

Coercive Sound: the Bodily Negotiation of Early English Performance Space

Don Ihde in his epistemological study of sound recounts his experience of the interior of Notre Dame Cathedral. Initially, the space is ‘a ghostly reminder of a civilisation long past, its muted walls echoing only the shuffle of countless tourist feet’, but when later the author returns during the singing of high mass ‘suddenly the mute walls echo and reecho and the singing fills the cathedral. Its soul has momentarily returned, and the mute testimony of the past has once again returned to live in the moment of the ritual.’¹ For Ihde, sound not only fills the empty space, but gives it life, a purpose, a reason for being. In this sense sound helps to define a space, helps us to understand it and perhaps even to create it. Wes Folkerth confirms such an assertion as he recalls the use of the word *sound* in the Early Modern period: ‘As a verb, *to sound* means not only to produce sound, but also to measure the depth of something, to establish its boundaries, to define it spatially.’² This notion of sound as a method of definition and transformation, moreover, is not restricted to external space but can be used to alter the inner space of human beings. From antiquity through to the Renaissance the ear was believed to be ‘the most immediate access to the internal spirits’ of man, as well as a means of controlling his thoughts, speech and actions.³ Inevitably then, sound can be wielded as a weapon of coercion, a way of forcing the listener to behave in specific ways, of influencing their thoughts and moulding their inner space to suit the ideals of the ruling power.⁴

The range of audio effects briefly described here can be found distilled in one late medieval play in which sound is used to dramatize a battle between the opposing forces of earthly and divine powers, both of which seek a specific physical and spiritual response from the audience. The fifteenth-century mystery play *Christ before Herod* was written for York’s Corpus Christi cycle; a group of short plays performed annually in celebration of the miracle of the Mass. The cycle aimed to present the history of the world according to the Bible, from Creation to the Day of Judgement, with each significant biblical episode reconstructed as a distinct, individual playlet. The plays were then distributed between York’s prosperous craft

¹ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1976), pp.50-51.

² Wes Folkerth, *The Sound of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.25.

³ *Ibid.*, p.57. See also Charles Burnett, ‘Perceiving Sound in the Middle Ages’, in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. by Mark M. Smith (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), pp. 69-84.

⁴ Jacques Attali, ‘Listening’, in *Hearing History: A Reader* (See Burnett above), pp. 12.

and merchant guilds to produce and perform, the elaborate sequence becoming as much a display of the city's great wealth and status as a performance in honour of the Sacrament.

Traditionally the plays were performed on pageant wagons, structures similar to the carnival floats that process through many modern towns and cities today. Evidence from the Mercers' guild indenture of 1433 shows how remarkably ornate some of the wagons could be; their Doomsday pageant, notably the last pageant of the day, had a 'helle mouthe [...] A cloud & ij peces of Rainbow of tymber [...] A great coster [*ornamental hanging*] of rede damaske [and] iiij Irens to bere vppe heuen', as well as 'A brandreth of Iren þat god sall sitte vpon when he sall sty [*ascend*] vppe to heuen [and] ij peces of rede cloudes & sternes [*stars*] of gold.'⁵ An example from British Library MS Additional 15707 similarly illustrates the detail that could be attained by the wheeled structures. It depicts a pageant wagon constructed as a ship, replete with mast, crow's nest, sails and rigging, and, although a continental source from early sixteenth-century Nuremberg, it demonstrates the structure's potential to assume the varying locations required by the biblical narrative.

On Corpus Christi day the decorated wagons would be wheeled through the streets of York, following a designated route with twelve prearranged stations, at each of which the play would be performed in full before being wheeled to the next stop and performed again. Parts of the route, such as The Shambles and Micklegate Bar, still survive and The Shambles in particular offers an insight into the space that awaited the performers. In comparison to the rest of modern York, the medieval street is extremely narrow, a feature emphasised by the style of the older buildings. The top level of the houses, in typical medieval style, jut out about a foot beyond the lower walls, creating a sense of enclosure by blocking some of the natural light and overshadowing the street below. Within such a space the pageant wagons, even those of John Marshall's restrictive size of twelve by seven feet six, would consume a large portion of the available space, vertical as well as horizontal because, as the accounts from the Mercers show, some pageants made use of an upper tier to represent the lofty heights of heaven.⁶ As well as the wagon and the actors the street would also

⁵ Printed in *Records of Early English Drama: York*, ed. by Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), p. 55.

⁶ John Marshall, 'Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. by Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 304.

accommodate the audience, which Greg Walker suggests potentially totalled around two hundred, with people crammed into the street and hanging out of the windows of adjacent houses.⁷ To this physical arrangement add the carnival atmosphere of Corpus Christi holiday and the sounds that accompany such a celebration. In the background are the sounds of York itself, the everyday hubbub heard unconsciously by the town's inhabitants: cartwheels clattering, sniffles, coughs, shuffling feet and clopping hooves. On top of this sonic backdrop ride those sounds that the townsfolk cannot help but consciously hear: bells ringing, holiday singing, music from another pageant or independent performer, perhaps even the excited cheers from a distant cockfight or bear baiting. All of these elements combine to generate the impression of a bustling, cacophonous and cramped performance space, one that could easily swallow the performers who must compete with the environment to engage and hold the audience's attention.

Into this boisterous multitude bursts King Herod, interrupting the intense carnival space with a tyrannical command and a promise of physical violence to any who dare to disobey him:

Pes, ye brothellis and browlys in pis broydenesse inbrased,
And freykis bat are frendely your freykenesse to frayne,
Youre tounges fro tretynge of trifillis be trased,
Or þis brande þat is bright schall breste in youre brayne.⁸

Although the speech appears in the manuscript as a unified whole, running uninterrupted until the First Duke enters at line twenty-seven, the verse's stylistic elements reveal a sonic maelstrom beneath the cohesive visual surface. For example, the metre varies considerably between lines, from as few as three beats per line in line eleven to as many as six in line nineteen. In comparison with the reliable rhythms of Shakespeare's iambic pentameter or Chaucer's rhyme royal such changeable patterns clearly disrupt the harmony of the verse, creating an impression of lawlessness and unpredictability. Similarly, the rhyme scheme alternates from a quite regular pattern in the opening four lines to a very messy muddle of rhymes in the central seven and onwards. The volume of alliterative words within each line likewise varies from two

⁷ Greg Walker, 'Religious Narrative: The Biblical Plays. Introduction', in *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. by Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p.3; Richard Beadle, 'The York Cycle', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, (See Marshall, above), p. 99.

⁸ *Christ before Herod*, in *The York Plays*, ed. by Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), ll. 1-4.

in line sixteen to six in line twelve. Such striking asymmetry, even when reading the text, makes it impossible to predict what follows, but in performance, where the irregularities are embodied by the actor, this effect would be amplified, producing a confused and disordered aural experience that reflects the character and rule of an erratic, volatile king.

Although we can never fully imagine the audio-spatial environment of fifteenth-century York, the dramatic effect of Herod's opening speech within such a space can still be appreciated. Imagine the narrow, crowded street described above where a carnival cacophony awaits the performers and threatens to absorb the attention of an already boisterous holiday crowd. To commence his reign the player first alters the audience's status by directly addressing them ('Ye brothellis and browlys'), constructing them as Herod's subordinate subjects and participants in the performance. The aural disorder generated by the verse, however, assures the actor's genuine, rather than a purely fictional, control over the crowd. Initially, the hissed sibilants, venomously spat plosives and harsh /k/ sound of 'plextis' and 'freykenesse' begin this process by creating some abrasive notes that can be distinguished above the background clamour.⁹ The alliteration adds to this, helping the actor to stress the most important words and increasing the intensity of the threats and mayhem by quickening the metre. The actor, therefore, is not only demanding the audience's attention as Herod, he is actually enforcing it in real-time by dominating the city soundscape.

Herod's acoustic control will, however, have a further, more direct, influence over the surrounding auditors, by provoking a change in their physical posture and therefore altering their relationship with the surrounding space.¹⁰ Unlike visual objects that appear to remain outside ourselves, that is, external to our mind as well as our body, sound seems to penetrate our awareness to become a part of our psychological experience.¹¹ Furthermore, hearing is somatic; it affects us internally, physically, corporeally. Take, for example, the common physical reaction to finger nails being scraped down a chalkboard, or the swaying, foot-tapping and dancing that

⁹ *Christ before Herod*, ll.5, 2.

¹⁰ Simon Shepherd, *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.44.

¹¹ See for example, Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, pp.75-82; Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp.7-16; Steven Connor, 'Edison's Teeth: Touching Hearing', in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, ed. by Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp.153-172.

invariably accompanies live music of any kind. In a similar manner, Herod's noise will not remain external to the spectator's body and mind. Instead it will become integrated 'into [their] inner life,' the violent audio attack becoming part of their understanding of the performance space, and their status within it, which in turn affects the postures that their physical bodies assume.¹² At a recent performance of extracts from the play at Nottingham University, students recounted such physical and emotional responses, for example an urge to retreat away from the performer and even a sense of fear, despite knowing that the actor could not actually harm them. Others remarked on the relief they felt when unnoticed by Herod, a dread every time he came close and reported adopting a more submissive bodily posture by dipping their head to avoid eye contact or hunching their back and shoulders.¹³

The reactions described by the students were undoubtedly influenced by the actor's physical movements, the auditory force of the verse amplified by an equally aggressive use of space, again emphasising the intrinsic connection between sound and body. The actor matched his movements to the rhythms and emphasis of the verse, lunging towards a spectator while firing a particularly ferocious plosive and striding across the room in time with the tripartite beat of 'and lusshe all youre lyymys with lasschis'.¹⁴ Such movements were possible because of the expanse of available space, but perhaps the more restricted medieval Herod would barge his way through the throng of observers, maybe even elbowing one or two on his way past.

There is also a second possible reaction where those braver audience members challenge Herod's ownership over the space by, say, standing taller, puffing out their chest and squaring their shoulders, returning Herod's threatening glare while parrying his acoustic assault with their own verbal attack. Although none of the students responded in this way, Sarah Carpenter has recently uncovered a similar response in an account *c.1522*, in which Juan Luis Vives comments on audience reactions that are far from the timorous and compliant responses of the twenty-first-century students. Vives notes that 'euen at the celebration of Christs passion and our redemption', when Peter cuts off Malchus's ear 'all resounds with laughter' and spectators hiss at the

¹² Richard D. Cureton, 'The Auditory Imagination and the Music of Poetry', in *Stylistic Criticism of Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Text to Context*, ed. by Pater Verdonk (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1993), pp.86-7.

¹³ *Sound and Performance*, University of Nottingham Distance Learning Summer School, 18th June 2008.

¹⁴ *Christ before Herod*, 1.11.

disciple's denial of the Messiah.¹⁵ Although not as overtly confrontational as the response I have suggested, this account nevertheless offers a picture of an audience willing to interact with, even challenge, a performer.

As Simon Shepherd suggests, then, the audience is 'having its physiological mechanisms controlled by the discourses working upon it,' they have unwittingly absorbed Herod's powerful disharmony, responded to it with these two kinaesthetic and emotional reactions and so have become 'physically caught up' in his suppressive discourse.¹⁶ In the first instance, the verbal violence forces some to shrink back, adopting a submissive posture to communicate their acceptance of Herod's spatial control; however, even those who resist the king's sonic onslaught still unwittingly conform to his construction of the performance space. In responding in such a manner they contribute their own audio chaos, enhancing the disordering of space and soundscape, and becoming, therefore, a constituent of Herod's subjugating force.

In eliciting these reactions from his audience, Herod is in complete control of the performance space. His rule extends out from the representational court into the streets of medieval York where his subjects are coerced into a somatic response to his oppressive noise. But his domination does not last as an alternative, more potent means of control enters in the form of the Messiah. Christ is brought into the scene as a prisoner, a captured criminal from Galilee brought forth between two of Pilate's soldiers. Strikingly, this condemned figure is both silent and still. Throughout the play there are no stage directions indicating Christ's movement, nor is he given any lines to utter, even during Herod's voluble interrogation. Furthermore, from Herod's own erratic questioning, it appears that Christ's indifference starts to undermine the king's sonic control. Initially, Herod perceives his interrogation of Christ as a game, but as the scene progresses his frustration begins to show: 'Howe likis þa, wele lorde? Saie. What deuyll, neuer a dele?', after which his demands become more unreasonable, expressed in increasingly abrupt, furious sentences: 'Kyte oute yugilment [*give your judgement?*]! Vta! Oy! Oy!'.¹⁷ Eventually, Herod, bewildered by the silent, unyielding Christ, can only conclude that Jesus must be 'woode', mad.¹⁸

¹⁵ St Augustine, *of the Citiie of God: with learned comments of Io. Lod. Vives. Englished by J.H.* (George Eld. 1610), courtesy of Sarah Carpenter, 'New Evidence: Vives and audience-response to biblical drama', *Medieval English Theatre* meeting, The University of Bristol, 29th March 2008.

¹⁶ Shepherd, *Theatre, Body, and Pleasure*, p.144.

¹⁷ *Christ before Herod*, ll.238-41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l.248.

Christ's refusal to respond to Herod either physically or verbally contrasts with both the probable audience responses; his sustained silence is not a fearful submission or a defiant challenge, neither is it a passive acceptance of Herod's superior might. On the contrary, by denying Herod either the vociferous or submissive reactions he seeks to ensure his audio-spatial dominion, Christ in fact appropriates Herod's coercive power over the bodies and minds of the gathered spectators. His silence and stillness contrast with Herod's blustering and rampaging so acutely that they can only be experienced in direct opposition, the one intensifying the other through their proximity, providing the spectator with the 'sounds of competing powers,' the opposing experiences of oppression and liberation.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Messiah's enigmatic silence likewise prompts a somatic response from the audience. Just as the disorder of Herod's brutal verse is absorbed into the body, so too is Christ's ordered silence and so the audience's body will produce an appropriate kinaesthetic response. So, where Herod enforced both subservient and disruptive physical reactions, Christ's sombre, solemn silence makes him the magnetic centre of the surrounding storm, the focal point within a disordered space that draws the eye and seduces the body into that same calm, quiet state.

The response from the student audience at Nottingham University, noted above, was similarly both physical and emotional. Initially, they remarked on the foolishness of Herod, that his previously threatening sound became impotent and ridiculous compared with the enduring silence of Christ. But perhaps more significant was a feeling of being protected from the clamouring king and the gratefulness for Christ's occupation of the performance space, his absorption of the tyrant's oppression. The audience also noted a more neutral stance relative to Herod's demise, as well as pity for their liberator and a distinct sense of guilt; having experienced a similar attack they could sympathise with his situation but were unable to alleviate his suffering. The power of his auditory peace and physical immobility seemed then to tug on the conscience of the crowd who stood captivated by his sacrifice for their protection, and so even a predominantly secular audience can be coerced into a form of devotion, a thankfulness to Christ for saving them from earthly and, by association, spiritual oppression.

¹⁹ Attali, 'Listening', p.16.

Amongst the cacophony of the post-Fall world the audience begin to see the gravity of the event they are witnessing, an event that is both cruel and violent, but also one that marks the beginning of Christ's sacrifice for mankind and the event that prompts the devotional coercion exercised by the medieval church. The experience of sound, of the opposing forces of noise and silence, is central to the transferral of power from tyrant to Saviour, the latter heralding the move from sin and suffering to salvation by offering an alternative experience, occupying the spectators' minds and bodies, filling them with gratitude, guilt and a voluntary obedience to their Lord, Jesus Christ.