THE YORK MASONS' MONKEY-BUSINESS

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Those of us whose enthusiasm for medieval drama is allied to an under-developed faculty for embarrassment, to the extent that we feel the urge to go out and perform it, are perhaps most acutely aware of one of the most elusive of questions. Once texts have been grappled with, along with countless staging decisions, the would-be performer is left with one nagging question which may only be answered by experience rather than authority: what will the audience make of it all? It has rightly been said that the most remarkable aspect of the increased interest in medieval drama in the last few decades has been the enthusiasm of spectators, but whilst an enthusiastic response may be more-or-less guaranteed, the exact nature of that response cannot always be predicted; the comic may be met with silence, the serious may prove inadvertently comic. Some of this, of course, may be accounted for by the elapse of a little over five hundred years since the text we use for the York Plays, for example, was written down. But what of the audience of the late Middle Ages?

The small amount of evidence we have for contemporary audience response — that of the York Memorandum Book for 1431–32 — would suggest that to be greeted with inappropriate laughter is not a fate reserved solely for modern players. According to this record,

> the Masons of this city have been accustomed to murmur amongst themselves about their pageant in the Corpus Christi Play in which Fergus was beaten because the subject of this pageant is not contained in sacred Scripture and used to produce more noise and laughter than devotion.

This apparently uncommon episode in English drama of the Funeral of the Virgin, then, was failing to find the correct balance between 'sentence' and 'solaas', instead tipping over into low comedy and unruliness.

Not only is the Funeral of the Virgin rare in English medieval drama, it is also extremely rare in English art of the Middle Ages, so it is quite remarkable that there are three depictions of the Funeral in the stained glass of York Minster. The earliest, dating from around 1285, is in the

chapterhouse (CHnII) and does not apparently feature Fergus. The latest, dating from the mid fourteenth century, is on the south side of the clerestory (SIV) and clearly shows Fergus, with somewhat simian features, hanging beneath the bier. Both of these representations occur within the context of Marian sequences, between images of the Death and Coronation of the Virgin. The Funeral in both these cases is, in effect, contained within a narrative framework in which it makes sense. Given the aforementioned scarcity of depictions of this scene, its repetition within the Minster over a period of seventy years or so may perhaps attest to a particularly strong local cult of the Virgin. The story certainly appears to have had great local popularity, which makes the response with which the Masons' performances were greeted all the more surprising.

Matters become still more perplexing when one turns to what is undoubtedly the most famous image of the Funeral of the Virgin in the Minster glass; that of the 'monkeys' funeral' in the north aisle of the nave (nXXV: PLATE 1). This, by far the smallest of the three representations, occurs not within a Marian sequence but in the lower border of what is generally called the 'Pilgrimage Window' (PLATE 2). The upper band of historiated panels shows the Crucifixion flanked, on the left, by the Virgin and two companions and, on the right, by St John the Evangelist with Longinus and Stephaton. The lower band shows St Peter flanked by male and female pilgrims, identifiable by their staffs and scripts. St Peter, it should be noted, not only holds his customary attribute of the key but also a church: the Minster is dedicated to him and he is thus depicted in several places in the glass with this combination of attributes. We may, therefore, read this window as an expression of, and exhortation to, individual piety — the pilgrims drawing towards the patron of the Minster — appropriately situated beneath a representation of the divine commitment to man embodied in Christ's Passion.

This devotional 'text', however, is peppered with all manner of seemingly incongruous and irrelevant marginalia, both surrounding the picture space and as medallions within the *grisaille* panels. One may observe here a number of common 'world upside-down' themes; for example, the preaching fox, the fantastic beast, and the woman asserting her 'maistrie' over the man. Such images may, as is often thought, be related to the growth of the use of *exempla* by preachers throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, perhaps even relating to the preacher's actual oration. If this is the case, we may read their unruliness

PLATE 1: York Minster Window N.XXV:
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PLATE 2A: York Minster Window N.XXV: Bottom Light (Copyright National Monuments Record)

PLATE 2B: Monkey's Funeral: 'Fergus' outlined. (Copyright National Monuments Record)

as a cautionary enactment of the instability of the marginal world when set against the spiritual immutability of the main devotional 'text'.

The 'monkeys' funeral', however, appears to go further, by not merely turning the world upside-down but also turning the apparently locally strong devotion to the Mother of Christ upside-down. Today, this image is generally viewed as a curiosity. Recognisable as the Funeral of the Virgin by the figure of Fergus hanging beneath the bier, it is nevertheless frequently referred to simply as a 'lively and amusing scene'. More recently, it has been suggested that it is a 'ludicrous parody', indicating that the subject was deemed suitable for satire and comedy. However, the notion of a 'lively and amusing' parody of the Funeral of the Virgin appearing, with the necessary consent of the Dean and Chapter, in a prominent and prestigious position in the Minster nave, is surely untenable. How, then, may it be explained?

We must here turn to the apocryphal tale of the Assumption itself. Although the York play is lost, the surviving N. Town text offers a clue to interpretation. When it is suggested by John that Peter should bear the palm before the Virgin's bier, he replies:

> Sere, and ye lept on Cristis brest, seyng all celestly;
> Ye are Goddis clene mayde, wythoutyn ony nay.
> This observaunce is most like you to do dewly;
> Wherfore tak it vpon you, brother, we pray.
> And I schal helpe for to bere the bere.

Although offered the highest honour, Peter refuses and instead undertakes to share the physical burden with the other disciples, rejoicing in his proper rôle. This self-aware humility is continued when Fergus, in attempting to upturn the bier, cleaves to the side and, in the source version, is blinded. He begs forgiveness, to which Peter replies that it is only Christ, not himself, who can forgive and restore: conversion naturally ensues. This also presents Peter in the intercessionary rôle which, in the Apocryphal tale of the Assumption, culminates in his being the named spokesman in the commendation of the Virgin's soul to Christ. St Peter, then, is represented both as an exemplar of humility and as an intercessionary agent, both of which contribute to an understanding of his place within the main 'text' Pilgrimage Window. As he — and, indeed, the Church which is dedicated to him — is the intercessionary link between the active devotion of the pilgrims and Christ who stands above, so too is

he defined as the pivotal link between the viewer and Christ; vital rôles which are nonetheless carried out with exemplary humility.

There remains, however, one more fundamental question: why should monkeys be employed in the scene rather than humans as elsewhere in the Minster? In the context of the clerestory glass, we may detect anti-Semitic overtones in the depiction of the Jew with simian features, but this cannot be the case in a representation in which all the figures appear as apes. Whilst the example of the clerestory window is in accord with the most common notion of the ape as somehow a degraded being, the ape may be assigned various qualities, most commonly associated with the purely physical aspects of human life. This is, no doubt, due to their physical similarity but spiritual, intellectual, and moral inferiority when compared with man. Indeed, the etymological authority, Isidore of Seville, traced the etymology of *simius* from *similitudo*, noting that 'the monkey wants to mimic everything he sees done'. Taking into account this assumed correspondence, it may be inferred that the Funeral image may carry implications of the base contemplating the divine and aspiring to that state. This suggestion, that not all 'aping' need necessarily be read as derogatory, is supported by reference to Chaucer's *House of Fame*, in which the 'smalle harpers' gape in admiration at their illustrious predecessors and aspire to

> ... countrefete hem as an ape,
> Or as craft countrefeteth kynde.

As the ape, lacking human nature, mimics man, so man, although lacking divinity, must strive to mimic the divine. In the case of the Pilgrimage Window, then, we are a long way from Camille's assertion that 'medieval people felt themselves too close to beasts ... to see the margins as anything other than the site of their wallowing, fallen co-existence'. Instead, I would suggest that the marginal scene of the 'monkeys' funeral' — based upon iconography with a particularly strong local resonance — acts as an aspirational gloss on the devotional message of the main pictorial space. The passage of time alone has rendered this an apparently parodic 'lively and amusing scene'.

Returning once more to the York Masons, acting out their marginal — that is, 'not contained in the sacred scripture' — fragment of Salvation History in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, what are they doing but aping the divine, turning the world upside-down in order to bring the sacred to life on the streets of York? The problem is that, about a century

after the glazing of the Minster nave, popular perceptions of the episode already appear to be shifting towards a modern viewpoint. The Masons are no longer performing 'the Corpus Christi play of the Funeral of the Virgin', or 'the Corpus Christi Play in which Peter intercedes', or even 'the Corpus Christi play in which Fergus was converted' but, as it says in the Memorandum Book, 'the Corpus Christi Play *in which Fergus was beaten*'. The devotional aspect, so important a century and more earlier, is lost beneath the surface slapstick. The inversion which formerly illuminated a higher truth is pushed too far and degenerates into mere monkey-business which is met by 'noise and laughter'.

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NOTES

1. William Tydeman 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited Richard Beadle (Cambridge University Press, 1994) 1.
2. *...quia Cementarij huius ciuitatis murmurabant inter se de pagina sua in ludo corporis christi vbi ffergus fflagelatus erat pro eo quod materia pagine illius in sacra non continetur scriptura & magis risum & clamorem causabat quam deuocionem*: *REED: York* edited Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, 2 vols (University of Toronto Press, 1979) *1* 47–48; translation *2* 732.
3. See Anna J. Mill 'The York Plays of the Dying, Assumption, and Coronation of Our Lady' *PMLA 65* (1950) 866.
4. David E. O'Connor and Jeremy Haselock 'The Stained and Painted Glass' in *A History of York Minster* edited G.E. Aylmer and Reginald Cant (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979) 383.
5. The height above ground level and the condition of the glass make it impossible to be sure, even with binoculars. We will, I suspect, need to wait for the Chapter House to fall under the close scrutiny of the *Corpus Vitrearum* project before we can be sure.
6. A much more extensive discussion of the glass may be found in my article, 'The Monkeys' Funeral in the Pilgrimage Window, York Minster' *Art History 23* (2000), 290–9.
7. See, for example, the West Window of the nave (wI).
8. The similarity to contemporary manuscript pages is noted in O'Connor and Haselock 'The Stained and Painted Glass' 17.

9. A fascinating recent study of these themes is Christa Grössinger *The World Upside-Down: English Misericords* (Harvey Miller, London, 1997). Representations of the preaching fox across all media are discussed in Kenneth Varty *Reynard the Fox* (Leicester University Press, 1967) 51–9.
10. Lillian M.C. Randall 'Exempla as a source of Gothic Marginal Illumination' *Art Bulletin 39* (1957) 97–109.
11. This is suggested by Michael Camille 'Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy' *Art History* 8 (1985) 26–49 (37).
12. O'Connor and Haselock 'The Stained and Painted Glass' 357.
13. Ruth Evans 'When a Body Meets a Body: Fergus and Mary in the York Cycle' *New Medieval Literatures 1* (1997) 205.
14. On the stages of consultation involved between the initial design and final installation of a stained glass window, see Sarah Crewe *Stained Glass in England c.1180–c.1540* (HMSO, London, 1987) 9.
15. This may be found in M.R. James *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1924).
16. *The N-Town Play* edited Stephen Spector *EETS SS 11* (1991) line 402. The source may be found in James *The Apocryphal New Testament* 213: 'Thou only of us art a virgin chosen of the Lord, and hast found such favour that thou didst lie on his breast: and when he hung for our salvation on the tree of the cross committed her unto thee with his own mouth. Thou therefore oughtest to carry this palm; and let us take up the body to bear it unto the place of the sepulchre'.
17. It should be noted that the name 'Fergus' only appears in the York records; elsewhere the Jew remains unnamed.
18. *The N-Town Play* 405; James *The Apocryphal New Testament* 214.
19. James *The Apocryphal New Testament* 215.
20. This point is made in Ruth Evans 'When a Body Meets a Body' note 40.
21. On such representations of the ape, see H.W. Janson *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (University of London Press, 1952); Grössinger *The World Upside-Down* 99–103.
22. Quoted in Michael Camille *Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art* (Reaktion, London, 1992) 12.
23. Geoffrey Chaucer *The House of Fame* in *The Riverside Chaucer* edited Larry D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 1988) lines 1212–13. On 'aping nature' see also *The Romance of the Rose* translated Charles Dahlberg (Princeton University Press, 1971; reprinted University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1986) 272.
24. Camille *Image on the Edge* 38.