Cosmic Signs: The Representation of Go[o]d and [the] [D]Evil in the Medieval Morality Play *Mankind*

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The medieval drama can, at times, be strikingly modern in its techniques, if not in its message. In the medieval morality play *Mankind*, the anonymous dramatist makes use of what appears to be a practically empty space and the minimum of props to create and establish a certain religious sense or atmosphere—a 'Space of Go(o)d'—and then to transform it into its opposite—a 'Space of (the) (D)Evil'. This paper will make use of the semiotics of drama in order to analyse the means by which the medieval dramatist manipulates Dramatic Space, including an investigation of the relation between external space (Theatre Space) and internal (psychological or spiritual) space. The role played by the 'unholy trinity' of Vices or 'worldlings' in the transformation and the way in which the dramatist plays visible and invisible powers off against each other will also be considered.

I have claimed that the medieval drama can be strikingly modern in its techniques, if not always in its message. The basic semiotic analysis which I shall be applying to a medieval dramatic text in this paper should demonstrate one aspect of this 'modernity'.[1]

For semioticians such as Mukarovsky, semiotics is a theory of representation, in which a 'first reality' is meant to evoke a 'second reality'; the work of art, or *artefact*, stands for something else. In this context, the representational nature of the dramatic genre makes it, *par excellence*, suitable for semiotic interpretation and criticism. For, as Martin Esslin reminds us:

> …every detail of what is exhibited during the course of a dramatic performance, on stage or screen, becomes a sign, a 'signifier', one of the multifarious basic ingredients from which, in the mind of each individual spectator, the basic information about what is happening in the drama is perceived and established. And out of these basic facts the higher levels of its 'meaning' must ultimately emerge. (39)

[1]This is a revised and expanded version of a paper with a different focus, presented to the SAVAL Conference at the University of the Witwatersrand, 2–5 June 1998 (Wilson & Von Maltzan).

And indeed, if semiotics sees the value of language (as meanings, messages, or signs) as predominating over other modes of experience of the world (Melrose 110), the medieval drama would appear to offer a rich field for investigation, since most of its texts contain little but dialogue—the extended and sometimes extravagant descriptions of stage settings, décor and costumes, as well as the detailed stage directions and instructions for 'business' to which we are accustomed in the scripts of modern plays are largely absent from medieval drama.[2]

In the medieval morality play *Mankind*, which presents the temptation, fall, and ultimate redemption of its central and representative character, the anonymous dramatist makes use of a practically empty stage space and a minimum of props to create and establish a certain religious sense or atmosphere—what I have termed

a 'Space of Go(o)d'

—and then to transform it into its opposite—

a 'Space of (the) (D)Evil'.

This paper intends to investigate the means by which this is achieved. The dramatist's manipulation of Dramatic Space will thus be the focus, and I shall also include a brief consideration of the relations between external and internal space (or dramatic space, on the one hand, and psychological or spiritual space, on the other).

Before embarking on this study, however, it might be wise to make a couple of points concerning the medieval audience's experience of religious drama in general, and the morality play in particular, in order to contextualise my use of semiotics. I should like to start with a quotation from Lyotard's text 'La Dent, la paume' (89), as translated by Susan Melrose, which I think may be decoded in such a way as to indicate the most significant differences between the medieval and the modern audience's theatrical experience:

> The sign…is something which replaces something else…. So theatre hides, in order to reveal. And our late modernity consists in this dilemma: there is no longer anything to replace, or to represent, there is no legitimate place-taker… (111).

[2]The morality *Wisdom*, found in the same manuscript as *Mankind* and *The Castle of Perseverance*, is an exception, having affinities with the later masque and containing detailed instructions for costuming, dance, and other paradramatic features.

Two essential points emerge here: the former in contrast to the relationship between the medieval audience and the drama, particularly the interpretation of its 'message' or the 'truth' which it wishes to convey, and the latter relating specifically to an alternative, pre-modern understanding of the nature of the actor in his representative role.

In the first place, the relationship between the medieval audience and the drama was significantly different from our own understanding or experience of that relationship today. While meaning and truth are today seen as relative, reflecting at best socially-agreed constructs (Melrose 6), in medieval times the hegemony of the Catholic Church in the West was such that, within the sphere of religion, 'meaning', 'truth', 'symbols' and 'signs' were given absolutes. Medieval religious drama, in its various forms, depicts what in the Middle Ages were understood to be the ultimate truths of life and it does so, at least in part, by means of unmistakable 'signs'—what Peirce referred to as 'icons'. Of course, this is not to say that any but the youngest medieval viewer of a mystery or morality play would take as *literal* Truth what he or she saw played (this is no more likely than with a modern audience)—indeed, there are several medieval texts which demonstrate that there had to be a clear demarcation between theatre and reality. The *Tretise of Miraclis Playinge* (Davidson) is one such: a warning against theatre which might seem to present its performance as unmediated truth, since this could involve the sacrilege of an actor presenting himself as God—the created being aspiring (like Lucifer, the first 'actor') to the role of the Creator! Nevertheless, what was performed was clearly—for its original audience, as distinct from ourselves—a representation of an undeniable, ultimate religious Truth.

Secondly, as far as the nature of the actor in his representative role is concerned, two aspects of the medieval religious drama require consideration. Firstly, the involvement of the community in many medieval plays staged as expressions of religious belief also created an audience/performance relationship different from that which we usually experience today, when plays are generally staged by professionals, or at least by semi-professional groups such as university players. (There are certain exceptions, such as the Oberammergau or Durban Passion Plays, or the more academically-orientated revivals staged in York or Toronto, but generally only the occasional church drama club production would seem to come anywhere close to the medieval audience's experience—when one's next-door-neighbour might be playing Christ, or oneself a Roman soldier.) Clearly, however, whether any particular play was professionally or communally staged, the audience's familiarity with community performances would give them a different perspective from ours on the specific nature of the 'liminality' involved, to use Victor Turner's term for the 'temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the

already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural "cosmos'" (41) or, more particularly, the actor's (or shaman's) state of being 'in between', which 'may involve a complex sequence of episodes in sacred space-time, and may also include subversive and ludic (or playful) events' (27)—indeed, exactly what a morality play such as *Mankind* involves.

There is a second important aspect to the nature of the actor. The actor, of course, is 'the iconic sign *par excellence*: a real human being who has become a sign for a human being' (Esslin 56). However, as Melrose, following Lyotard, goes on to say about modern drama,

> In the equation of sign and what it is said to stand for conventionally (e.g. B on stage standing for A 'in the real world out there'), A is absent, but perceived to be both B's precedent, its order and its hidden truth; and B is reduced to nothing, mere illusion of presence whose being is in A and thus elsewhere, ideal, absence. (111)

This is the modern understanding of the semiotic problem of the actor playing a character—a figure whose (illusion of) presence is actually absence. It is thus no more than metaphorical hyperbole to say of a particular twentieth-century actor such as Laurence Olivier or Mel Gibson that he 'IS Hamlet' – that is, unless he is known in his private life to be more than usually indecisive, given to soliloquy, and a member of a highly dysfunctional family circle! In the medieval context, on the other hand, and particularly in the case of the morality plays, the very names of the characters (often also the names of the plays) generally reveal the fact that such a statement is actually intended as literally true: the world of the morality is a *mappa mundi* in which actor X 'IS' Everyman; actor Y 'IS' Humanum Genus (in *The Castle of Perseverance*), and actor Z 'IS' Mankind: the 'other' of theatrical performance IS the 'self'. The identification goes further than this, however: in the *speculum* of the medieval morality play, every single member of the audience is intended to see him- or herself as represented, or mirrored, by those actor-characters, by their actions and particularly by their changing spiritual state. One might call it not just a *mappa mundi*, but a map, or picturing, of the human mind or soul in its wavering between the forces of Good and of Evil—a necessarily external (dramatic) representation of what is actually an internal (spiritual or psychological) experience. Within their own cultural or religious context, thus (and in a manner different even from that of the mystery plays of their own day), the deixis of the morality plays is to represent the medieval HERE and NOW as well as the dramatic THEN and THERE. In that context they are thus both reflexive and universal, as it would seem that drama cannot be today.

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I turn now to the means of analysing my text, and to the specific examples of decodable 'signs' within it. It should be emphasised at the outset that I do not wish to suggest, like theoreticians of old, that the written text of a drama is primary and its performance necessarily secondary. On the contrary, the real dramatic experience can only take place within the context of theatrical perfomance, and my interpretation will thus rely heavily on imaginative recreation of such performance.

In constructing such an imaginative recreation, one may first seek the sign systems and in particular the 'key' signs involved in theatrical presentation, as identified by various theatre semioticians and to be 'read' in performance by an individual spectator on the basis of his or her 'performance competence'.[3] The exact delineation or application of these sign systems will differ from critic to critic, from era to era, and from play to play, but the general idea remains the same: a dramatic text is a complex palimpsest of meanings (Esslin 86) in which the individual signs are only the raw material used to create significance or meaning. For Kowzan (182 ff) the sign systems comprise four main aspects: the text (words and delivery); the expressive use of the actor's body (facial expression, gesture, and movement in dramatic space); the actor's appearance (costume, make-up, and hairdo), the visuals of the stage (sets, lighting and properties) and theatre sound (music and sound effects). Esslin, for whom the stage itself is the primary generator of meaning, adds the category of 'framing and preparatory indicators', including the shape of the theatrical space and the 'ambience' or 'atmosphere' of the theatre as well as relevant 'pre-publicity' such as title, generic description, prologue, and so on (53). One must remember, however, that these lists have been produced by modern critics and theoreticians. By contrast, for much of medieval theatre, as indeed for Greek and Elizabethan drama, the iconic element of the stage set was largely suggested by words and gestures, rather than by other representational elements.

And indeed, in the case of *Mankind,* unlike several of the other medieval plays, we have no other surviving evidence of the existence of these sign systems in performance than the text itself. There is no stage plan, such as we have for *The Castle of Perseverance* (Nelson 124; Eccles)*,*

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[3]'Key' signs are those of particular significance and influence, since they operate over longer periods of time. Examples include the register, or level of language used in the play; a general colour scheme; the pictorial style of a set (e.g., realistic/abstract); the period style of costumes; the chosen acting style (e.g., realistic/grotesque; deeply serious/comic), or the mood of background music.

to set the scene for us (and, at the same time, to tell us that theatre-in-the-round was a medieval phenomenon). There is no director's diagram, such as that from Lucerne (Nelson 138), or sketches such as that from Valenciennes (123). Nor are there detailed accounts of expenditure, including extra remuneration (perhaps 'danger pay'?) for actors playing devils or Judas, such as we have for the Mercers' *Play of Doomsday* in the York cycle (Johnston & Dorrell). In the case of *Mankind*, the text alone presents itself and its signs as the raw material for recreation and interpretation. What is more, no indication whatsoever of such key signs as set, décor or costumes is to be found at the beginning of the manuscript. The play was apparently written by a country clergyman living near Cambridge (Bevington, *Tudor Drama* 39), and intended for performance by a touring company in rural Cambridgeshire and Norfolk (Potter 55). It is thus generally considered to be an early example of a professional play, with a small cast involving careful doubling, few props and no cumbersome set requirements. (Indeed, the text proves it is also fully 'professional' in the pecuniary sense, when the Vice characters hold a collection before allowing the audience to see the devil!) Coogan recognised that the play contains certain motifs of repentance, leading her to conclude that:

> …the play Mankind seems to have been written especially to encourage people to keep a good Lent. Ideally, this meant a contrite Shrovetide or early Lenten confession of sins, and a serious devotion to the works of satisfaction during the penitential season. If through human frailty anyone should fall from grace or neglect the works of penance, he was not, on this account, to despair of God's mercy, nor was he recklessly to presume on it, but rather he was to return humbly to confession and renew his purpose of amendment . (55)

The play is equally suitable for performance outdoors (e.g. on a booth stage in an inn-yard) or indoors, whether at an alehouse such as is mentioned in the text, or in the hall of a large private house or institution, such as a university college. Judging on the available evidence, therefore, the audience's first impressions are not derived from an impressive set, as might be the case with a modern play, but from the opening dialogue. And, as if to compensate for the text's absence of evidence of visual signs, it is full of verbal signs to which a medieval audience, in contrast to a modern one, would have been alert. Indeed, the way in which the playwright manipulates this very alertness would seem to prove the point, as I shall attempt to show. In this connection, his use of comedy in the service of a serious didactic aim is particularly impressive, as has been demonstrated in detail by Coogan:

The serious parts are highlighted by position, by dignity of
language, and by the ultimate easy triumph of good over evil. The
comic parts serve the serious parts by illustrating the allegory, and
by underlining the moral teachings through parody and negative
example. (108)

Before investigating the difference between the modern and the
medieval audience's sign-perception, and hence their differing receptions
of the opening scenes (or the first 'act', on which I shall concentrate in this
study), it is as well to outline the events. John Wesley Harris provides the
following useful summary, at the same time in my opinion reflecting the
modern audience's likely reception of the play as at times boring, at times
quite busy and amusing, but ultimately a rather meaningless combination
of humour and didacticism:

First a friar called Mercy appears, and delivers a deliberately boring
sermon exhorting the audience to shun temptation so they can be
saved on the Day of Judgement. After a few minutes he is
interrupted by Mischief, who mocks him outrageously. The three
vices of the piece, New Guise, Nought and Nowadays, now burst
in, force Mercy to join in a wild dance and rough him up thoroughly
before leaving. Mercy thanks God and resumes his sermon,
dwelling on the way in which the bestiality of man far exceeds that
of animals, because man is a rational being and should know better.
   Mankind, a simple, innocent labourer, now appears, and is
lectured by Mercy on the avoidance of sin and given a set of
Paternoster beads to help him recall the Seven Deadly Sins. This
lesson is interrupted by the re-entry of the vices, first New Guise,
and then the rest, and when Mercy has gone and Mankind has
started to dig the ground with his spade they try to distract him from
his work. At this point they get the audience to sing a little song,
which is innocent enough at first but later proves to be full of
lavatory humour. They then pester Mankind until he strikes out at
them with his spade in frustration, apparently wounding them all,
and they flee from the stage. (163-64)

What can the medieval audience, by contrast, be imagined to make of
this as 'act one' of a morality play? First, with regard to one of the key
signs of the play: the level of language, or register, may be regarded as one
of the dramatist's prime technical concerns, as Ashley and Chaplan,
among others, have shown. Throughout the play, Mercy is made to speak
in a characteristically elevated style. Harris considers his first speech a

'deliberately boring sermon', and even the play's editor, Mark Eccles, is apologetic, saying: 'The speeches of Mercy are tedious, but moralising must be expected in a moral play' (xlv). I would disagree with the notion that the medieval audience is (whether intentionally or not) bored by Mercy's sermon. Though cast in long lines and containing many aureate polysyllables, it is only 44 lines long (not significantly longer than dramatic opening speeches in several other plays) and is carefully structured as a summary of the relevant aspects of the catechism, starting with God the Father and the Creation, moving on, via Christ the Son and the Redemption, to a discussion of the mercy of God for sinners (with Our Lady as mediatrix), the need for a virtuous life and good works to ensure a good death, and the efficacy of the Eucharist—which, of course, is directly related to the achievement of salvation by the Crucifixion ('*I* am the Bread of Life'). It closes with a vivid and timely warning about the devil,

…the mortall enmye, that vemynousse serpente,

From the wyche Gode preserue yow all at the last jugement!
For sekyrly ther xall be a streyt examynacyon,
The corn xall be sauyde, the chaffe xall be brente.
I besech yow hertyly, haue this premedytacyon. (40-44)

This sermon, thus, does not only serve to individualise the character of Mercy by means of a personal speech-pattern and the use of Latin (marked as the language of the Church) and theological vocabulary. Mercy has defined himself specifically as the mercy of God, made incarnate in Christ; thus the elevated level of discourse quite fittingly identifies him as the representative of cosmic Good in the play. We will not see God, Christ, or Our Lady play a dramatic role here as they do in other plays such as *Everyman* or *Mariken van Nieumeghen*—the supernatural powers of Good remain invisible—but their names are on Mercy's lips, he is their temporal representative, and their power is his to command. The world of Good is thus sited by language, as it were, with and within Mercy. During this first sermon-speech, the movements and gestures of the actor playing the part of Mercy would establish the whole acting area for the audience as part of this world of Good. (Metaphor also plays an important role in this process: the Scriptural conceit of the corn and chaff (43, above) will become a metaphor, or sign, for the spiritual health of Mankind's soul.)

In contrast to the force of Good actually established by Mercy's words and actions, his sermon also identifies the Devil, the chief force of Evil in the medieval cosmic battle, defining him as an enemy both during life and at the Last Judgement. The play includes five demonic characters who oppose Mercy—Tityvillus (the devil), the three minor vices or worldlings: Nought, Nowadays and New Guise, and Mischief (the chief Vice, associated by Coogan with suicide occasioned by despair of God's mercy, and thus identified by her as the specific dramatic foil to Mercy, 59). At this first point it is indeed Mischief who is introduced, with a speech whose diction and style in its first few lines clearly mock both Mercy's serious religious content and his elevated register, before introducing the short, doggerel verse which will characterise or signal the discourse of evil :

I beseche yow hertyly, leue yowr calcacyon,
Leue yowr chaffe, leue yowr corn, leue yowr dalyacyon.
Yowr wytt ys lytyll, yowr hede ys mekyll, ye are full of predycacyon.
But, ser, I prey this questyon to claryfye:
    Mysse-masche, dryff-draff,
    Sume was corn and sume was chaffe,
    My dame seyde my name was Raffe;
Onschett yowr lokke and take an halpenye.   (45-52)

What is particularly interesting about Mischief's interruption of Mercy's sermon is that it is not merely humorous. Amusing echoes aside, what the dramatist is having Mischief do here—as has been shown by Briscoe (159)—is not merely to interrupt the sermon, but to complete it in a comic way with a proof, followed by an Englished Latin quotation :

> Ande ye sayde the corn xulde be sauyde and the chaff xulde be feryde,
> Ande he prouyth nay, as yt shewth be this werse:
> 'Corn seruit bredibus, chaffe horsibus, straw fyrybusque.'
> Thys ys as moche to say, to yowr leude wndyrstondynge,
> As the corn xall serue to brede at the nexte bakynge… (55-9).

This is also the first of many instances in which it becomes clear that the code of language is a very important dramatic device for this dramatist. It is not only words like 'corn', 'chaffe' and 'straw' that are used by Mischief in their ordinary, everyday denotation, as part of the world of quotidian reality (which is susceptible to the influence of evil), while functioning, for Mercy, as metaphors representing aspects of the ultimate, invisible reality of the world of the spirit, of Scripture, and of Good. Throughout his sermon, Mercy has used words which, in the serious religious context in which he intends them, have a particular meaning. For instance, because of its power to cleanse the soul from sin, he describes the passion and death of Christ as 'that blyssyde lauatorye' (12). This, then, is the significance attached to the word within the world in which Mercy operates, the world of Good. Of course, once Mischief and the Vices take over the stage space, such words as 'lauatorye' (12), 'remocyon' (14), 'nature' (15), 'pryke' (30), 'members' (32, 35), 'satysfye' (35) and 'wombe' (36) will all take on other, less decent—inverted, obverse, or obscene—significations. Indeed, the idea of Evil inverting Good is a key one for the play, and Mischief has also been defined as an 'Inversion Vice' (Jack 166) because he 'derives from a vision of evil as the upsetting of divine order'.

The worldlings, New Guise, Nowadays and Nought, who are the second force for evil to take the stage, have also been labelled 'Conviviality Vices' (Jack), because their role is to attempt to seduce Mankind with 'the affable face of evil'. It is noteworthy that their names do not represent specific deadly sins, like those of the vices or tempters in *The Castle of Perseverance,* but general abuses of the age, such as fashion. Indeed, they complain that they had not intended coming on stage, but heard their names called by Mercy (in all likelihood as part of a lament about the evils of the present day, contained in the one page now missing from the manuscript) :

> NOUGHT: But ser, I trow of ws thre I herde yow speke.
> NEW GYSE: Crystys curse hade therfor, for I was in slepe.

NOWADAYS: And I hade the cuppe in my honde, redy to goo to met.
Therfor, ser, curtly, grett yow well.
MERCY: Few wordys, few and well sett!
NEW GYSE: Ser, yt ys the new gyse and the new jett.
Many wordys and schortely sett.
Thys ys the new gyse, euery-dele. (98-105)

As can be seen, however, at least two of the deadly sins are implicitly signified here: Sloth and Gluttony. In exposing common social abuses, as Potter notes, the satire of the morality plays adheres to the conventions of medieval preaching tradition (48). In Thomist theological terms, names were believed to agree with the nature of the thing named, and in the drama of this period, a character's self-identification gave the audience a clear and unequivocal notion of the quality he or she would demonstrate (Richardson & Johnston 145). The worldlings are quite self-reflexive in this regard. Nought, for instance, later defines himself and his name by saying :

NOUGHT: …I was neuer worth a pottfull a wortys sythyn I was born.
My name ys Nought. (272-3)

Indeed, the worldlings are quite self-reflexively aware of the dramatic nature of the play as a whole, commenting at times on it, for instance to Mercy: 'Thys ys no parte of thi pley' (84) and 'Men haue lytyll deynte of yowr pley / Because ye make no sporte' (267-7). So, too, Mischief reminds the audience at the beginning of the second 'act': 'I, Myscheff, was here at the begynnynge of the game' (417), and great play is made of collecting money from the audience before the 'abhomynabull presens' (465) of the devil can appear. Tityvillus's 'invysybull' (529) temptation of Mankind, for which he coerces the audience into silence and complicity, as well as the naming of actual local people (503-15) as the worldlings' accomplices are two further examples of this play's unusual degree of self-reflexivity—a subject deserving of a study on its own.

Like Mischief, the worldlings are also well aware of the fact that they and Mercy represent opposite poles of linguistic usage or register. In addition to lines 101-105 (quoted above), when Mercy objects to their swearing and 'ydyll language' (147), New Guise explicitly associates himself with linguistic style and complains that Mercy's body is so '…full of Englysch Laten. / I am aferde yt wyll brest' (124-5). Sexual innuendo, too, is part of the worldlings' stock-in-trade: 'Onschett yowr lokke and take an halpenye' (52) or, as Mankind concentrates furiously on his agricultural activities:

23

NEW GYSE : Ey, how ye turne the erth wppe and down!
I haue be in my days in many goode town
Yett saw I neuer such another tyllynge. (361-3)

Obscene language also features prominently in the worldlings'
discourse, both among themselves—'Osculare fundamentum!' (142)—and
as a means of mocking Mercy:

NOWADAYS: I prey yow hertyly, worschyppull clerke,
To haue this Englysch mad in Laten:
'I haue etun a dychfuyll of curdys,
Ande I haue schetun yowr mowth full of turdys.'
(129-132)

By this stage of the play, I think it is safe to assume that all but the most
prudish members of the audience are likely to be enjoying the humorous
utterances and actions of the worldlings, even if in a somewhat scandalised
fashion. This, I think, is precisely what the dramatist is aiming at by his use
of linguistic signs such as register and, particularly, obscenity. It will also
be demonstrated by another explicit association of the audience with Evil
later in this 'act'.

Once Mercy has dismissed the worldlings, again lamenting their
wantonness, Mankind appears for the first time (at line 186). In terms of
the semiotic poles of Good and Evil which have been established, his
dignified diction immediately links him with Mercy, while his deictic
practice is to associate himself with the audience when addressing them.
Like the worldlings, Mankind is far more self-aware and self-reflexive than
most of the morality protagonists. He is not only aware of the existence of
sin, but also of its potential power over him. He speaks immediately of his
'composycyon' as being 'Of a body and of a soull, of condycyon contrarye'
(194-5), in this way signifying (and lamenting) the vulnerability of the
body to the world of Evil and its temptations :

MANKYNDE: O thou my soull, so sotyll in thy substance,
Alasse, what was thi fortune and thi chaunce
To be assocyat wyth my flesch, that stynkyng
dungehyll?
(202-04)

With regard to the non-specific nature of Mankind's sinfulness, Coogan
notes that:

In presenting Mankind as the universal type of erring man, the

dramatist had to keep Mankind's self-accusations general enough to make the lesson he was propounding applicable in some way to every member of the audience, but concrete enough to possess dramatic interest. The theme of the conflict between body and soul, as he uses it, meets both these requirements, and possesses seasonal appropriateness as well: the remedies Mercy proposes are good Lenten practice. (19)

Actually, the body-in-subordination is still part of the world of Good. Initially, Mankind is characterised as a tiller of the soil. This, too, has a significance beyond the superficial. In this play, personal properties, few though they are, function as key semiotic signs. Like his other personal properties, the Paternoster beads (which Tityvillus will persuade him to part with in the second 'act') and the home-made 'badge' bearing the Ash Wednesday text 'Memento, homo, quod cinis es et in cinerem reuerteris' (321) (which he will also lose when the worldlings 're-tailor' his coat), Mankind's most obvious personal property, the spade, is an iconic sign. It makes him, for the medieval audience, a figure of Adam as well as of Cain. Both are associated with the sinful condition of humanity, Adam as the originator thereof and Cain as the first murderer. As Coogan points out:

> That the medieval man was vividly conscious of his lineal descent from Adam, and of his inheritance of the punishments of original sin, is apparent in almost every type of medieval writing: sermon, tract, drama, lyric. (48)

Yet in the first 'act', when the dramatic space is still predominantly characterised by the power associated with Mercy and the world of Good, Mankind's spade becomes a sign of something different—literally and figuratively—the weapon of God, or Good, with which he repulses the attempted intrusion of the world of Evil, as represented by the worldlings.

They start by mocking his agricultural activities :

> NOUGHT: Here xall be goode corn, he may not mysse yt;
>   Yf he wyll haue reyn he may ouerpysse yt;
>   Ande yf he wyll haue compasse he may ouerblysse yt
>   A lytyll wyth hys ars lyke.   (372-5)

At first Mankind tries simply to dismiss them verbally :

> MANKYNDE: Hey yow hens, felouse, wyth bredynge.
>   Leue yowr derysyion and yowr japying.
>   I must nedys labure, yt ys my lyvynge.

25

When this has no effect, he uses the spade to set about him with righteous anger:

>   MANKYNDE: Go and do yowr labur! Gode lett yow neuer the!
>   Or wyth my spade I xall yow dynge, by the Holy
>   Trinyte!
>   Haue ye non other man to moke, but euer me?
>   Ye wolde haue me of yowr sett?
>   Hye yow forth lyuely, for hens I wyll yow dryffe.
>   (376-80)

And he does so, delivering blows which leave the three worldlings, as it were, collectively in the same condition which cricketing legend refers to as 'Nelson'. The audience recalls Mercy's earlier identification of Mankind as 'Crystys own knyght' (229) and his accompanying admonition: 'Yf ye wyll be crownyde, ye must nedys fyght' (231).

The image of the body and its use for good or for evil remains a strong one in the play. Whereas Mankind ends the first 'act' victorious in Good, with the help of God's grace (407), the second 'act' will see him falling prey to the worldlings' 'secret weapon', Tityvillus the Devil. Indeed, when Tityvillus finally succeeds in tempting Mankind, it will be precisely by means of the body, first by making the ground too hard to dig—by the non-realistic theatrical means of hiding a plank, or 'borde' in the dramatic area defined by Mankind's digging as his 'field'—thus inducing him to sloth, to neglect of his duty of labour (to which humankind was destined by Adam's sin), and secondly by affecting the body's most basic functions. While Mankind attempts to use his paternoster beads—the third of the personal properties by which his allegiance to the world of Good is established—to pray, which is the second duty of humanity, Tityvillus whispers in his ear:

>   TITYVILLUS: A schorte preyere thyrlyth hewyn; of thi preyere blyn.
>   Thou art holyer then euer was ony of thi kyn.
>   Aryse and avent the! Nature compellys. (558-60)

And poor Mankind must leave his prayer-beads and go 'into thi yerde' (561) to 'do that nedys must be don' (563) … 'For drede of the colyke and eke of the ston' (562). What was in the first 'act' merely verbal lavatorial humour has in the second moved onto the level of action, as the servants of Evil work on the inversion of the correct relationship between body and soul (previously described by Mercy in terms of the traditional image of a

horse and rider), using the body to subvert the duties of the soul. The measure of their success is the similarity between Mankind's language and their own at this point :

> MANKYNDE: Of labure and preyer, I am nere yrke of both;
> I wyll no more of yt, thow Mercy be wroth.
> My hede ys very heuy, I tell yow forsoth.
> I xall slepe full my bely and he wore my brother.
>
> (585-8)

And, moments later, after a few more lies from Tityvillus, not only Sloth, but other Deadly Sins such as Gluttony and Lechery have also become part of Mankind's discourse :

> MANKYNDE: Adew, fayre masters! I wyll hast me to the ale-house
> Ande speke wyth New Gyse, Nowadays and Nought
> And geett me a lemman wyth a smattrynge face.
>
> (609-11)

It is important to note, here, that Tityvillus, while visible to the audience (who have, in fact, paid dearly to see him!), remains invisible to Mankind himself. The warning to the audience is clear: the victim himself is always unaware of the presence, the danger, and the *modus operandi* of the Devil. But there is a deeper level of significance involved here and elsewhere in the play, such as in the earlier scene in which Mankind fights off the 'worldlings', invoking the aid of the Holy Trinity as he does so (376-80, quoted above). While the powers of Good remain invisible— although ultimately omnipotent—in this play, the greatest of the powers of Evil alternates at will between the visible and the invisible state, according to one's point of view. This very changeability on the part of Tityvillus as the strongest representative of Evil is yet another means of marking him, in contrast to the faithful Mercy and the consistently invisible powers of Good, as a grave danger to Mankind's soul.

As I have already suggested, however, Mankind is not the only victim of the worldlings' temptations! Before Mankind's fall, the audience is subjected to a species of temptation in which the worldlings invite them to sing along in a so-called 'Christmas song' which soon becomes scatological—thus, metaphorically speaking, contaminating all those who have (quite innocently) participated. The connection with the temptation of Mankind is clear. The dramatist's aim with this paradramatic sing-along, it would appear, is for the audience not merely to be observers of the temptation, fall, and redemption of the Mankind-figure, but literally to experience it for themselves.

I have concentrated on the early part of the play, because this is where the world of Good is established and assailed by that of Evil. However, certain episodes in the latter part of the play should also be mentioned, in that they demonstrate the dramatist's use of further types of sign systems. Gesture and movement, for instance, though ever-present, are specifically significant where they involve Mankind's demonstration of a relationship of supplication. In the first 'act', he kneels to Mercy, the priestly representative of God, in an episode reminiscent of a confession scene. Later, when he has been thoroughly corrupted, he will take part in a scene with Mischief and the three worldlings which parodies a judicial court as well as a confessional scene. Here he will undertake to commit six deadly sins—according to New Gyse, 'lechery ys non' (706)—and to go early on Sunday mornings to the ale-house, to steal, to murder, and so forth. Thus the good spiritual advice of Mercy early in the play is countered here by the sinful 'instruction' of his new fellows. In terms of the sign system relating to dramatic structure, thus, the dramatist is creating significance by making use of the dynamics of contrast.

In this scene, too, another of the semiotic sign systems—costume—is involved, and again in terms of a contrast between the costume of Good and that of Evil.[4] From the beginning of the play, Mankind has been wearing a longish coat, or 'side gown' (671) which, in this scene, the worldlings cut down to an almost indecent size. This is not merely social satire on current fashions. The association of Mankind with the world of Good was achieved in part by a costume casting him as 'Crystes own knyght' (229). The worldlings' re-tailoring of that costume effects a significant alteration in his appearance, making him appear as one of them, part of the world of Evil, in the new fashion of the day. Given the important visual impact of costume, it is hardly surprising that it should be a key sign, or that a change of costume, such as Everyman's or Anima's (in *Wisdom*), should be a morality convention serving to indicate a change in a character's spiritual condition.

Interestingly enough, the change of costume in *Mankind* is conveyed solely by means of dialogue—there are no stage directions—but it is an instance of what, in modern drama, would be part of the subtext (or *Nebentext*), and possibly a more important part than the main text.

Ironies of various sorts are ever-present in the text, for the meanings

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[4]One should not be surprised to find costume a key sign in the medieval religious drama, since liturgical costume is heavily symbolic, utilising different colours to signify different times of the Church year or various types of festivals. Indeed, the deeply symbolic nature of much of medieval religious practice may well be the reason why semiotics – unlike various other modern theories – is so very applicable to a medieval religious text.

conveyed by the worldlings and the other forces for Evil are consistently false, manipulative, or in other ways conducive towards a negative outcome for Mankind (as opposed to Mercy's benevolent influence). Indeed, Tityvillus convinces Mankind that Mercy is dead, having become a horse-thief and been hanged. This is a particularly nice irony, considering that horse-stealing is one of the chief accomplishments of the worldlings, whereas Mercy's chief concern (in terms of the horse-and-rider metaphor) is with the rider (the soul), not the horse (the body)! And, indeed, in a neat intertextual parallel with Judas (who, according to the Bible, despaired, went out, and hanged himself), Mankind too despairs. In the third 'act', when he hears that Mercy is, in fact, alive and looking faithfully for him, he calls for a rope to hang himself, saying that he is 'not worthy' (800). Like the deus-ex-machina, the allegorical Mercy arrives just in time to save him from both hanging and damnation.

I should like, finally, to return to an important issue already touched upon in relation to Tityvillus: that of the contrast which the dramatist creates between the visible and the invisible powers, and indeed between different types of invisibility. It is as if the dramatist paradoxically sets up visibility/invisibility as a bipolar sign, explicitly alerting the audience to the fact that Tityvillus is visible to them but invisible to Mankind, in order to emphasise even further the polar opposites on which the morality play is founded. The play's very self-reflexivity identifies Tityvillus's invisibility as a mere trick of Evil; the invisibility of the powers of Good is very different: it is a physical absence which is actually read by the audience as a spiritually omnipresent omnipotence. The very visible 'unholy trinity' of worldlings, plus Mischief and Tityvillus, may at first appear to represent too great odds (at five-to-one) for Mercy to cope with, and may indeed secure a temporary victory in the second 'act' and the early part of the third, but the power of Good which ultimately triumphs is, I would argue, all the greater by virtue of its invisibility and physical absence, its need to be represented not mimetically, by a mere actor playing God, but semiotically, by means of far more potent dramatic signs.

I have claimed that the medieval drama can, at times, be highly modern in its techniques. This study has, I hope, demonstrated that, by the use of various sign systems including language in all its forms (names, discourse, humour, imagery, etc); intertextuality (with Biblical story or Catholic dogma such as the Deadly Sins, the Holy Trinity, or the body/soul dichotomy); iconic props (like the spade, the badge, the Paternoster beads and the rope); striking costumes (including the shortening of Mankind's robe); significant episodes (such as the mock-confession in Mischief's court), and telling manipulation of presence and absence on stage (or visibility and invisibility), the dramatist creates a dramatic space characterised by the dynamics of contrast. In this space, Good and Evil

engage in their ongoing cosmic battle for the soul of Mankind, whose psychological or spiritual 'space' (situation or condition) is the actual 'signified' behind all the 'signifiers' of the dramatic space. Truly a complex and, indeed, a 'modern' achievement for a medieval dramatist!

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