the relationship between this world and the next in her comparison of Gyll with both Eve and Mary. As Stearns sees it, by controlling Mak and subverting patriarchy, Gyll "represents the perversion of the natural order and is symbolic of the problems of a world in need of redemption," thus invoking Eve, who herself "prefigures Mary, an identification which points up medieval typology and the linking of the Fall with the Redemption."¹⁵ In Stearns's reading, the pageant reinforces both conventional gender roles and Christian spirituality. Also considering the pageant's negotiation of temporal and spiritual values, but more interested in drama's capacity to teach without preaching doctrine, Rose A. Zimbardo suggests that it offers two possible paths: one shaped by God's will and spiritual welfare, and another shaped by man's will and temporal welfare. She concludes that Mak "has chosen worldly power over heavenly power," but the audience still has a choice to make.¹⁶ I focus more acutely on how Mak and Gyll's performance of pain reinterprets Eve's plight and celebrates the potential for temporal deliverance when men cooperate and share their power with women.

By rewarding sympathetic and merciful responses to pain, authentic or not, and by emphasizing practical and biological interdependences between the sexes, this pageant keeps us from drawing any clear-cut conclusions about pain's moral significance. In fact, the relationship between practical need and moral standing may be as complicated as that between temporal and spiritual welfare. Beginning, as it does, by bemoaning social abuses of power in particular and earthly pain and oppression in general, this play immediately suggests the possibility of

subverting the powers that be. Working men suffer for lack of sleep and complain of their overlords' oppression; the gentry easily subdues the lower class through excessive taxation and legislation; husbands fear their wives' abuse; wives wonder at their own endless housework, and everyone shivers in the bitter cold, rain, and poverty that afflicts them all. "Thus," explains the shepherd Coll, "ar husbandys opprest, in pointe to myscary" ["are laborers oppressed to the point of death"], and so live their lives "in payne, anger, and wo" ["in pain, anger, and woe"] (22, 40). The only things these characters enjoy in abundance are the pain of life in northern England's punishing weather and the awareness of social injustice, specifically a sense that those who feel pain tend to be victims of others' moral failings. The play thereby diverges from the strict equation of pain and deserved punishment that Genesis's third chapter makes. The powers that be are far from fair in the *Second Shepherds' Play's* spiteful and oppressive landscape; and so it is easy to recognize some justice in subversive behavior. Gyll's success shines in this context.

Gyll appraises her resources and manages to create power with all she really has, with the one thing these characters share: pain. She performs the oldest kind of pain in the book of Genesis, where childbirth appears as the world's first variety of physical pain and the divine's first notion of punishment. There, God promises to multiply Eve's labor pains and those of her daughters, while also granting their husbands power to govern them. But Gyll restructures the relationship among power, punishment, and the pain of childbirth. By acting as if she has just given birth, she recognizes, embraces, and finally adapts the aesthetics of divine punishment, the performance of pain, utilizing pain to distinguish herself as her household's true leader. When Mak agrees to perform in her show, she aptly proclaims, "Yit a woman avyse helpys at the last" ["Yet a woman's advice helps in the end"] (342). Later, when he dares criticize her, she reminds him of her considerable domestic responsibilities and declares, "Full wofull is the householde / That wantys a woman" ["Full woeful is the household / That lacks a woman"], stressing their interdependence within the household (419–20). Gyll asserts that womankind's special relationship with woe (grief certainly, and also physical and other painful distress) works two ways: women feel woe most intensely, because of the divine ordinance that assigns them responsibility for childbirth; and because women know such distress, they are supremely equipped to advise, help, and protect their families from woe.

Gyll's performance reflects Scarry's understanding of the relationship between knowledge and pain in *Genesis*, where "the body is made a permanently preoccupying category in the pain of childbirth, the pain of work required to bring forth food, and the ongoing unease in relation to any fixed shelter," for Gyll conflates these three main causes of distress and bodily awareness.¹⁷ Not only does Gyll's particular performance work to fuse childbirth with the need for food (the stolen lamb) and the protections of fixed shelter (ejecting the shepherds from her home), but it also manipulates *Genesis*'s marriage of pain with knowledge to gain power, yet without Christ, whom the Gospel deems necessary for knowing truth and God the Father himself. By redirecting the very pain a patriarchal God imposes on women toward her own advantage and touting the inherent value of womankind as a category, Gyll co-opts divine power itself and reorders its relationship with knowledge and punishment. She discovers and demonstrates that the divine punishment of labor pain inadvertently empowers women's bodies to ward off questions, to weaken the senses, to elicit sympathy and gifts, to get what they want—at least temporarily. Eternal spiritual power is a separate matter. Gyll's charade does indicate spiritual and moral corruption, as traditional readings have it, but her advice and her dramatized body defend her household's physical assets and curb her husband under her governance.¹⁸

Gyll's woeful routine is not only the pageant's most successful instance of subversive behavior, but is also the most well-received performance within the *Second Shepherds' Play*. Even before Mak plays the sympathetic husband, he attempts a more challenging role by entering the stage with a cloak over his clothes, a disguise or costume over his costume, and then layers a fake southern accent atop that, pretending to be the king's own yeoman. However, the shepherds do not buy his ruse for even a moment, famously demanding that he, "take outt that sothren tothe, / And sett in a tordel!" ["take out that southern tooth, / And set in a turd!"] (215–16). Gyll's performance triumphs by contrast, for the shepherds respond to her act sympathetically.

In Gyll's case, the shepherds best distinguish themselves as good, generous souls by suspending their disbelief and playing along with the performance: by being a receptive theater audience. Their momentary belief in Gyll's false performance of pain reveals a nevertheless honorable sense of their own characters, if the privilege of attending the Nativity is any measure. Their response suggests that sympathy for one's fellow creatures might work as a conduit between temporal and spiritual welfare to secure even spiritual deliverance. By reward-

ing the shepherds for responding compassionately to a charade as if it were real, the play intimates that not even God can control the pain he introduces into this world and with which he means to subdue women. While both Genesis and Scarry's readings of pain take it as a foundational human experience, this play pushes further to consider how sympathy for fellows in pain and skill at arts like performance might also shape what it means to be human. Pain does not need to be felt for it to be represented, believed, or to be effective, for performance has complicated the situation into which Genesis first introduces pain, making pain easier for women to manipulate and more difficult for men to understand.

The *Second Shepherds' Play* is not simply a performance piece; it is also a meditation on performativity that queries itself by admitting performance's dangerous flexibility alongside pain's unruly power. The play disrupts Genesis's spiritual network of pain, purpose, and gender politics. Gyll attempts to renegotiate Genesis's appraisal of punishment and gender politics expressly by using performance to adapt the role with which the sacred text originally punishes her and all women. Although this may damn her morally and spiritually and reinforce stereotypes about feminine duplicity, her performance of pain is the most successful subversive act on a temporal landscape deeply scarred by the pains of poverty and inhabited by characters who are just as intensely aware of abuses of power, which they bemoan from their opening lines forward. The *Second Shepherds' Play* reorders conventional relationships, undercutting late medieval Christianity's exaltation of spiritual over temporal welfare through its performances of pain and its serious interest in the complex, meaningful world such performances revivify.

Between Work and Knowledge

Like the *Second Shepherds' Play*, the *York Crucifixion* is at odds with itself, because it is so deeply interested in this world's complexities despite its requisite nods to a Christian spirituality that condemns such interest. It troubles the values of seeing, feeling, working, and knowing pain as surely as Gyll insists on the value of womankind and her woe. Dwelling on the iconic scene wherein Christianity attempts to reconcile power with pain, Christ's words from the cross struggle to manipulate the interrelation of pain, punishment, and knowledge through notions of work and the sense of sight. Christ's battered and

exposed body defends the value of the audience's capacity to "feele" his unparalleled pain "fully," while also absolving his crucifiers' sin in causing his pain expressly because, due to their spiritual ignorance, "[w]hat þei wirke, wotte þai noght" ["what they work, know they naught"] (256, 261). Much of this passion scene is conventional, suggesting how New Testament self-sacrifice, suffering, and absolution replace Old Testament transgression and punishment to offer kinder, more spiritual possibilities for human-divine relations. Yet, pain's very pervasiveness testifies to the pageant's powerful temporal and political valences, to its investment in human bodies and the pain they feel.

The *York Crucifixion* contextualizes its meditation on pain and punishment by isolating its crucifixion episode from other passion moments and from the death of Christ, rendering a bare-wagon production that ponders the generic details of nailing any man to a cross. Other English cycle plays treat the Crucifixion primarily as a vehicle of spiritual salvation and transcendence. For instance, the *Chester Cycle's* 892-line *Christ's Passion* includes Pontius Pilate washing his hands of guilt for Christ's murder and the 666-line *Towneley Crucifixion* invokes Christ's glorious Easter morning resurrection. The 300-line York pageant, with its limited scope, stark *mise-en-scène*, and small cast of characters, focuses primarily on Christ's crucifixion as a spectacle of pain and capital punishment.¹⁹ The play begins with Roman soldiers addressing each other as knights, thus emphasizing their military and social rank within the Roman imperial hierarchy, and proclaiming, "how lordis and leders of owre lawe" ["how lords and leaders of our law"] have judged and sentenced Christ to death (4). The unusual detail and the discrepancy between the size of the cross and its victim accentuate the practical nature of the work necessary to make one piece of a man, a cross, and a mortise. It ends with Christ still nailed to his cross, hyper-extended to fit its wide-set bore holes, not yet dead, and therefore not capable of being resurrected. The pain is epitomized by this liminal status. His criminalized, friendless, suffering human body is bound to a cross that identifies him with those responsible for his pain, those who count him responsible for their pain.

The pageant tortures both crucifiers and the crucified throughout, illuminating the fact that human bodies are vulnerable to pain regardless of guilt or agency. In fact, these soldiers complain more than their victim, confusing the roles of persecutor and victim and demonstrating the impossibility of hurting others without also hurting oneself in this and other colonial contexts.²⁰ The *Crucifixion's* humanizing impulse destabilizes the appeal of empire and spiritual transcendence

extolled throughout medieval art, reevaluating the thoroughly sentient world those priorities destroy.²¹ It ultimately demystifies the Passion's conventional representation of pain.²²

Because the *York Crucifixion* blurs lines between persecutors and persecuted, not with guilt, as René Girard's theory of scapegoat persecutions has it, but with shared pain and fear, it resists the trends Girard identifies elsewhere in Christian iconography.²³ Girard insists that true persecutors misrepresent scapegoats as persecutors precisely by blurring lines of guilt, agency, and power between themselves and their victims. He argues further that because Christ's crucifiers try and yet swiftly fail to scapegoat Christ, Christ rises untarred by the brush of persecution; and so he is not a true scapegoat.²⁴ However, because Christ Crucified is a quintessentially iconic image, "its ambiguity, anonymity, and formal simplicity give it," as W. J. T. Mitchell notes, "a life of its own that acquires new dimensions of meaning in every new context that it encounters."²⁵ The particular context of York's Christ Crucified matches temporal details with spiritual language, which together question and confirm the power Christ's body traditionally emblemizes. Mitchell explains how layering narrative readings with devotional readings of a sacred, iconic image unlocks rich meanings. He suggests that we must narratively put "a date and a proper name to the figure, and a provenance" to the image, and then also ponder devotionally "what it means to live with the image and the world it depicts, to ask what it wants from us," in order to understand well "the convergence of secular and sacred power" in images such as Christ Crucified.²⁶ Girard reads Christ and the entire Passion scene devotionally; indeed, most medieval readings of this icon are similarly exclusively devotional. I contend that the *York Crucifixion* returns Christ Crucified to his colonial provenance, thus allowing us to read Christ and the Passion both narratively and devotionally and so to make rare, crucial connections between secular and sacred power.

Christ's words in this pose essentially distinguish spiritual vision above temporal work. He calls out to all who walk by, implicating the audience, insisting that they feel the magnitude of what is happening to him and participate in his work of suffering through their sight. Here, passers-by see with more awareness than those whose violent manual labor facilitates Christ's spiritual work of salvation.²⁷ He pleads:

Al men þat walkis by weye or strete,
 Takes tente 3e schalle no travayle tyne.
 Byholdes Myn heede, Myn handis, and My feete,
 And fully feele nowe, or 3e fyne,
 Yf any mournyng may be meete,
 Or myscheve mesured unto Myne.
 My Fadir, þat all bales may bete,
 Forgiffis þes men þat dois Me pyne.
 What þei wirke, wotte þai noght;
 Therefore, My Fadir, I crave,
 Latte nevere þer synnys be sought,
 But see þer saules to save.

[All men that walk by way or street,
 Take heed you shall no labor lose.
 Behold My head, My hands, and My feet,
 And fully feel now, before you leave,
 If any mourning may be matched,
 Or mischief measured unto Mine.
 My Father, that all bales may beat,
 Forgive these men that do Me pain.
 What they work, know they naught;
 Therefore, My Father, I crave,
 Let never their sins be sought,
 But see their souls to save.] (253–64)

Beginning with the imperatives “take tente” (take heed, pay attention) and “byholde” (gaze, observe, contemplate, understand), Christ fuses the audience’s sight with powers of concentration and comprehension. The word “travayle” (to put forth great effort, to labor, to suffer) emphasizes links between work and pain, even as the story he tells ties work to sin, and the verb “tynen” (to lose, to perish, to waste, to fail, to forfeit) highlights the defeat and loss that those who fail to attend to this pain stand to suffer. Insisting that the soldiers deserve forgiveness even though they cause pain, expressly because they do not know what they work (or do), Christ drives a wedge between work and knowledge. He emphasizes instead the link between seeing and feeling; for him observing the traumatized human body (head, hands, and feet) aligns more closely with knowing pain. As if sight were the most extraordinary instrument in the divine toolbox, Christ closes by asking his father to overlook the soldiers’ sins and to “see” that their souls be saved, highlighting spectacle’s spiritual power.²⁸

In the Genesis episode that the *Second Shepherds' Play* challenges, sin introduces knowledge, then fear, pain, and work, in that order. The *York Crucifixion* reverses the order as the work of crucifixion brings pain to the bodies of Christ and the soldiers. Then, Christ invites audience members to know his pain by beholding his suffering body and feeling his "mournyng" (anxiety or grief) and his "myscheve" (trouble or injury) (257, 258). Feeling Christ's pain here is tantamount to experiencing fear.²⁹ The travail of crucifixion, its very work of suffering, thus brings pain, fear, and then knowledge, in that order, rehearsing a conventional narrative of how Christ's sacrifice atones for original sin.

However, this pageant refuses Christ the last word on work. Instead, the second soldier echoes his directive, "[t]akes tente 3e schalle no travayle tyne," when he challenges Christ, concluding, "Þis travayle here we tyne" ["This labor/work here we lose/waste"] (254, 300). This repeated language reveals the difficulties of distinguishing spiritual from temporal powers of pain. Christ valorizes his pain and even the soldiers' work of crucifixion by insisting on the spiritual utility of observing it, but soon the second soldier rebuts, evaluating the context of capital punishment and the work of public torture as wasted efforts. He asserts that what we see is all we get: temporal suffering with no spiritual truth of salvation, only the obvious pain and destruction. This invocation of waste confirms Christ's claim that the soldiers do not know what they are doing insofar as they miss their work's spiritual productivity.³⁰ Yet, by giving the second soldier the last word, the *Crucifixion* also admits how easily this scene might spiral out of divine control and how difficult it is for theological concepts of spiritual vision and knowledge to erase competing temporal experiences of sight and knowledge of pain. This unusual recognition of pain as waste resists the distractions of spiritual transcendence bound to the Passion.

Soldier Two's closing line recalls what he had earlier diagnosed as wastefulness, "Þis unthriftý thyng" ["this unprofitable thing"]: the business of capital punishment (300, 90). Playing on Christ's canonical moment of doubt, this line clears a space for reflection on waste, on the blood, hammers, nails, rope, skin, sweat, tears, wood—on the logistical facts of empire that always weigh on this story. Christ urges us to see an all too familiar spectacle of state execution as a sign of spiritual salvation, praying that God forgive the soldiers because they do not know what they are doing, because of their spiritual ignorance, even as the word "wirke" admits the mundane temporality of their colonial situation (261). Objecting to how "commentary on this sentence implies that the desire to forgive unpardonable executors forces Jesus

to invent a somewhat trifling excuse for them that hardly conforms to the reality of the Passion," Girard moves to "recognize its almost technical role in the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism."³¹ He takes Christ's words as proof that his persecutors, like others in the history of scapegoat persecutions, retain a "sincere belief in the culpability of their victim"; and so, since they "know not what they do . . . we must forgive them."³² But we discount the imperial context and the temporal narrative that informs spiritual devotion when we fail to acknowledge the reality that these soldiers *do* "know what they do": they are active agents of ideology. These soldiers break the scapegoat-persecutor mold just as this Christ transcends the Girardian scapegoat profile.

In their own ways, both Christ as a sacrificial figure and Girard as a reader of sacrifice underestimate the *York Crucifixion's* soldiers. They not only recognize waste, but they also construct a *mise-en-scène* that accentuates this story's colonial politics. Although the soldiers do not recognize Christ's spiritual worth or his claim to unite humanity, they do know what they are doing. And so do we. They ground this pageant in historical realities from its beginning as they explicate their location in time and space and express the pain and fear they know. Recall how the first soldier rallies his knights by citing "lordis and leders of owre lawe," the Roman legal hierarchy, which he claims for all through his plural possessive pronoun. Soldier Two replies with the specific geographic location in which they find themselves, "Calvarie," a public hill in ancient Israel, named for the tangible, physical skulls that remain of those executed (4, 7). The intersection of imperial law and colonial hill generates and explains the pain evident there. This location functions as a "contact zone," a space where, in Mary Louise Pratt's words, "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths."³³ The pageant's opening lines employ law, space, and political identity to position these figures in their contact zone. The claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* (a simple wagon stage and small group of five actors) thickens their colonial intimacy. Physical proximity and the time the figures spend together define them in relation to each other. Here close-range juxtapositions painfully merge Christ with crucifiers, colonial criminal with imperial soldiers, and religious community with tyrannical state. Not one of these identifications retains its meaning without its violently apposite second term. Christ is illegible without his crucifiers; and because those crucifiers define themselves by their work, they mean nothing without their victim. In this way, the *Crucifixion* takes a "'contact' perspective"

wherein "subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized . . . not in terms of separateness and apartheid, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices," yet "within radically asymmetrical relations of power."³⁴ In linking simple, secular time with pain, these soldiers consistently stress their co-presence, revealing how the politics of pain relates them with Christ.

As in the *Second Shepherds' Play*, pain in the *York Crucifixion* envelops its characters more powerfully than any other force. Each soldier causes Christ pain, injures himself, and feels reciprocal pain.³⁵ The first soldier takes responsibility for Christ's head, which symbolizes that soldier's leadership role (87–88); he suffers the most acute injury, a dislocated shoulder, announcing, "grete harme have I hente, / My schuldir is in sounder" ["great harm have I caught, / My shoulder is torn asunder"] (189–90). This dislocation is practically airborne, something he catches (*henten*) like a disease, a real but unintentional consequence of working in a contact zone. His words render injury and harm environmental hazards for all contact zone inhabitants. Meanwhile, the second soldier, who nails Christ's right hand (81–82), reports, "And sertis I am nere schente, / So lange have I borne undir" ["And certainly I am nearly ruined, / So long have I borne under"] (191–92). He reminds us of the more cumulative effects of their actions. The first soldier is able to pinpoint his pain in his dislocated shoulder, but fails to locate its source precisely; the second describes ubiquitous pain that is not confined even to the body and certainly not to one spot, though its source is more obvious. Soldier Two is "nere schente," nearly destroyed, ruined, punished—he is worn down and suffering from the full range of physical, technical, emotional, and perhaps spiritual difficulties he has experienced by overextending himself "so lange" over time (191, 192). Referring to lifting the cross from below, he indicates that he shares the weight of the world's sins, conventionally borne by Christ's body; acknowledging that he shares his victim's burden, this soldier identifies both with and against Christ. His experience reflects the pain of overextension, representing the empire's disproportionate reach and subtly critiquing the empire-building of late medieval civic, national, and ecclesiastical institutions. The second soldier's pain instantiates colonialism's cumulative toll on colonizers and colonized.

The third and fourth soldiers have somewhat more complicated complaints. Soldier Three attends to Christ's left hand, focusing on the pain of forced unity as he exclaims, "This cross and I in two

muste twynne, / Ellis brekis my bakke in sondre sone" ["This cross and I in two must part, / Else breaks my back asunder soon"], which reminds us that two parties, the Roman Empire and its most troublesome colony, intersect here (193–94). Finally, the fourth soldier explains that Christ's "lymmys on lenghe þan schalle I lede, / And even unto þe bore þame bringe" ["limbs on length then shall I stretch, / And even unto the bore holes them bring"], taking responsibility for all Christ's limbs and reemphasizing the most painful aspect of this particular crucifixion: the overextension that stretches Christ's body to conform to that overwide cross (85–86). Likewise, Soldier Four complains not about a particular sort of pain, but about overextended work time, therefore calling attention to the dynamic between capitalist ideology and pain in this moment of capital punishment. While the others complain of physical pain, the fourth expresses fear. "Þis dede for us will nevere be done" ["This deed for us will never be done"], he exclaims and adds, "So wille of werke nevere we wore" ["So lacking at work never we were"] (196, 205). As this soldier worries about the time, he reminds us how time distinguishes crucifixion from other forms of capital punishment. Scarry observes that, "The cross is unusual among weapons: its hurt of the body does not occur in one explosive moment of contact; it is not there and gone but there against the body for a long time. The identification is steady."³⁶ The cross works through the effects of time and space on human bodies; it conforms the body to the weapon's shape and maintains that steady identification with itself over an unendurable stretch of time. Crucifixion troubles time in matching everyday tools, hammers and nails (designed to shorten work time and to maximize efficiency) with a spectacular form (designed to protract the time of dying and to maximize both the pain its victim feels in his dying body and the fear other living bodies who see that body feel as they reflect upon it). Soldier Four disorders crucifixion's conventional power structure by performing pain and fear as consequences of shared time and by logging the overextended time these antagonists share.

The *York Crucifixion* illuminates pain's uselessness as its soldiers experience and confess the wastefulness of their time spent torturing. To turn away from this testament is to ignore the politics of time and pain. Instead, we must harmonize Christ's plea that we ponder the meaning of his suffering body with the soldiers' admission that we waste our efforts when we torture each other and overextend bodies and resources through colonialism and other violent forms of hegemony. Neither Christ's painful address nor the soldiers' stinging revelation is complete without the other.

Much like Gyll in the *Second Shepherds' Play*, these soldiers lack spiritual knowledge, yet boast insight into the politics of pain, the temporal knowledge of good and evil that Eve gains by eating the forbidden fruit and going through this life and its labors with eyes open. Theirs is the human condition, experiences of conquest and colonialism, the spectacular reality of public execution, which shaped English society for centuries. Their crucifix works as a sign of state-sanctioned violence across time. It emblemizes the pain of empire: the terror that the colonized will remain bound to those who fear they might actually come to define themselves, and might recover their violently ruptured social body. Although many in the *York Crucifixion's* original audiences are unlikely to have grasped these colonial and anti-colonial resonances, some would be familiar with Roman imperialism, crusaders, and their faded Levantine colonies and most could understand this spectacle as an implicit meditation on political torture in the theatrical and public form of medieval state punishments. Here, Christ's living, but dying, overextended body is not a simple de-politicization. This play considers the violent collision of a Roman Empire that mirrors the medieval monarchy, a Jewish Synod that mirrors medieval ecclesiastical persecution of heretics, and a victim, seen by some as a state criminal and believed by others to be completely innocent. Because York's medieval Corpus Christi pageants entered and commenced performing at Mickelgate Bar, the gate where severed heads of medieval convicts hung (as current York citizens remind visitors), the original audiences could have made such connections rather easily. By demystifying the Passion's aesthetics of pain, the *York Crucifixion* reevaluates the world we destroy and the systems of oppression we perpetuate when we forgive political persecution as uncritically and automatically as Christ advises.

Unruly Power or Subversive Potential: Critique through Pain

"The foundational moment of Christianity is a moment of torture, a moment that transforms an empty pagan method of mangling bodies into an ennobled model of exemplary behavior to be imitated by the faithful," writes Jody Enders, situating the unruliness of that power inherent in medieval Biblical drama's performance of pain.³⁷ Indeed, representing this exemplary behavior without also conjuring that wasteful, destructive business of mangling bodies is tricky to say the least. The *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* attempts to sidestep this trap

by condemning drama but, like the plays analyzed above, it belies itself with subversive potential. Both plays aim to extol spiritual values, yet subtly critique spiritual transcendence as a cover for various hegemonic ideologies that only temporal political strategies might effectively challenge; they admit that political oppression might not be undone through religious symbolism, as Girard implies. Likewise, the treatise aims to disavow drama, especially its representations of bodies in pain, yet conjures bodily pain to promote Christian spirituality.

Even though the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* warns against the risks of such signifying with suffering human bodies as the *Second Shepherds' Play* and *York Crucifixion* hazard, it revels in imagery that amplifies the usefulness of pain and fear. In the first of its two parts, which contains just 385 lines, the treatise brandishes its image of Christ besieged by Jewish tormentors three times in sixteen lines (133–49), aiming to deter Christians from the theater by insisting that Passion-playing thespians are not so different from those infamous Jews.³⁸ The treatise also waves God's *yerde*, or rod, four times in nineteen lines, instructing the faithful to maintain discipline by imagining it poised over their heads like a schoolmaster's rod threatening trembling schoolchildren (78, 81, 92, 97). Perhaps its most powerful image of pain is its comparison of a nail, which holds two things together, with the fear that grounds belief in God. Here, "drede smiten to Godward" ["fear beaten toward God"], works "right as a nail smiten in holdith two thingis togidere" ["just as a nail smitten in holds two things together"] (37–39). Thus, the treatise presses Passion imagery (beatings and nails) into its own rhetorical service even as it condemns Passion plays, warning, in closing, that viewing such plays drives that good old nail of dread out of place (717–24). This view of spectacle, pain, and fear counters views we find in the *York Crucifixion*, for here, rather than forging horizontal bonds across lines of difference or through compassion, threat and fear of pain strictly reinforce social hierarchies. Furthermore, the treatise fails to reach good, spiritual fear without also conjuring bad, corporal fear, suggesting that pain may be more useful toward social and political critique than toward spiritual salvation.

Unlike the *Crucifixion's* Christ, the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* eschews linking inward discernment with outward awareness. It lists and refutes six pro-drama positions, including that Passion performances often move men to true devotion through bitter tears (162–65) and that while some find God through earnest deeds, only game and play move others (66–75). It attacks the first point by classing weeping audiences with the daughters of Jerusalem who mourn Christ's suffering

as he reproves their tears in Luke 23. The treatise later declares that those who weep over the Passion weep not for their own sins or in good faith, perhaps interpreting the Gospel as not merely revising but absolutely refusing the body-conscious interrelation of pain and sin that Genesis introduces and that medieval drama develops (306–11). Turning slightly to address the matter of those moved only by play, the treatise condemns such false witnesses and deems their feigned holiness worse than obvious lack thereof. It indicates that not all forms of fear are equal; fear of sin is noble, but fear of pain is not. Thus, the treatise refutes two points with one reason: fear of pain damns sinners, shackling them to earthly bodies, while fear of sin frees and saves souls. As Sharon Aronson-Lehavi notes, “[t]he answers that the *ToMP* gives to these six reasons . . . repeatedly emphasize the performances’ bodily and earthly function as opposed to their self-proclaimed devotional qualities: they are meant for their creators’ and spectators’ enjoyment rather than for God.”³⁹ In this way, the treatise insists that temporal experiences and spiritual goals be mutually exclusive, rejecting any commerce drama might facilitate.

While drama and the treatise share concerns, interests, and even goals, drama approaches them with hope and the treatise with fear. Focusing on the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, an important Middle English play set in late medieval Spain that also treats pain, Heather Hill-Vasquez argues that both the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* and the plays it repudiates attend to issues of “inappropriate human engagement of sacred objects and topics.”⁴⁰ But while the treatise oversimplifies and condemns lay approaches to integrating human with divine, she explains, drama provides a complex consideration of issues related to such integration. Hill-Vasquez also notes that drama’s reliance on lay people rendered it particularly threatening to the treatise’s authors: performance had been an unruly space itself; mixing human and divine was risky, but where clergy were trusted to do it properly in the sacraments, the involvement of lay actors and tradesmen in plays proved more worrisome. I want to extend Hill-Vasquez’s insights to note that while medieval drama invests hope in pain’s spiritual power to link man with Christ, the *Tretise* dwells in fear of pain’s temporal inclinations to focus on human bodies and to awaken the potentially subversive political and social consciousness they sustain.

The *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* indirectly wards off the dangers of noticing Gyll’s successes and Christ’s failures: it condemns and seeks to control dramatic spectacles of pain by distinguishing between fear of pain, a temporal drive, and fear of sin, a spiritual force. Reading

and recovering the *Tretise* as late medieval performance theory, Aronson-Lehavi reveals a model based in acknowledgment of “the tension between the liveliness of the theatrical event and its enacted/fictional (and sacred) world.”⁴¹ Since the actor’s body is the prime site of this tension, pain is key in the theatrical moment. The treatise distinguishes between painting and playing pain, asserting that paintings of the Crucifixion work like naked letters to reveal truth, whereas playing the Crucifixion causes excessive bodily delight, distracting viewers from their proper eschatological hopes (373–85). Drama, unlike painting, refers continually to actors and to the duality of fiction and representation “at the expense . . . of achieving an exclusive focus on Christ or any other sacred character,” as Aronson-Lehavi explains.⁴² This duality presents a problem for treatise authors insisting on the greater reality of the enacted sacred world, and a dangerous draw for lay Christians interested in the politics of religion. Aronson-Lehavi suggests that drama could provide both a space for worship and a place to explore temporal and secular matters, yet argues that “[m]edieval performance was not, and could not be, subversive in the modern sense, but it could be ‘slippery’” and it did serve “as a cultural site characterized by potentiality and uncertainty.”⁴³ Indeed, the *Tretise* apprehends how theater unfailingly invests itself in temporality, requiring artists and audiences to share moments in time and space, thus heightening its patrons’ awareness of their participation in secular community. Feeling and accepting pain defines humanity according to the Bible; meanwhile, feeling tension and doubt while desiring debate and even encouraging dissent—feeling, yet repurposing pain—defines the human art of drama, according to late medieval performance theory. Whether subversive, unruly, or slippery, Middle English plays hold the potential to transform pain into skepticism and faith into critique. Just as the *Tretise*’s authors fear, the power to know and repurpose pain will fuel most critical and artistic appeals to any faith that centralizes torture.

Conventional readings of late medieval Biblical plays have helped to depoliticize and de-historicize the subversive, even revolutionary possibilities Biblical stories hold by subordinating their temporality to their spiritually redemptive endings.⁴⁴ The *Second Shepherds’ Play* frames pain and suffering predominantly as consequences of temporal conditions: climatic, economic, spatial, and social forces working across political communities in secular time. And the pain that the *York Crucifixion* plays out on Christ’s distended but unbroken human body mirrors the dilemma of a late medieval popular culture that has grown articulate in criticizing the hegemonic overextensions of its own civic,

national, and ecclesiastical institutions.⁴⁵ Despite their differences and more conventional resonances, both plays use pain's unruly power to negotiate the line between the seen and the unseen, the space between temporal reformation and spiritual redemption.

NOTES

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1. Scarry, 209.

2. *Ibid.*, 209.

3. *Ibid.*, 209–10.

4. *Ibid.*, 214, 219.

5. Medieval studies abounds with scholarship about pain; most pointedly, Bale; Cohen; and Mills examine pain's usefulness in late medieval literature, philosophy, and visual art, respectively.

6. Carlson, 6. See also Enders's analysis of pain's pleasure and utility in medieval drama in *Medieval Theater of Cruelty*.

7. See Clopper, 171–81.

8. Kubiak, 53.

9. Mills, 17.

10. Most scholars agree that the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* takes cycle drama as its main target; however, Clopper argues that we have misinterpreted *miracula*, which actually refers to a range of folk games and other ludic activity (63–107). Several scholars have explored similarities and concerns shared between the *Tretise* and the plays it seems to condemn. See Aronson-Lehavi; Hill-Vasquez, 77–101; and Nisse, 10–14, 23–45, 96–98.

11. All *Second Shepherds' Play* and *York Crucifixion* citations are to *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, by line number. Translations are my own.

12. For more on Mak's character and performance, see Bowers.

13. See Deskis.

14. The thieves do not, however, eat the sheep. See Sinanoglou for more on lamb symbolism and analogues wherein the thieves eat the sheep.

15. Stearns, 296–97.

16. Zimbardo, 403–06 at 405.

17. Scarry, 210.

18. See Kooper.

19. See Merback, 11–125, 195–217, on how medieval visual art negotiates the tension between the history of crucifixion as capital punishment and Christianity's highly symbolic appropriation of it.

20. For important contextualization of this scene within colonial and anti-colonial discourse, see Aslan, 154–56; and Mueller. Aslan focuses on the history of crucifixion in ancient Israel, while Mueller considers empire and medieval England, reading the *Siege of Jerusalem's* crucifixions and other graphic violence as "a manifestation of a pessimistic martial discourse that does not delight, but rather, instills a deep emotionally overwrought ambivalence about the horrors of war and empire-building" (288).

21. Scholars have long recognized the York cycle's realism and, in particular, the way it humanizes and embodies Christ in order to suggest how that broken body engenders the body of a transcendent Christian community. See, for instance, Beckwith; Davidson, "Realism of the York Realist"; Robinson; and Travis. I consider a consequence of *Crucifixion's* humanization more similar to that which Mueller sees in the *Siege of Jerusalem*, where, he notes, "emphasis on Christ's corporal destruction invites readers to dwell on his human, expendable nature in addition to his spiritual transcendence and central role in providential history" (291).

22. My reading follows in the spirit of Enders's *Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, which demystifies "both the aesthetics of violence and the critical response to it" (23).

23. Girard, *Scapegoat*.

24. *Ibid.*, 100–11.

25. Mitchell, 20.

26. *Ibid.*, 21, 22. In "Sacred Gestures," Mitchell usefully compares Christ Crucified with the Hooded Man, photographed at Abu Ghraib prison in the early twenty-first century, to illustrate his point about layered readings.

27. See Boboc on how spiritual and temporal work might instead complement each other in the *Crucifixion* and other York pageants. Other key works that influence my view of how this pageant incorporates the audience and crucifiers in the work of crucifixion include Beckwith; Travis; Faust; and Fitzgerald, 161–64.

28. See Lerer on the late medieval spectatorial sensibility. He explains how spectacular punishments used the symbolic terror of the inscribed body to deter crime and to demonstrate figurative concepts about social and political bodies. I hold that the York play's particular spectacle of execution (drawn out and focused as it is on overextension) demonstrates the costs of expanding empires and institutions.

29. See Bale, 23–25, on edifying fear, which he locates in medieval texts and images and then traces back to Aristotle. See also Kubiak, 40, on terror as a kind of pain inseparable from fear.

30. Beckwith describes a conventional understanding: "What has been an act of the most malevolent destruction acting under the aegis of both the ecclesiastical and civic authorities, at their collusion and behest—the pinning of Christ—is at once his suffering, and through his suffering, an act of strengthening and joining" (69).

31. Girard, *Scapegoat*, 111.

32. *Ibid.*, 111, 212.

33. Pratt, 4.

34. *Ibid.*, 7.

35. For wider contextualization of this dynamic, see Cohen, chapter 7. Cohen demonstrates that even as medieval scholasticism produced detailed explanations of the uniqueness of Christ's pain and fear, devotional works sought to present the "immediate experience of ultimate pain in sharing the Passion" (221).

36. Scarry, 213.

37. Enders, 45.

38. All *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* citations appear hereafter by line number alone.

39. Aronson-Lehavi, 22.

40. Hill-Vasquez, 54.

41. Aronson-Lehavi, 2.

42. *Ibid.*, 57.

43. *Ibid.*, 26.

44. As Williams notes in *Modern Tragedy*, "much Western Christianity has separated redemption from social change, even if it accepts both" (107).

45. On the rich and complex political history of the English trade guilds and fifteenth-century institutional politics in York and other English urban centers, see Fitzgerald; James; King; Nisse; Pappano, "Judas in York"; Pappano and Rice, "Beginning and Beginning-Again"; and Rice.

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