

Scarring Roles: Trauma and Temporality on the Medieval Stage

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The question of trauma, the ways in which individual or collective psyches respond to violent events that are by their nature “unassimilable,” has been a central preoccupation of clinical psychology since its inception.² At least as far back as the work of Charcot, Janet, and Freud, traumatized minds, memories and bodies have featured extensively in psychoanalytic discourse.³ However it is only comparatively recently that criticism has begun to consider trauma in its own right, despite its frequent reliance on the conceptual vocabulary of psychoanalysis. Hence in an important survey of the issue from 1997, John Berger acknowledges the relative novelty of the approach, asking “why, at this moment, trauma should attract such attention and become a pivotal subject.”⁴ Nevertheless, the amount of work exploring the ways in which traumatic experience may be embedded and encoded in texts is already impressive, and it is perhaps with some justification that Taiwo Afuape links trauma criticism to the appearance of a “burgeoning trauma industry,” such is its current “pervasiveness and influence” in analysis.⁵

Given these efforts, it is perhaps inevitable that trauma should have filtered into discussions of medieval drama, with its spectacular scenes of torture and dismemberment that often “blur the boundaries between real and realistic violence.”⁶ Over the last two decades scholars such as Margaret Owens, Jody Enders, and Marla Carlson, to name but a few, have published work in this field.⁷ However, while these discussions make clear the semblance between dramatic spectacle and the experience of trauma, and spell out the fruitfulness of trauma theory for analysts of medieval theatre, they tend to travel in broadly the same direction. Most of these scholars tend to focus on the power of trauma to disrupt or derange language,

performance, and even culture itself. They tend to gravitate towards the view of Elaine Scarry, with her central claim that “pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it,” or Slavoj Žižek, who likewise holds that “factual unreliability” and “confusion” must be integral to any depiction of trauma if “its truth” is not to be called into question.⁸ Hence Claire Sponsler argues that scenes of dismemberment only break up the communal identity ritual drama sought to foster, treating the “damaged body as a way of questioning the illusion of civic harmony based on the idea of an enclosed inviolate body corporate,” while Katharine Goodland discusses the use of traumatized images in Marian drama as a “spectral force” that makes “manifest cultural angst” but also “seems to vanish as soon as it is perceived.”⁹ In either case, trauma on stage can only register its effects at the points in which meaning breaks down or becomes overloaded; it can only intrude into and disrupt the spectacle, generating effects outside the control and intentions of its performers.

However, despite the strengths of these discussions, and the arresting insights they afford, there are other possibilities latent in the concept of trauma. If we return to the clinical diagnosis of trauma and its aetiology we can locate a number of ways in which trauma might be seen less as a disabling presence and more as a productive technique, capable of being manipulated for a range of effects. This in turn might help us to understand why violence and torture were such important symbolic resources for medieval dramatists, and what exposing audiences to such scenes might have been intended to achieve. Particularly suggestive material can be found in the work of Bessel van der Kolk and his associates, especially in its emphasis on the re-exposure and revictimization that often characterizes victim responses to trauma.¹⁰ As Van der Kolk writes, “many traumatized people expose themselves, seemingly compulsively, to situations reminiscent of the original trauma,” noting that “war veterans may

enlist as mercenaries” or “victims of childhood physical abuse seemingly provoke subsequent abuse in foster families.”¹¹

Of course, the repetitive structure of trauma has long been observed, although usually with the assumption that re-enactment serves to nullify trauma in some way, replaying it in order to gain control over it. Freud arrives at precisely this conclusion in his famous account of the *fort-da* game he witnessed “a one-and-a-half-year-old boy” playing repeatedly. Freud argued that the child was continually restaging his mother’s departure with his toys, and that this arose from an “instinctive urge to assert control,” taking command over an event in which “his own role...was passive.”¹² However, on the contrary, Van der Kolk observes that this repetition has no such effects. He proposes instead that “reliving the trauma repeatedly...may serve to re-enforce the preoccupation and fixation,” resulting in “a positive feedback loop” by which “the frequent re-living of a traumatic event...kindle[s] the strength of the memory trace.”¹³ This resistance to revision and integration is in fact what sets trauma apart from other forms of memory in Van der Kolk’s view. While “ordinarily, memories of particular events are remembered as stories that change over time and that do not evoke intense emotions,” in the case of traumatic memories “the past is relived with an immediate sensory and emotional intensity.”¹⁴ The traumatic event, in effect, is an echo that does not fade but deafens, continually reverberating without undergoing any modification in its intensity.

This idea of trauma as a perpetual, undiminishing force carries a number of important implications. On the one hand, it signals that trauma need not only suppress or disturb language, but might also provoke it. As Van der Kolk and his collaborators are quick to point out, its demand to be reactivated might take place within texts as well as behaviour: trauma does not only lend itself to “acts of sublimated creativity” but seems to invite representation,

as “art and literature” are the domains in which it has registered its presence most forcefully.¹⁵ Trauma is not then simply a point at which language collapses, as its insistence on being re-performed can become an imperative to speak or write. But more significant still is the sense of temporality that traumatic repetition produces. Trauma is not merely a remembrance or a trace but a state with its own unique experience of time. A fundamental feature of trauma is its inability to be accommodated into the usual structures that govern memory: “when people are traumatized...the usual cognitive schemata are inadequate to create a mental construct which places the experience in the perspective of prior knowledge schemes.”¹⁶ Since these schemata are generally chronological in nature, taking the form of “narratives” which order events in strict progressions, consigning each episode to its own point in a time-line relative to other points and to the present, the “unintegrated” nature of trauma becomes a resistance to sequential time itself. What underpins trauma’s repetition and stubborn refusal to change, therefore, is the fact that it will not take its place as a specific moment in its sufferer’s history, but instead drifts free and continually erupts into the present: “because of this timeless and unintegrated nature of traumatic memories, victims remain embedded in the trauma as a contemporary experience.”¹⁷ Trauma comes to strand its sufferers in an eternal present, as it resists accommodation into chronology, leaving them “behaving and feeling like they were traumatized over and over again.”¹⁸

What makes this all the more interesting is that these two characteristics of trauma, its apparent timelessness and its stimulation of language, were not entirely unknown to medieval culture. The influence that pain has over memory is routinely acknowledged in medieval pedagogy. In his rhetorical handbook *Rhetorica novissima* (1235), for instance, Boncompagno da Signa ranks suffering among the “twelve principal techniques by which memory is reinforced”: “Because the senses of human beings are prone to evil rather than

good...he that is struck, if he has attained the age of reason, does not forget the blow...indeed a place in which one falls or is hurt is committed to memory, but that place is easily forgotten in which one received good service.”¹⁹ The same idea is also voiced elsewhere; in his *Versarius* (c.1200), a collection of mnemonic verse designed for students at Lincoln cathedral school, William de Montibus summarizes “memorialia” with the formula “the word of God and the whip of the Lord stand in the mind.”²⁰ Such notions were sufficiently widespread to emerge in proverbial literature, such as the fifteenth-century deportment book which recommends “a 3erde may make a chyld/ To lerne welle hys lesson.”²¹ These comments not only show a general perception that victimization and retention were connected, but imply that such a condition was seen as a device to be deliberately exploited. After all, the context from which these statements emerged, that of the medieval classroom, made ready use of violence and humiliation in the service of imprinting knowledge permanently on to pupils’ minds; in Robert Mills’ phrase, the schoolroom relies on a general “equivalence between the hammering home of knowledge in the mind and the production of painful impressions in the body.”²² In short, the Middle Ages not only forged a link between pain and unfading memory, but treated it as useful and deployable, not a wayward force beyond human control. Moreover, the fact that this link is closely associated with schooling, with the very processes by which literacy was acquired, give it a foundational place within the production of language and texts.

All of this begins to suggest how trauma theory can help us to understand the excesses of the medieval stage, and the motives that might underlie its often relentless emphasis on scenes of mutilation. As has been frequently noted since at least the work of Glynne Wickham, one of the central projects of much medieval drama is the evocation of precisely the same sense of timelessness that trauma forces on to its sufferers. As Wickham writes, it often seeks to

pierce the finitude and transience of the earthly space it occupies in order to signal a “universal time where the past was reflected in the present and the future,” with “every concrete image having its universal analogue.”²³ Appreciating the ways in which trauma also seems to maroon its sufferer in an eternal moment might allow us to add violence and injury to the devices by which medieval dramatists could evoke this universal time. Scenes of torture and violent death might be ranked among wilful anachronism or the manipulation of “non-heavenly space” as a further technique by which the purely temporal site of performance could be made to denote an infinite reality.²⁴ The depiction of traumatic violence, in short, might be best seen as a consciously deployed method by which dramatists could “celebrate the permanent truth of Christianity” as “a theory of history.”²⁵

A possible witness to how this might have worked in practice is the Middle Dutch *Historie van Jan van Beverley*. Although little known outside the Netherlands, this ranks among the most curious dramatic texts of the late medieval period. The piece itself has only survived in a chapbook edition, first printed by Thomas van der Noot at Brussels in c.1512.²⁶ It proved highly popular in the early modern period, being issued five further times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and remaining in circulation well into the eighteenth century.²⁷ While the text in its current form is composed in a mixture of verse and prose, over the last century scholars have come to recognize its dramatic origins, locating its origins in the theatrical culture of the *rederijkerskamers*.²⁸ Questions nevertheless remain about many aspects of the piece: it is unclear, for instance, what type of drama it represents, whether a stage-play, a monologue, or even a puppet-play, and is equally uncertain whether its ultimate provenance was Flanders or England.²⁹

What makes the *Historie* significant here is its focus on trauma. It is difficult to overlook the text's clear interest in violence and its psychological aftermath. While it purports to recount the *vita* of the historical John of Beverley, the eighth-century bishop of Hexham and York who ordained Bede as priest, it instead tells a wholly fictitious story of rape, murder, and self-recrimination.³⁰ In its account, John is a pious hermit who is visited by the devil in the guise of an angel, and told he must commit either drunkenness, rape, or murder to free himself of the sin of pride. Choosing drunkenness as the least severe of the three, he finds himself overcome with lust, and proceeds to rape and murder his own sister. As not even the pope can find a fitting penalty for such sins, John is forced to redeem himself by living as a wild beast for seven years, eating grass and walking on all fours. He is only freed from this state when his absolution is announced by a newborn child. The play ends with John taking Holy Communion as his sister restored to life.

As should be clear even in outline, the *Historie* is fundamentally concerned with a violent event of such magnitude that it resists accommodation into "existing conceptual frameworks."³¹ Even the highest spiritual authority in the text proves unable to find an adequate recompense for John's crimes: when John travels to Rome, the pope pleads that he has no knowledge which might allow him to interpret these offences, as "the like of these sins I never knew,/ Nor has such a thing come to me before."³² Available categories and rituals are therefore unable to integrate and make sense of his deeds. Traumatic repetition can also be seen in the form of John's penance, which seems to replay his violent offence rather than erase it. The way in which he bestializes himself, vowing "to creep like an animal/ On hands and on feet," only restages the bestial behaviour alcohol inspired in him.³³ Finally the text requires that its audience share in this trauma, transforming it into a generalized marker of human imperfection. John's parting wish that "we, after this life full of suffering,/ Might

come to Jesus the adored” is clearly intended to encompass the audience as much as himself, redirecting his condition towards the spectator.³⁴

But where the text is most valuable is in highlighting how its scenes of violence were meant to be received. Especially telling in this respect is its use of woodcuts. There are seven of these throughout the text, each nearly a full page in size, and clearly commissioned especially by Van der Noot. While it is difficult to determine how closely these images correspond to any performance of the play, they can at least be said to represent a response to it, an attempt to adapt its visual elements for the benefit of readers. The most significant of the images is the woodcut representing John’s crime, which serves as both the frontispiece and an interior illustration.³⁵ What is interesting about this is that it depicts all three stages of John’s crime at once: in the foreground he lays his hands on his protesting sister, while a little further back he rams a knife into her throat, and in the background shovels earth over her body. The fact that these discrete events are collapsed into a single episode of intensified violence recalls the timeless quality of trauma. Narrative time is here replaced by contemporaneity, as the three crimes are made concurrent rather than sequential.

The *Historie* is of course scarcely alone in presenting its story in this suspended, ahistoric manner. The *tableaux vivants* that accompanied many formal entries and processions often assume the same mode, flattening narratives into a collection of simultaneous events, and further instances can be readily found in pictorial art from the period.³⁶ But what the text does suggest is that this way of reacting to violence is somehow written into the drama. The woodcut is a response, independent of performance itself and subsequent to it, to the violence at the centre of the drama; and the form this reaction takes recasts the violence as timeless, compressing this section of the play into a single point of time. For Van der Noot or his

collaborators, the most suitable way to think about the traumatic events at the centre of the play was by treating their progression as a single moment. This choice is important, as it serves to highlight medieval theatre's possible aim in confronting its spectators with traumatic imagery. Its spectacles of broken and tortured bodies may be designed to impress on to the viewer the infinite, non-chronological experience that is intrinsic to trauma itself, and which this woodcut clearly displays. In short, the medieval stage might not merely have sought to portray trauma, but to induce its temporal effects in its spectators. This is not to say that this is the only interpretive possibility that trauma theory affords when approaching medieval drama. It might also be seen in light of the community-building that much medieval performance carries out, functioning as a "ritual in terms of which the opposites of social wholeness and social differentiation could be affirmed": as Cathy Caruth has demonstrated, trauma is uniquely capable of generating shared narratives and identities in this way, as "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas," a point that seems especially pertinent to the ritual staging of passion and martyrdom in the service of civic cohesion.³⁷ In any case, the point remains that trauma should be seen less as an accidental, uncontrollable effect of medieval drama, and more as a definite stratagem within the repertoire of the medieval dramatist. It should be approached as a device that was mindfully utilised to create specific responses in the viewer.

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² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, 1991), p.55.

³ For a review of early theories of trauma in light of later developments, see Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "Pierre Janet and the Breakdown of Adaptation in Psychological Trauma," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 146 (1989): 1530-40.

⁴ James Berger, "Trauma and Literary Theory," *Contemporary Literature* 38 (1997): 569-82.

⁵ Taiwo Afuape, *Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma* (London, 2012), p.50.

⁶ Paul Manning, "Staging the State and the Hypostasization of the Violence in the Medieval Cornish Drama," *Cornish Studies* 13 (2005): 126-69.

⁷ Margaret E. Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment: the Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (Cranbury NJ, 2005), pp.202-24; Jody Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 2002); Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics and Artists* (Aldershot, 2010), pp.124-25.

⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985), p.4; Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London, 2009).

⁹ Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis, 1997), p.152; Katharine Goodland, *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama* (Aldershot, 2005), pp.1-2.

¹⁰ On Van der Kolk's importance, see the assessment in Richard J. McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp.177-85.

¹¹ Bessel van der Kolk, "The Compulsion to Repeat Trauma: Revictimization, Attachment and Masochism," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 12 (1989): 389-411 (389-90).

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and other writings*, trans. and ed. by John Reddick (London, 2003), pp.45-102 (pp.52-54).

¹³ Van der Kolk, "The Compulsion to Repeat Trauma," 401; Bessel van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Post Traumatic Stress," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1 (1994): 253-65 (259).

¹⁴ Bessel van der Kolk and Alexander McFarlane, "The Black Hole Of Trauma," in *Traumatic Stress: the Effects of Overwhelming Experience of Mind, Body and Society*, ed. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane and Lars Weisath (New York, 1996), pp.7-8.

¹⁵ Van der Kolk and McFarlane, "The Black Hole Of Trauma," p.3.

¹⁶ Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, "Pierre Janet and the Breakdown of Adaptation," 1529.

¹⁷ Van der Kolk and McFarlane, "The Black Hole Of Trauma," p.7-8.

¹⁸ Van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps The Score," 253.

¹⁹ "De duodecim principalibus notis quibus memoria roboratur"; "Quia magis sunt proni hominum sensus ad malum quam ad bonum...quod ille, qui offenditur, si ad annos discretionis pervenit, non obliviscitur offensarum...Locus enim, in quo cadit aliquis vel offenditur, memorie commendatur, sed illius loci facile obliviscitur, in quo recepit servitia":

Boncompagno da Signa, *Boncompagni Rhetorica novissima*, Augustus Gaudenzi, *Bibliotheca iuridica Medii Aevi, Scripta Anecdota Glossatorum*, 3 vols. (Bologna, 1888-1901), 2.277, 282.

²⁰ “Memorialia: Stent in mente Dei verbum Dominique flagellum”: Joseph Goering, *William de Montibus (c.1140–1213): the schools and the literature of pastoral care*, Texts and Studies 108 (Toronto, 1992), 439.

²¹ *Symon's Lesson of Wysdome*, in *The Babees Book*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS o.s. 32 (London, 1869), p.402.

²² Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London, 2005), p.155.

²³ Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1987), pp.64-65.

²⁴ Arnold Williams, “The Comic in the Cycles,” *Medieval Drama*, ed. Neville Denny, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 16 (London, 1973), p.116-17; R.W. Hanning, “‘You Have Begun a Parlous Pleye’: The Nature and Limits of Dramatic Mimesis as a Theme in Four Middle English ‘Fall of Lucifer’ Cycle Plays,” in *The Drama of the Middle Ages*, ed. Clifford Davidson, C.J. Gianakaris and John H. Stroupe (New York, 1982), pp.140-68 (p.151).

²⁵ Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influences* (London, 1975), p.8.

²⁶ G.J. Boekenoogen, *Historie van Jan van Beverley* (Leiden, 1903), p.40.

²⁷ R.J. Resoort, “Het raadsel van de rijmdrukken,” *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 3 (1998): 327-344 (335-36); Maurits Sabbe, *Het leven ende den cours der studenten* (Antwerp, 1908), p.273; Emile Henri van Heurck, *De Vlaamsche Volksboeken* (Antwerp, 1943), p.116.

²⁸ G. Kalff, “Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van ons Middeleeuwsch drama,” *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 22 (1903): 304-20; G. Kalff, *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde* (Groningen, 1907), II, pp.325-26.

²⁹ J.A. Worp, “Is de *Mariken van Nieumeghen* geschreven om vertoond te worden?,” *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 36 (1917): 152-57 (p.157); Herman Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord – Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1400-1560* (Amsterdam, 2007), pp.173, 531; Lynette Muir, *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: the Plays and their Legacy* (Cambridge UK, 2010), p.25; Alan Deighton, “Julian of Norwich’s Knowledge of the Life of St John of Beverley,” *Notes and Queries* 40 (1993): 440-43; Alan R. Deighton, “The Sins of John of Saint John of Beverley: The Case of the Dutch “volksboek” *Jan van Beverley*,” *Leuvense Bijdragen* 82 (1993): 227-46.

³⁰ See Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 5.2-7, trans. Leo Shirley-Price and R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp.267-74.

³¹ Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, “Pierre Janet and the Breakdown of Adaptation,” p.1535.

³² “Deser sonden gelijcke ick nie en vernam/ Noch so en quam mi nie te vooren”: Boekenooogen, *Historie*, p.21.

³³ “Cruypen als een dier/ Op handen op voeten”: *ibid.*, p.26.

³⁴ “Wi na dit leven vol allinden/ Moghen comen by Jesum den gheminden”: *ibid.*, p.35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14.

³⁶ Graham Runnalls, “Mystère représentation théâtrale: histoire d’un mot,” *Revue de linguistique romane* 64 (2000): 321-45 (p.337); R.J. Knecht, “Court Festivals as Political Spectacle: the Example of Sixteenth-Century France,” *Europa Triumphans : Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J.R. Mulryne, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly, Margaret Shewring, Elizabeth Goldring and Sarah Knight, 2 vols. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), I.19-31 (pp.19-21).

³⁷ Mervyn James, “Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town,” *Past and Present* 98 (1983): 3-29 (p.4); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, 1991), p.24.