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**FRAGMINA VERBORUM:  
THE VICES' USE OF LANGUAGE  
IN THE MACRO PLAYS**

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In *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1425), the everyman figure Humanum Genus has died after succumbing to avarice in his old age, and is being led off to hell by Malus Angelus, who taunts his victim with these words:

Now dagge we hens a dogge trot.  
In my dongion I schal þe dere.  
On þe is many a synful spot;  
þerfore þis schame I schal þe schere  
    Whanne þou comyst to my neste.  
Why woldyst þou, schrewe schalt neuere þe,  
But in þi lyue don aftyr me?  
And þi Good Aungyl tawth þe  
    Alwey to þe beste.

3a, but þou woldyst hym not leue;  
To Coueytise alwey þou drow.

(lines 3099–109)<sup>1</sup>

This speech is typical of the devils and deadly sins — whom we may collectively call the Vices — in the homiletic morality plays. Here the bluff derision of Malus Angelus, his scornful “3a!” and use of doggerel (“Now dagge we hens a dogge trot”) characterize their sardonic eloquence and

nonsensical volubility. While the Vice ostensibly serves the play's didactic purpose by bringing the precise cause of Anima's downfall, Covetousness, to the attention of the audience, his commentary is also an expression of triumph at the expense of the "Good Aungyl," and suggests the inability of the Virtues to effectively articulate doctrine.

As this example suggests, the coarse antics and parody of the morality Vices, like the cruel jokes of the *Tortores* in the devotional Cycle Plays, are prominent and often disturbingly appealing, and it is difficult to easily explain the uneasy laughter they generate. Scholars influenced by folklore studies and theories of the ritual origins of drama, such as A.P. Rossiter, see a fundamental ambivalence in the clash of pagan carnival and Christian piety.<sup>2</sup> Exegetical critics like V.A. Kolve, who argues that the elements of mediaeval drama all contribute to the production of a uniformly Christian meaning, suggest that an audience would have been able to separate fruit from chaff while viewing a performance. Kolve admits that a character like Cain in the Wakefield *Mactatio Abel* would certainly be amusing, but only at his own expense, drawing "unrestrained and unsympathetic" laughter.<sup>3</sup> *Mankind* (c. 1475), whose energetic Vices make it the most problematic of the morality plays from this point of view, affords us further examples of these critical positions. David Bevington sees its "earthy humour" as part of a popular dramatic tradition which could easily include "earthy humour, . . . song, dance, and slapstick violence in the context of a moral tale".<sup>4</sup> Paula Neuss, however, draws an exegetical distinction between the idle language of the Vices, who represent sloth (*Accidia*), and the earnest (but boring) sermonising of Mercy, who urges the audience to "puryfye yowr sowlys" through "goode werkys."<sup>5</sup>

What these two positions share is an assumption that one can divide the plays' language between the nonsense of the Vices and the sense of the soul's heavenly champions, the Virtues. Language is the medium of conflict in the morality play, a genre related to mediaeval debate literature. The subject, Man, is the target at which the representatives of Heaven and Hell aim their arguments. Like good rhetoricians, the contestants' object is *persuasio*, to convince Man that a certain way of life is preferable to another. Mankind thus has free will only in so far as he is free to choose options represented by competing discourses. In each play Mankind is first instructed by the agents of God, and then is pulled away, repeatedly in the *Castle of Perseverance* and comically in *Mankind*, by the opponents. One might think that the Virtues, armed with God's Truth, would enjoy a clear superiority in this contest, but in fact the Vices seem to take a particular pleasure in being able

to “deconstruct” the Word. As we noted above, *Malus Angelus* is especially proud that Mankind has chosen Covetousness and damnation despite the fact that “þi Good Aungyl tawth þ ee / Alwey to the beste.” (lines 3106–07)

The morality plays present systems over which God presides as the ultimate guarantee of meaning and attempt to validate doctrines which ensure salvation through obedience. To what extent is their success, their unity, threatened by the Vices’ subversive use of discourse, obscenity, and practical jokes? If language and signification can be used to obscure meaning, where does truth, particularly God’s Truth, reside in these plays? Our critical anxiety concerning the Vices ultimately seems to stem from their ability to verbally subvert the medium of conflict, the medium used to assert doctrine, and thus undermine the homiletic project of these plays. Contemporary theory has taught us to think of language in terms of its momentary applications, rather than as a vehicle for perfect meaning. This paper examines the plays in light of this theory, and suggests that the most valuable lesson of the morality play may well be to illustrate the great gulf between its speakers and God, the elusive, eternally distant Other.

As every mediaeval churchgoer knew from the account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis (lines 1–9), a multiplicity of languages was a punishment of man’s pride and a constant reminder of his fallen state. For St Augustine corporeal, imperfect language was a vexing obstacle in any attempt to discuss or have discourse with the perfect, God. In his *Confessions*, for example, he admits to a daydream in which he discusses scripture with Moses, and then remembers that he would not understand the prophet’s Hebrew. Pursuing the thought, Augustine realizes that he would be no better off if the prophet could speak Latin, as then he could only be sure of understanding Moses *literally*. However, because of a Neoplatonic distinction between ideas and words, Augustine is able to resolve the problem:

Truly within me, within, in the chamber of my thoughts, Truth, neither Hebrew, nor Greek, nor Latin, nor barbarian, without organs of voice or tongue, or sound of syllables, would say, “It is truth,” and I forthwith should say confidently to that man of Thine, “thou sayest truly.”<sup>6</sup>

It is this belief in a transcendental presence animating language, namely God as *Logos*, which dominates Augustinian semiotics. As Jacques Derrida notes in *Of Grammatology*, in metaphysics the signifier (*signans*) merely bears an “intermediary” relationship to its signified (*signatum*), while the *signatum* “always referred, as to its referent, to a *res*, to an entity created or at any rate first thought and spoken, thinkable and speakable, in the eternal present of the divine *logos*.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there are points, such

as his discussion of "heretical punctuation" in Scripture, found in his *On Christian Doctrine*, Book III, where Augustine admits that the vagaries of language have the power to obstruct the truth, and he can only offer faith in doctrine as a defence against them.<sup>8</sup> For Augustine, the problem ultimately lies in the representation of God's perfection by means of corporeal language. If one describes God as perfection, he writes, "a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable." Somewhat uneasily, Augustine concludes that this contradiction should be passed over silently, "For God, although nothing worthy may be spoken of Him, has accepted the tribute of the human voice and wished us to take joy in praising Him with our words."<sup>9</sup>

Eugene Vance has suggested that Augustine's solution to this contradiction is for the Christian to substitute "vertical dialogue" for "horizontal dialogue." By horizontal dialogue Vance means the earthly love and discourse that "exiles us from God . . . and is to incur the punishment of passions that come with — and lead to — mortality."<sup>10</sup> Following the example of St Paul in 1 Corinthians (14.1-4) Augustine advises the Christian to seek a solitary, extra-linguistic relationship with God, or to seek the gift of prophecy should the Christian wish to retain a voice in the world.<sup>11</sup> Bernard Gui, biographer of Thomas Aquinas, tells a famous story which offers a further example of this "vertical dialogue" that transcends earthly communication. Asked why he had ceased to work on the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas is said to have replied that "All my writing is now at an end; for such things have been revealed to me that all I have taught and written seems quite trivial to me now. The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, He may quickly end my life also."<sup>12</sup> The *Summa* itself anticipates this position in its declaration that God cannot be known by the intellect through the senses, but may be known through the "gratuitous light" of divine grace.<sup>13</sup>

A similar strategy of ascetic self-isolation is recommended by the Virtues of the morality plays. In the play *Wisdom* (c. 1460), Anima is only imperilled when induced by *Lucyfer* to seek "conversacyon" and "comunycacyon" (425-26) with others on earth. Prior to *Lucyfer's* arrival, Anima was content to remain in vertical, extra-linguistic discourse with *Wisdom*,<sup>14</sup> who states that:

The hye worthynes of my loue  
 Angell nor man can tell playnly.  
 Yt may be felt in experyens from aboue

But not spoke ne tolde as yt ys veryly.

The godly loue no creature can specyfye. (lines 61–65)

Unfortunately for Wisdom and his colleagues, the highly eloquent Vices, like Lucyfer, do not give Man much opportunity for meditation and spiritual discourse. Lucyfer is not as blustering and riotous as the other Macro Vices or as his demonic colleagues in the Cycles, although he does manage the occasional “Owt harow I rore” (325) as if to appease the convention. His particular talent is in rhetoric, a skill mistrusted by many in the Middle Ages. Augustine’s distrust of earthly language lies in his recognition that rhetoric can be used to urge “falsehood” as well as “truth,” leading him to disclaim the title of rhetorician.<sup>15</sup> Lucyfer short-circuits Man’s “resone” by appealing to his corporeal Mynde, which is vulnerable to “sensualyte” and the “fyve owtewarde wyttys” (135–60). The contemplative life of vertical discourse, he argues, is difficult to maintain and to fail at it is to risk offending God “hyghly” (431–36). Lucyfer’s verbal coup is in using the *exemplum* of the life of Christ to persuade man to seek worldly company:

LUCYFER. And all hys lyff was informacyon

Ande example to man.

Sumtyme wyth synners he had conversacyon;

Sumtyme wyth holy also comunycacyon;

Sumtyme he laboryde, preyde; sumtyme tribulacyon;

Thys was vita mixta þat Gode here began;

Ande þat lyff xulde ye here sewe.

(lines 423–29)

Mynde is dazzled by these rhetorical fireworks and can not argue the obvious defence, that Christ led a “*vita mixta*” but did not share fallen man’s *natura mixta*. “Your resons be grete” (448) is his only response.

Humanum Genus in the *Castle of Perseverance* is similarly seduced into worldly discourse, but is rescued after a battle between the Seven Virtues and Seven Deadly Sins. Now in his old age, he is sheltered in the castle of the virtues, “Þese ladys of goodnesse” who have shown him “to blysse”:

It is but foly, as I gesse,

Al þis werldys wele iwys.

Þese louely ladys, more and lesse,

In wyse wordys þei telle me þys.

Þus seyth þe bok of kendys.

(lines 2509–13)

Despite this doctrinal authority, Avarice quickly seduces Mankind into renouncing “blysse.” The Vice makes no attempt to disguise his purpose, and even stresses the addictive nature of covetousness, which he represents as worldly security:

In þis bowre I schal þe blys;  
 Worldly wele schal be þi wage;  
 More mucke þanne is þyne iwys  
 Take þou in þis trost terage  
 And loke þat þou do wronge.  
 Coveytyse, it is no sore,  
 He wyl þe feffen ful of store,  
 And alwey, alwey, sey "more and more",  
 And þat schal be þi songe. (lines 2704–712)

Mankind is completely enthralled by this teaching, which embodies the exact opposite of the holy doctrine of charity, and says "A, Coveytyse, haue þou good grace! / Certys þou beryst a trewe tonge" (lines 2713–14).<sup>16</sup>

The figure of Mercy, in the play of *Mankind*, is realistically aware that the Vices, "Nyse in þer aray, in language þei be large," will attempt to "perverte" his ward, and warns Mankind accordingly (294–98). Mankind's spiritual arsenal includes the Word Itself, the passage from Job (34.15) which reminds him "that you are dust, and to dust you will return." However, the Vices, on the strength of their subversive eloquence, are able to drive home a wedge of language which corrodes Mankind's faith in his counsellor's discourse (594–604). As the devil tells the audience, this story is a "praty game," and yet while it is outrageously false and contrived, by advising Mankind to seek "mercy" of the three rogues Tytyvillus is skillfully manoeuvring him into a new discourse, where he will be constituted as a new subject, and subject to new counsel. Here we might modify Vance's terms, horizontal and vertical dialogue, terms implicated in structuralism and metaphysics, and speak instead of discursive knowledge, in which identity can only be established by the presence of the addressed Other.

According to Emile Benveniste, the identifying pronouns "I" and "you" are only referential momentarily, at the moment of utterance in discourse. "The reality to which [the pronoun I] refers," Benveniste writes, "is the reality of the discourse. It is the instance of discourse in which designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the 'subject'."<sup>17</sup> The Mankind figures in the morality plays are constantly being shaped by discourse, which is the source of competing knowledges, earthly and spiritual. The role of the Virtues is to fix Mankind in a discursive knowledge with his Creator while leading him out of the world, as Catherine Belsey notes:

To know God [in the Middle Ages] was not to master an object of knowledge, but to apprehend a meaning which was also truth. God, the *Logos*, at once divinity, concept and word, was pure meaning and pure being, the transcendental signified and referent, and fully to know God was not to dif-

ferentiate oneself from the objects of knowledge but, on the contrary, to become absorbed in total presence, to be transformed and ultimately dissolved. Knowledge was also practice, uniting meaning and being in submission to the discourse and the discipline of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

However, as we have already noted, the advocates of God, of the transcendent signified, have difficulty subjecting Mankind within this divine discourse. The Vices' goal is to sabotage or render untrustworthy all signifying systems which might lead man to knowledge, and to leave him alone and confused in the fallen world of non-meaning. In *Mankind*, for example, Tytyvillus hides Man's grain and slips a plank into the ground.<sup>19</sup> After striking the wood with his spade, Man exclaims that "Thys londe ys so harde yt makyth [me] wnlusty and yrke" (545), and abandons his useful labour. Tytyvillus' plank, like his story of Mercy fled to France, is a ploy to ensnare Man, and yet as a signifier it is real in and of itself. As David Bevington notes, the ground is literally "stiff as a board."<sup>20</sup>

Belsey is one of several critics who have noticed that the morality Vices deal in an "engaging nonsense which scrambles the discourse of salvation."<sup>21</sup> Avarice in *The Castle of Perseverance* exhorts the other Deadly Sins to "Feffyn hym [Mankind] wyth ȝoure foly" (1026). In the same play the Vices are especially fond of metrical and alliterative tags,<sup>22</sup> which are meaningless but attractive signifiers. Such signification, as Augustine complains in his *On True Religion*, is a worldly snare, for "Some perverse persons . . . set more store by their ears than by their intelligence."<sup>23</sup> The Vices' most effective weapon is obscenity. While debating with his rivals in *Perseverance*, Malus Angelus frequently uses verbal abuse to deny his opponent any rational foothold in the argument:

MALUS ANGELUS:

ȝa, whanne þe fox prechyth, kepe wel ȝore gees!  
 He spekyth as it were a holy pope.  
 Goo, felaw, and pyke of þo lys  
 Þat crepe þer upon þi cope!  
 Þi part is pleyed al at þe dys  
 Þat þou schalt haue here, as I hope.  
 Tyl Mankynde fallyth to podys prys,  
 Coveytyse schal hym grype and grope  
 Tyl sum schame hym schende.  
 Tyl man be dyth in dethys dow  
 He seyth neuere he hath inow.  
 Þerfore, goode boy, cum blow  
 At my neþer ende!

(lines 802-14)

Bonus Angelus is seemingly at a loss to counter this barrage of words and withdraws, leaving Man to bad company. Similarly, Mercy in *Mankind* does not respond when asked by Nowadays to translate his obscene couplet into Latin "in clerycall manere" (130-34).<sup>24</sup> One is thus left to wonder if the Virtues have any power at all in earthly discourse.

New-Guise, Nought, and Nowadays, the Vices of the play *Mankind*, are especially adept at jamming the broadcasts of the Virtues. Their scatological, antiphonic "Crystemes song" (331-43) even incorporates the audience in apparently harmless fun, which actually demolishes the content of the ideal, liturgical antiphon, dedicated to the praise of God, while leaving its shell standing:

NOUGHT:

Now I prey all þe yemandry þat ys here

To syng wyth ws wyth a mery chere:

[*He sings a line at a time; New-Guise and Nowadays lead the audience in singing after him*]

Yt ys wretyn wyth a coll, yt ys wretyn wyth a cole,

NEW-GYSE and NOWADAYS:

Yt ys wretyn wyth a colle, yt ys wretyn wyth a colle,

NOUGHT:

He þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll, he þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll,

NEW-GYSE and NOWADAYS:

He þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll, he þat schytyth with hys hoyll,

NOUGHT:

But he wyppye hys ars clen, but he wyppye hys ars clen,

NEW-GYSE and NOWADAYS:

But he wyype hys ars clen, but he wyype his ars clen,

NOUGHT:

On hys breche yt xall be sen, on hys breche yt xall be sen.

NEW-GYSE and NOWADAYS:

On hys breche yt xall be sen, on hys brech yt xall be sen.

All sing:

Holyke, holyke, holyke! holyke, holyke, holyke! (lines 333-43)<sup>25</sup>

These Vices ridicule Man's useful labour, devalue the clerical Latin of Mercy, and by ramming bits of decontextualised scripture together they are able to use even the Word with ironic intent, using the Psalms as an anti-fraternal jibe and to suggest that sin is best committed in the company of others (323-26). The Vices' ability to turn the Word itself into a weapon is seen in other plays, such as *Wisdom*. In *Perseverance* Avarice subverts the proverb, a traditional vehicle of instruction, by using one of Cato's distichs (*Catonis Distichia* 2.17) to urge Man to repudiate charity (854-66).



The stream of abuse, nonsense, and deceit generated by the Vices serves, as Belsey notes, "to draw attention to the signifier at the expense of meaning."<sup>26</sup> One is left to wonder if an inadvertent lesson of the morality plays is to demonstrate the absence of any metaphysical underpinnings to language, which is merely free-floating and subject to its user's intentions. As we have seen, Augustine, like the Virtues in these plays, ultimately counsels faith as a solution to our inability to represent the ineffable in corporeal language. Like the Everyman figure who represents us, we the audience are hindered by earthly faculties and are denied the presence of God until language ceases with death. Consciousness, as Derrida understands it, is enmeshed in and is the effect of a semiological chain, continuous and without origin, where signs mean because of other signs and the play of difference between them.<sup>27</sup> Lacking any ultimate guarantee of meaning which would render language "innocent" and "neutral",<sup>28</sup> all discourse becomes highly self-interested:

If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one's language, and one's choice of terms, only within a topic [an orientation in space] and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute and definitive.<sup>29</sup>

While the morality play attempts to present God as the ultimate guarantee of meaning, it tends to become a plurality of competing discourse. Its results are provisional. In *Mankind* the action ends on earth, with Man apparently better prepared to meet his heavenly judge. Tytyvillus and his crew have been vanquished by some comic stage business, but their defeat is unconvincing. Mercy tells the departing audience to "Serge 3our condicyons wyth dew examinacion" (908), suggesting that the Vices' defeat is only temporary. They are lurking in wait for future Everymen, and, as with Beckett's *Endgame*, one suspects that the play's action could happen all over again. In *Perseverance* Man is redeemed by Mercy only after death and the end of earthly language. The plays themselves evade closure in that they call attention to their illusory nature. "Thynke and remembyr þe world ys but a wanite," says Mercy in *Mankind*, "As yt ys prowyd daly by diurse transmutacyon" (909-10). God himself in *The Castle of Perseverance* suddenly ceases to be a *Pater sedens in iudicio* and now, merely an actor, breaks the audience's spell:

Þus endyth oure gamys.  
 To saue 3ou fro synnyng  
 Evyr at þe begynnyng  
 thynke on 3oure last endyng!

(lines 3645-48)

As noted above, the plurality of these plays, especially of *Mankind*, affects critics in several ways. Bevington describes Tytyvillus and his henchmen as "thoroughly engaging rascals,"<sup>30</sup> while Bernard Spivack thinks it the paradox of the morality play that the Vices become "theatrically fascinating."<sup>31</sup> David Zesmer and Hardin Craig find *Mankind* exasperating. Zesmer complains that "Titivillus and his grotesque crew simply revel in foul speech and coarse antics, almost to the point of obscuring the moral purpose for which these characters were introduced."<sup>32</sup> Craig ascribes its obscenity to a debased popular tradition, calling *Mankind* "ignorant, corrupt, probably degenerate, and vulgar."<sup>33</sup> This plurality persists in the later morality plays even after their focus becomes more secular, as in Skelton's *Magnyfycence*, where there is a long internal sequence of stage business for fools and Vices that has, at best, a tenuous relation to the plot. As we have seen, one can explain this trait, as Bevington and Happé<sup>34</sup> have done, by associating the Vices with popular theatre, although such a theory fails to consider the linguistic implications raised by the Vices' use of language. Following the lead of D.W. Robertson, Jr, one could invoke Augustinian notions of the correct and incorrect use of material signifiers, and argue, as Spivack does, that the Vices show Man the incorrect use of worldly things while contributing to the plays' homiletic function. Such a mediaevalism would however remain within the tradition of western metaphysics. As I have argued, the Vices in these plays demonstrate that language is the slipperiest of mediums, and that to look beyond it for a guarantee of meaning requires a leap of faith of Augustinian proportions.

Paul Zumthor has stated, without alarm, that the mediaeval text tends towards the ironic interplay of "yes and no, obverse/reverse" and produces a meaning which "in the last analysis, would present itself as enigmatic, the enigma being resolved into simultaneous and contradictory propositions."<sup>35</sup> For Zumthor, mediaevalism is "writing-reading, reading-writing: a play of mirrors catching the reflection of dead values in the glass of lived values, *per speculum in aenigmate*."<sup>36</sup> We should thus not be too distressed by our inability to clearly distinguish a victor in these absurd but deadly serious debates. What we need to develop instead is an understanding of that profoundly didactic text, the morality play, which recognizes both the shaping nature and strategic uses of its discourse, discourse that is neither nonsensical nor transcendent, but merely self-interested.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All references to *Mankind*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, and to *Wisdom* are to *The Macro Plays*, ed. Mark Eccles, EETS 262 (London 1969).

<sup>2</sup> A.P. Rossiter, in *English Drama From Early Times to the Elizabethans* (New York 1967), writes that "the Moral Play tends to split into 'layers' rather as slate does, one set of *laminae* still concerned with morality, the other with mirth and immoralities, or mere farce and horseplay" (p. 98). A recent essay by Anthony Gash, "Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Mediaeval Drama," in *Mediaeval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton 1986) 74-98, develops Rossiter's thesis. Gash examines the connection between *Mankind* and the Shrove Tuesday and Christmas customs referred to in the play, in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. He finds that parodic elements such as the papal pardon (144-46), misapplication of psalms (324-25), and the darkly humorous references to hanging (516, 520) are expressions of folk humour undermining the prestige of ecclesiastical and judicial authority, and argues that while the play's hero is allegorically mankind, "it must have been easy for the rural audience to see him as a poor labourer whose toil does not always seem compatible with church-going" (94). On the carnivalesque element in mediaeval literature, see Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Isowolsky (Cambridge, Mass. 1968) and also his essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin 1981) 41-83.

<sup>3</sup> V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford 1966) 140.

<sup>4</sup> David Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe* (Cambridge, Mass. 1962) 18. Similarly, Robert Weimann, in *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre*, ed. Robert Scharz (Baltimore 1978), sees the verbal non-sense in *Mankind* as "the heritage of non-sensical ritual self expression" in the popular folk plays (p. 119).

<sup>5</sup> Paula Neuss, "Active and Idle Language: Dramatic Images in *Mankind*," *Medieval Drama*, ed. Neville Denny (London 1973) 40-67.

<sup>6</sup> St Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York 1949) XI.5 (p. 246).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore 1976) 73.

<sup>8</sup> St Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Roberston, Jr (Indianapolis 1958) III.2 (p. 79).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* I.6 (pp. 10-11). Aquinas considers this point in his discussion of the naming of God, in the *Summa Theologica*, ed. Anton C. Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 Vols, (New York 1945) Q.13, art. 1 (I, 113). Because we cannot know the essence of God but can only know him indirectly via his effects, Aquinas concludes that likewise one can only name God indirectly: ". . . we know God from creatures as their cause, and also by way of excellence and remotion. In this way therefore He can be named by us from creatures, yet not so that the name which signifies Him expresses the divine essence in itself in the way that the name *man* expresses the essence of man in himself, since it signifies the definition which manifests his essence. For the idea expressed by the name is the definition."

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Vance, "The Apple as Feather: Toward a Poetics of Dialogue in Early French Medieval Theatre," *Mervellous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln, Nebraska 1986) 184-229 (at p. 193).

<sup>11</sup> The Apostle cautions that the interpretation of prophecy is also a gift of God: "the man who can speak in a strange tongue should pray for the power to interpret it" (1 Cor. 14.13). References to the Bible are to Monsignor Knox's translation of the Vulgate (New York 1944).

<sup>12</sup> *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents*, Trans. and ed. Kenelm Foster (London 1959) 46.

<sup>13</sup> *ST* (at n. 9) Q.12, art. 12-13.

<sup>14</sup> The concept of extra-linguistic discourse is expressed by the Old Testament Wisdom of Solomon, to which the play refers: "Whence, then, did the prudence spring that endowed me? Prayer brought it, to God I prayed, and the spirit of wisdom came upon me" (7.7).

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (at n. 8), IV. 1-2. A distrust of rhetoric is often visible in mediaeval texts. In the Wakefield *Last Judgement* the foremost demon Tytyvillus is praised by his peers for his knowledge of "gramory and somewhat of arte" (l. 251); *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Boston 1975), 646. Chaucer's Franklin (V. 719) and Host (IV. 16-20) both disavow any knowledge of rhetoric.

<sup>16</sup> Prolonged exposure to the influence of the Vices seems to cause the mankind figure a logical and semantic breakdown. In a later play (c. 1515), Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (in *Four Morality Plays*, ed. Peter Happé [Harmondsworth 1979] 211-311), the mankind figure's aureate diction deteriorates under the influence of Skelton's surreal Vices. He begins to rave like a Cycle tyrant (1457-1514), to utter oaths (1569, 1619) and to speak in alliterative lines (1560) reminiscent of those in *Perseverance*.

<sup>17</sup> Emile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language," *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami 1971) 223-30, 226.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London 1985) 56.

<sup>19</sup> Neuss (at n. 5) notes similarities between this episode and others in mediaeval French drama (p. 61).

<sup>20</sup> Bevington (at n. 15) 901.

<sup>21</sup> Belsey (at n. 18) 60.

<sup>22</sup> Although *Perseverance's* style is generally alliterative, regardless of the character speaking, it seemed to me that the playwright assigned the most alliteration to the Vices. To test this impression, I selected the first five scenes (in Eccles' edition, at n. 1), where the Vices are predominant, and the last five, which are dominated by the Virtues and God, and then made a count of lines containing three or more alliterating words. I also included the Banns as a neutral comparison. The results, given in terms of a percentage of total lines with 3-word alliteration, supported my assumption, at least in so far as Man's principal enemies, the World, Flesh, Devil and Death, are concerned.

|               |     |                     |     |
|---------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| Vexillators   | 16% | Garcio              | 15% |
| Malus Angelus | 11% | Humanum Genus/Anima | 13% |
| Bonus Angelus | 13% | Veritas             | 5%  |
| Stulticia     | 3%  | Justicia            | 7%  |
| Voluptas      | 11% | Misericordia        | 3%  |
| Mors          | 37% | Pax                 | 1%  |
| Mundus        | 37% | Deus                | 12% |
| Belyal        | 60% |                     |     |
| Caro          | 45% |                     |     |

Admittedly, a complete study would have to include all of the play's 3649 lines, as well as the list of alliterative and metrical tags identified by Eccles (p. xix). Possibly those scholars interested in computer-assisted textual analysis may wish to pursue this matter.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Eugene Vance's illuminating essay, "St Augustine: Language as Temporality" (at n. 10), 34-50, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Neuss (at n. 5) argues that Mercy does not respond "because no virtuous person should use the kind of language that New Guise has been speaking, and Mercy is therefore unable to produce the words that would prove the Vice wrong, and remains silent" (p. 51). Neuss's distinction between right and wrong reveals her desire to establish reference points in the play, but the point here is that the Vice's persistent use of obscenity exhausts the arbitrarily-assigned taboo value of certain signifiers, and ultimately suggests the non-referential nature of language itself. Similarly, Myscheff's mock-Latin (680-81) reveals a shrewd awareness of the arbitrary and interdependent distinctions which give meaning to the individual units of language.

<sup>25</sup> Stage directions are from Bevington (at n. 15). As an example of what Bakhtin calls "licensed parody," compare this song with the "Prose of the Ass" quoted by Rossiter (at n. 2) 63. This passage is worth quoting in full if only because of previous commentators' oblique references to it. I experienced a similar reticence when the audience was encouraged to sing this at a performance of *Mankind* at Glendon College, Toronto, directed by John Mayberry (November 1987). Presumably, mediaeval audiences were more forthcoming. This interesting production used an all-women cast, effectively pairing Mercy (dressed as a nun) with Tytyvillus.

<sup>26</sup> Belsey (at n. 18) 60.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Differance," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago 1982) 1-27, 9 f.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago 1981) 19.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida (at n. 7) 70.

<sup>30</sup> Bevington (at n. 15) 902.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York 1958) 123.

<sup>32</sup> David M. Zesmer, *Guide to English Literature: From Beowulf Through Chaucer and Medieval Drama* (New York 1961) 283.

<sup>33</sup> Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1955) 351.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Happé, "The 'Vice' and the Popular Theatre, 1547-80," in *Poetry and Drama: 1570-1700*, eds. Antony Coleman and Antony Hammond (London 1981) 13-31.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages*, trans. Sarah White (Lincoln, Nebraska 1986) 63. Compare Zumthor's with Rossiter's statement: "A strangely comprehensive two-ways-facingness brings together in medieval art the remote, and transcendental, the noble, and the vulgar, the gross and the base; often switching abruptly from the one to the other, from pathos to brutality, or from reverence to blasphemy" (at n. 2) 58.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 87-88.

