

**ENCOUNTERING THE EMBODIED MOUTH OF HELL:  
THE PLAY OF OPPOSITIONS IN RELIGIOUS VERNACULAR THEATER**

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## **Abstract**

The cavernous mouth of hell was an iconographic convention representing the threshold of eternal damnation in medieval England and Europe. The gaping mouth of a fierce beast captured the essence of everlasting isolation from God, making it a dramatic way to represent hell's perpetual threat for devout Christians. Created in tenth-century Anglo-Saxon England, the mouth of hell spread throughout continental Europe, and detailed Lucifer's Fall, the Harrowing of Hell, or the Last Judgment. This horrible visage was represented in sculpted tympana, paintings, mosaics, and stained glass, and by the fourteenth century, the mouth of hell appeared in lay religious vernacular theater as a constructed stage scene and prop.

Theatrical effects contributed characteristics to the visual experience of the mouth of hell that could not be portrayed in static representations. Actors playing demons issued from the great mouth, condemned characters were dragged to its jaws, smoke wafted from its recesses. In his 1995 survey of the image, Gary D. Schmidt utilizes Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism to propose that the mouth of hell became a ludic site of laughter in medieval theater, eroding its theological meaning and accelerating its decline. By examining the mouth of hell's performativity within a ritualized production undertaken by communities, this thesis intervenes in debates about the fearsome, comic, efficacious, and entertaining qualities of religious vernacular theater.

Extant primary sources reveal that theater did not void the iconography of its threatening countenance, but facilitated an intimacy between the laity and the mouth of hell that had not been possible before. Through its purposeful nature, communal obligations and audience involvement, religious vernacular theater provided a context in which the mouth of hell could become a multivocal and complex image within medieval culture.

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*In dedication to those who fight daily  
to defeat the Kraken.*

## **1. Introduction**

The mouth of hell. This expression, perhaps vaguely recognizable to a contemporary audience, may suggest an ambiguous sense of unease and discomfort resulting from a mild run of bad luck or a particularly grueling day. For medieval people, however, the mouth of hell was explicit and imminent: an iconographic convention representing the snarling, toothy, oral vacuity of a zoomorphic creature through which pernicious souls were cast into the unfathomable bowels of hell. Passing into the gaping maw of the beast meant eternal damnation, the blessed peace of heaven lost forever to the burning fumes of sulfur and sadistic screams of malevolent demons. The cavernous mouth of hell was the threshold to an immeasurable depth of tortuous darkness, affliction, suffering, and spiritual exile, making it a poignant and dramatic way to represent hell's perpetual threat for devout Christians.

Throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries, the iconographic image proliferated in Anglo-Saxon England, illuminating the pages of manuscripts by meticulously detailing the fateful Fall of Lucifer, the Harrowing of Hell, or the Last Judgment. Of course, the frightful monster with a mouth full of teeth causes immediate dread, even before it is recognized as the entrance to hell. The success, however, of the image in succinctly capturing the essence of damnation—everlasting and hopeless isolation from God whilst enduring unimaginable pain—can be recorded in its wide dissemination across Europe, its prominent use until the sixteenth century, and the variety of media in which its gruesome visage was found. Not only illuminations, but sculpted tympana, paintings, mosaics, and stained glass boasted variations of the mouth of hell and its rending jaws. In one of its final manifestations, the mouth of hell appeared in theater as a constructed stage scene and prop, becoming an important component of communal, lay religious vernacular plays.

In religious vernacular productions, the incorporation of special effects through the mouth of hell mise-en-scène contributed fundamental, hellish characteristics to the visual experience that could not be portrayed in static representations. Through the theatrical mouth of hell actors playing demons belched into the playing area and the condemned were dragged out of sight. Smoke wafted from its jaws, thunderous noises bellowed from its throat, terrorized cries of the damned issued from its recesses. Expressed in the streets or squares of medieval towns, whether in movable pageants or staged in an outdoor theater, the mouth of hell was represented beyond the physical context of the church, and freed from more constraining media to become fully embodied, animated, and embedded within the landscape of the community.

The representation of the mouth of hell as the threatening locus of eternal damnation and the soul's final severance from God remained an important quality in its theatrical role. This more transhistorical meaning, however, was nuanced by its embodiment within theater. Religious vernacular productions provided an opportunity for the diabolical iconography to confront viewers somatically in ways which were both ludic and fearsome. These experiences and interactions facilitated a physical reaction from participants and viewers, creating an intimacy between the laity and the mouth of hell that had not been possible before. The performative qualities of the mouth of hell, its mobility and overtly physical engagement with actors and the dramatized space allowed the iconographic image to navigate between the poles of efficacy and entertainment, fear and laughter, in order to express and give meaning to the vagaries of medieval life and anticipated afterlife.

The work of previous scholars will provide an important foundation for the investigation of the mouth of hell's role in medieval theater. In his book *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, Gary D. Schmidt traces the nascency, expansion, and decline of the mouth of hell. For Schmidt an increasing public use of the mouth of hell, and especially its role in vernacular

theater, resulted in an erosion of its theological meaning and accelerated its eventual disuse. Important to Schmidt's analysis is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism and popular culture, which provides a platform for examining the mouth of hell's potentially ludic qualities.

In his celebrated study *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque world of medieval peoples that Rabelais was relying upon. This is the unofficial, folk world of festive laughter, ceremonial pageants, marketplace humor, and rapacious feasting, which directly opposed the official world of church, governance, and ruling classes.<sup>1</sup> The humor of the base, unofficial world, as Bakhtin proposes, incorporates an aesthetic style he called grotesque realism. The crowning feature of grotesque realism is the pervious body—an active and jocund participant in the world that joyfully engages in an endless process of birth, death, and regeneration. According to Bakhtin, the mouth of hell—as an undeniably corporeal, fiercely open, and endlessly penetrable orifice—was an ideal manifestation of grotesque realism. The use of the mouth of hell in a lay, vernacular, and theatrical environment made it part of this unofficial realm and entrenched it within grotesque realism, where it became a ludic, laughable feature of dramatic productions. Schmidt utilizes Bakhtin's theory to conclude that the familiarization of medieval theatrical spectators with the mouth of hell reduced the iconography's spiritual force and promoted its decline.

In his book, *Performance Theory*, theorist Richard Schechner examines the interface between ritual and theater, providing a way to move beyond Schmidt's conclusion that late medieval theater brought an end to the religious efficacy of the mouth of hell. Schechner proposes that all performance exists on a continuum between the poles of efficacy and entertainment, which are associated with ritual and theater respectively. Efficacious performances are undertaken in order to produce results. These ritual events are communal,

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1965), 5-6.



transformative, universal and obligatory, and do not distinguish performers from spectators. At the other end of the spectrum are entertaining performances that constitute modern conceptions of theater and are more frivolous and voluntary, with a clear distinction between performers and spectators. Ritual is embedded within a larger social phenomenon that extends beyond theater, and is performed in order to guide, order, or manage the world of the performance in a collective, inclusive manner that aims to achieve more than simply present a dramatic storyline.<sup>2</sup> Through its purposeful nature, communal obligations and audience involvement, medieval religious vernacular theater resembled ritualized performance, providing a context in which the mouth of hell could fluctuate between various meanings, never reducing its purposeful nature but rather making it a multivocal and complex image within medieval culture.

Vernacular religious productions allowed the community to ascribe various, and at times conflicting, meanings onto the mouth of hell. Dominant scholarship proposes that the mouth of hell became a ludic site of pure laughter, teeming with lusty, raucous, cruel and bawdy demons. Without denying the possibility of a ludic mouth of hell, this project proposes to explore, confront and move beyond previous interpretations in order to determine and acknowledge additional changes that occurred in the perception of the mouth of hell.

Theater provided a context for the mouth of hell that was fostered by the community and no longer bound by the strictures of formalized religion or the restricted media of traditional visual representations. This allowed the mouth of hell to take on new expressions through its embodiment and interaction with actors and spectators. Untethered from pure doctrinal meaning, but not completely loosed from its menacing physical and spiritual qualities, the mouth of hell became an efficacious, involute image, an intersection between comic and frightful, earthly and otherworldly, secular and spiritual, that celebrated the tension of these oppositional themes.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 154.

This thesis intervenes in debates about what was at stake in the fearsome and ludic, efficacious and entertaining, expressions of religious vernacular theater by examining the mouth of hell's performativity within a ritualized production undertaken by medieval communities. Theatrical manifestations of the mouth of hell, even if produced by the laity, did not void the iconography of its phantasmic, threatening countenance, but rather precisely because of the ritual nature of religious vernacular performances, was represented in a more compelling and powerful manner while also being comedic and laughable. In theater the mouth of hell maintained its traditional role as the entrance to hell and as the wellspring of a nefarious opposition to God and His heavenly kingdom. But it also exceeded this role through collective efforts of the community which implemented ambiguous characteristics in order to understand, express, and validate the world(s) in which medieval people lived, died, and posthumously persisted.

The mouth of hell is of interest in part because it is an apt litmus test of what makes theatrical productions unique venues for conventional iconography in ways different from more traditional representations. It is also of interest because vernacular theater expanded the narrative context in which the mouth of hell was typically found. From the eleventh century, the mouth of hell was closely associated with the Harrowing of Hell and the Last Judgment, and it continued to represent these biblical events throughout the Middle Ages. Extant theatrical records reveal, however, that religious legends and stories as divergent as saint and nativity plays incorporated the mouth of hell into their plots and scenes.<sup>3</sup> Such evidence suggests that the mouth of hell became an important feature in many plays, and its attendant mechanization allowed it to confront spectators in an entirely new way, in entirely new narratives. Furthermore, this project aims to shed new light on the theatrical representation of the mouth of hell by investigating, and

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela Sheingorn, "'Who can open the doors of his face?' The Iconography of Hell Mouth," in *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 3-5; Robert Lima, *Stages of Evil: Occultism in Western Theater and Drama* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 14.

ultimately moving beyond, conceptions of the ludic and subversive that have come to be attached to it through Bakhtin and, later, Schmidt. While not wanting to reject fully these analyses, examining the intimacy of embodiment and the ritualistic nature of vernacular religious productions reveals that the mouth of hell was a complicated limen that remained a site of transition, plurality, and exchange, and of religious importance even in its theatrical incarnation.

In the following sections, evidence is drawn from a wide array of primary sources, including written records, accounts, receipts, and descriptions of theatrical performances, as well as Jean Fouquet's fifteenth-century illumination, *The Martyrdom of St. Apollonia*.<sup>4</sup> As can be noted, the source and nature of theatrical documentation is inconsistent. This is due, in part, to the ephemeral nature of theater. Some sources are municipal, and provide the records of payments made to actors, carpenters, and painters; other accounts include the scripts, sometimes with stage directions; at times guilds kept their own records, providing yet another perspective on the production of these dramatic events. While some records have persisted in large quantities from certain countries—France and England for example—other countries with rich theatrical heritages have scant extant documentation. This trend is exacerbated when narrowing the focus to a specific topic and theme, such as the mouth of hell.

The reliance on a range of sources and traditions is not intended to ignore or gloss over the vital differences that made medieval theater unique to each community.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the aim is to create a coherent understanding of the implementation and consequence of the mouth of hell in medieval theater. To trace the utilization of a theatrical motif effectively that is found throughout Europe, regional similarities become important in locating commonalities between otherwise

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<sup>4</sup> I cannot begin to do justice to an analysis of this spectacular image within the scope of this project, but I have written on this image and many of the concepts broached here, and plan to publish it in a future article. An illustration of this image can be found in *The Hours of Etienne Chevalier* (New York: George Braziller, 1971), 113, plate 45.

<sup>5</sup> Regional differences were often so acute that, if taken to its extreme, it would be difficult to make any generalizations about medieval theater. In essence, this seems parallel to the fact that—despite performing the same play again and again—by necessity, every theatrical performance will be different. While in essence true, the thematic intent remained relatively constant.

singular and distinctive theatrical traditions. As theater scholar Jody Enders suggests, it is possible to investigate the “medieval whole that is more important than the sum of its parts” while still respecting “the integrity of those parts.”<sup>6</sup>

By necessity the time-frame of this project is also expansive. An Anglo-Norman play, *Jeu d’Adam*, created in the twelfth century, is the earliest extant religious vernacular play.<sup>7</sup> The majority of theatrical evidence, however, begins at the close of the fourteenth century and persists until the sixteenth century, extending even into the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> Although medieval theatrical traditions fluctuated over the course of these several centuries, they remained thematically and technically consistent. While other artistic, religious, and philosophical elements changed within the cultural landscape, theater was slower to adapt. Because of these unique features theater historians and scholars contend that medieval theater experienced an extended Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the terminology “religious vernacular theater” throughout this thesis is meant to define those productions which were overtly religious in theme, subject, plot, setting and characters, and that were performed in the common language—that is, not Latin. Such a phrase encompasses the modern-day designations of “mystery plays,” “miracle plays,” and “morality

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<sup>6</sup> Jody Enders, “Medieval Stages,” in *Theatre Survey*, 50, no. 2 (2009): 320, <http://journals.cambridge.org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=6484596&jid=TSY&volumeId=50&issueId=02&aid=6484588&bodyId=&membershipNumber=&societyETOCSession=>.

<sup>7</sup> Maureen Fries, “The Evolution of Eve in Medieval French and English Religious Drama,” in *Studies in Philology* 99, no. 1 (2002), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Raffaella Ferrari et al., ed. Peter Meredith and John E. Tailby (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1983), 3, 5; Robert Lima, “The Mouth of Hell: the Iconography of Damnation on the Stage of the Middle Ages,” in *European Iconography East and West: Selected Papers of the Szeged International Conference June 9-12, 1993*, ed. György E. Szőnyi (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 35. Lima argues that mouth of hell iconography was widely used even through the seventeenth century.

<sup>9</sup> Jody Enders, introduction to *The Farce of the Fart and Other Ribaldries: Twelve Medieval French Plays in Modern English*, ed. Jody Enders (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 2; John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3-6. For a discussion on the end of medieval theater, see *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 5. For the causes of medieval theater’s dissolution in England, see Fries, “The Evolution of Eve,” 1-2; Stephen K. Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord: Medieval Dramatizations of the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1989), 194-195, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ubc/docDetail.action?docID=10220891.pdf>. Also see Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, vol. 1, *1300 to 1576* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), xxvii. Wickham gives the rather ambiguous statement, “For theatre, the Middle Ages end when vitality departs from the open stage.” He includes Elizabethan theater in the ranks of “medieval” theater.

plays,” terms which were not used during the Middle Ages when the productions were written and performed. At any rate, the mouth of hell was implemented throughout these various categories of plays, necessitating a way to discuss them in a manner that unites them through their commonalities.

Section two of this project outlines the origins of the mouth of hell by investigating the shifting attitudes towards visual imagery as set forth in the tenth century *Regularis Concordia*. The cultural influence of pagan Danish invaders is reviewed to understand how their interpretation of the afterlife paralleled, influenced, and reified burgeoning mouth of hell imagery. Next, the section briefly examines the dissemination of the mouth of hell throughout medieval Europe, and introduces Schmidt’s analysis of the mouth of hell and its religious demise. After a brief introduction to the prominent medieval theatrical traditions in England and Europe, section three more fully examines the development and characteristics of religious vernacular theater in particular. From this survey, a direct study of the construction and implementation of the theatrical mouth of hell is undertaken to reveal how it was a complex and intimate feature of the medieval community through dramatic productions.

Section four returns to Schmidt’s theory of the theatrical mouth of hell and engages in a detailed study of Bakhtin’s grotesque realism. Theatrical representations of devils and their association with hell are examined to better understand the ways in which their familiar relationship with spectators and connection to folk celebrations intersects with conceptions of the comic. In chapter five Schechner’s theories on ritual and theater are employed to challenge the precedent set by Bakhtin and Schmidt and to provide insight on how the mouth of hell functioned as a multivalent image, able to navigate oppositional roles in order to elucidate better the vagaries of the medieval world.

## **2. The Mouth of Hell and Its Development**

### **Reform and Imagery**

Scholars continue to debate the origins of the mouth of hell—its precursors, socio-cultural determinants, participation within the social, religious, and political environs, and the ways it was viewed and understood by its earliest audiences. Despite differences in opinion, most agree that the visual mouth of hell was conceived in the particular cultural and theological atmosphere of Britain during the tenth-century monastic reform, which had been influenced by the Cluniac Reform, initiated in France earlier in that century.<sup>10</sup> Among other changes, the reform rewrote the tenants of monasticism in Western Europe by increasing the focus on liturgy and instituting a return to *The Rule of St. Benedict* which emphasized a life of prayer and divine service.<sup>11</sup> It eventually influenced Britain and its religious communities, effectively reorganizing the monastic and social structure of the island.<sup>12</sup>

To successfully implement the monastic reformation in Britain a synod convened at Winchester around 970 to create the *Regularis Concordia*.<sup>13</sup> The *Concordia* provided a framework for England's reformation by focusing on liturgical celebrations within monastic communities. The reformation defined and refined the clergy so that discipline and salvation could be sought by many while simultaneously organizing and strengthening the presence of the Church throughout Europe.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a rich visual culture supplemented the increasing

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<sup>10</sup> Gary D. Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hel*, 20. The reform took longer in Britain due to the disorganization of religious communities from Viking invasions. See also Dom Thomas Symons, introduction to *Regularis Concordia*, ed. Dom Thomas Symons (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1953), ix-x.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1997), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Dom David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A history of its development from the times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council 940-1216* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 44.

importance and complexity of the Liturgy.<sup>15</sup> For example, one passage of the *Concordia* outlines a solemn imitation of Christ's interment. A space at the altar was designated with a curtain as a representation of Christ's sepulcher. A crucifix, wrapped in cloth, was laid within the sepulcher "in imitation as it were of the burial of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>16</sup> Until the night of Christ's resurrection, a vigil was to be kept at the curtained "tomb."<sup>17</sup> During Easter celebrations, the *Concordia* suggests singing the antiphonic *Quem Quaeritis* trope "softly and sweetly" as "an imitation of the angel seated on the tomb and of the women coming with perfumes to anoint the body of Jesus."<sup>18</sup> Passages from the *Concordia* reveal that the reform nurtured a burgeoning interest in visual arts and dramatic techniques during liturgical celebrations that were meant to assist and guide the monastic community.

And yet, the efficacy of the visual arts was recognized to extend beyond monastery walls. The *Concordia* promoted the use of visual aids to educate "unlearned common persons and neophytes," increasing the knowledge and understanding of clergy and laity alike.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, visual displays weren't limited to the interior of monastic buildings; some processions took place in the streets and may have been visible to people unassociated with monastic orders.<sup>20</sup> Both the clergy and laity witnessed the use of formal and dramatic art throughout the liturgy. Spectacular imagery and the carefully prescribed actions of ecclesiastics stamped upon the "unlearned" the impression of faith in the hopes that the physical representation of intangible theological beings, virtues and vices would induce a greater spirituality among the people along with moral and

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<sup>15</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> *Regularis Concordia*, ed. Dom Thomas Symons (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1953), 44-45.

<sup>17</sup> *Regularis Concordia*, 44-45; Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> *Regularis Concordia*, 50; Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 58; Richard Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1974) 19. This is often credited as the progenitor of liturgical theater.

<sup>19</sup> *Regularis Concordia*, 44; Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 26-27; Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 7, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 44; Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 7. Knowles also suggests that members of the laity assisted in the celebration of Sunday Mass and major feast-days.

religious education.<sup>21</sup> The monastic reform created a fertile environment for the cultivation and growth of imagery's spiritual significance that was vital to the development of the mouth of hell.

Due to an increased emphasis on imagery, verbal and written accounts of hell found in biblical parables, stories, legends and theological exempla were translated into visual forms. In particular, four scriptural descriptions of hell refer to the act of swallowing or otherwise consuming humans and souls in the process of damnation: Sheol, the lion, dragon, and leviathan. These wicked biblical entities stalk and consume the souls of errant humans, establishing an association between damnation and being devoured that may have found its final expression in the mouth of hell.<sup>22</sup> After all, being ingurgitated by a rapacious beast—whether a brute from a murky forest dell or a cursed infernal crevice—was an alarming and real prospect throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries—one which was certainly exploited in mouth of hell imagery.

An influx of Danish pagan culture in Britain helped concretize these concerns. Danish raids began in the mid-tenth century and escalated until the island was conquered by the early eleventh century. Important parallels existed between the endemic and invading cultures, as both Christians and pagans reveled in legends of mighty heroes battling creatures with menacing jaws, like *Beowulf*'s monster Grendel or Odin's fierce wolf Fenrir.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the concept of a tortuous, frightful hell was not entirely foreign to the Scandinavians. In Nordic legends, Loki's daughter Hel oversaw a cold, dark realm occupied by souls.<sup>24</sup> A great dragon and snakelike creatures occupied the entrance of Hel's kingdom, where monsters consumed men and corpses.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Regularis Concordia*, 36; Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 7.

<sup>22</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 32-60. Schmidt provides specific examples to link these four scriptural images with the mouth of hell. Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 145-46. Galpern discusses how the ambiguity of the animal represented in the mouth of hell suits the nature of Satan's ever-shifting forms. The mouth of hell, as an amalgamation of various beasts, is indicative of Satan's deceptive nature. Also see Lima, "The Mouth of Hell," 35; Lima, *Stages of Evil: Occultism in Western Theater and Drama*, 15-28; Sheingorn, "'Who can open the doors of his face?,'" 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 2, 137-139.

<sup>24</sup> Etymologically Hel is the origin of the English word "hell."

<sup>25</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 29-30; Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 151.



The immediate, bestial nature of mouth of hell imagery and its similarities to Scandinavian legends made it an apt image to propagate during this time of cultural confrontation and exchange. Proselytizing was integral to the monastic reform, and indeed, part of the *Concordia*'s aim was to distill and clarify Christian beliefs in order to resist and reverse the paganism of the invaders.<sup>26</sup> Parallels between Danish conceptions of afterlife and the gnashing mouth of hell made the iconographic representation of hell a potential tool for conversion, inducing pagans to adopt Christianity through its loathsome, yet familiar, qualities.<sup>27</sup>

In a broader sense, the mouth of hell conceptualized the afterlife in a way that had a lasting impact on Christian doctrine. Theologically, hell was a place of banishment and isolation from God and the heavenly elect, suffered without hope, without grace, and in full knowledge of such lack and loss. The mouth of hell established an unmistakably physical and processual rendition of damnation, which was foremost a spiritual *condition*. Mouth of hell iconography reified the concept of hell as a spiritual *location*. Before the doctrinal codification of purgatory at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274, the association of the mouth and swallowing with hell provided the basic framework for a sequential spiritual afterlife as the soul either ascended to heaven or descended to hell. Important to these concepts is the mouth of hell's focus on swallowing and devouring, perhaps an obvious point, but one that cemented and maintained the image's role as the threshold to hell, rather than hell itself. As a vacuous space with the ability to swallow souls into indeterminable—and in visual and theatrical art, often vague or unseen—

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<sup>26</sup> Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 21.

<sup>27</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 24-26; Galpern, "The Shape of Hell in Anglo-Saxon England," 3. Galpern states, "I shall argue that the search for an iconography of hell that could be understood by pagan and Christian alike was the central factor in the crystallization of a new image, the mouth of hell, by Anglo-Saxon artists." This issue, however, is contested. Schmidt points out that manuscripts were poor tools of conversion due to their exclusivity; the earliest mouths of hell may have been more devotional than evangelistic (61). In contrast, Galpern contends that wealthy laymen did have access to manuscripts, and commissioned private devotional works for themselves (7, 9-10). Perhaps if manuscripts were status symbols, pagan rulers would scramble to claim ownership over them, and be duly impressed by the clear, dramatic imagery of hell. See also Lima, "The Mouth of Hell," 35; Sheingorn, "'Who can open the doors of his face?'" 7.

depths, the mouth of hell functioned as one location in a series of important spiritual spaces before the establishment of the larger tripartite structure of heaven, hell and purgatory.

### **Proliferation and Recession**

From its earliest appearance on a small ivory panel in the ninth century to its lurking visage in manuscripts, sculptures, paintings and finally theater, the mouth of hell participated in a discursive process of shifting media, locations, and audiences.<sup>28</sup> By the twelfth century images of the mouth of hell outgrew British shores and spread throughout continental Europe, consistently representing scenes of the Harrowing of Hell and Last Judgment.<sup>29</sup> A beautiful example of the mouth of hell can be found in the *Last Judgment* tympanum on the west portal of the Cathedral of Ste-Foy in Conques, France, built in the early 1100s.<sup>30</sup>

This sculpture displays Christ in Judgment as he presides in the center of the tympanum, seated on a throne and encircled by a mandorla. He raises his right hand in a blessing to those granted access to heaven, and lowers his left hand towards those condemned to the graphic tortures of hell. On the bottom register of the tympanum just right of the center, a figure stoops, tucked into a diving-position—head between raised arms. This ill-fated soul is about to be shoved by a malformed demon into a particularly greedy mouth of hell carved in deep-relief. The lips of the mouth of hell, depicted in profile, fold back from a ragged series of teeth, and the tongue curves upwards in anticipation of tasting the sinful morsel about to enter its jaws. As if to emphasize its avaricious nature, a claw-like paw extends below the creature, grasping towards the timorous soul and dragging its own cumbersome head ever-closer to its victim. Lapping at sinners from the western portal of a great pilgrimage church, this mouth of hell would have been

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<sup>28</sup> This ivory is at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Museum Number 253-1867.

<sup>29</sup> Lima, "The Mouth of Hell," 35. For information on the Harrowing of Hell see: Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 46, 61. The Harrowing of Hell is based on the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus and refers to Christ's descent into hell after his crucifixion and the release of souls from hell who have been condemned to its depths since the beginning of time.

<sup>30</sup> The image can be found in Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art Across Time*, vol. 1, *Prehistory to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 373, plate 10.11.

visible to a vast number of pious Christians making their way to Ste-Foy in order to experience the patron saint's benevolence and be expunged of their spiritual and physical defects.

Like the sundry tortures enacted by demonic hordes and Satan's sinister presence found just beyond the entrance to hell in Ste-Foy's western tympanum, the mouth of hell became an immediately recognizable characteristic of hell itself, enabling its grimacing mouth to be represented through a variety of media. According to Schmidt, as the use of the mouth of hell spread, so too did its variations; multiple mouths conjoined in different modalities to create vivid, eclectic images. Its dissemination in continental Europe marked a "golden age" that lasted until the fifteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps one of the best examples of this creative expansion is the mouth of hell found in a full-page miniature for the Office of the Dead in the book of hours for the Duchess Catherine of Cleves.<sup>32</sup> Created by a Dutch artist circa 1440, the illumination reveals just how unique mouth of hell imagery had become by this time.

In a vertiginous conflation of infernal imagery, three mouths of hell compress into one image in the Duchess' book of hours. In the lower half of a space defined by a vegetal border, the yellow lips of a glum mouth of hell scallop open to reveal a series of sharp teeth. Startlingly, yet another mouth of hell clogs the throat of the first. This second mouth of hell glares out at the viewer with yellow feline eyes and a snubbed nose, while the rest of its face burns red. A cauldron sits inside of its maw, crammed with unhappy souls stewing in the eternal flames of damnation that lick at their fleshly bodies. Behind and above these two mouths of hell looms a castellated fortress flanked by a pair of bulbous towers. On top of the towers demons disembowel one victim and rip another asunder, while fire issues from the windows. Between these towers yawns the third mouth of hell, its eyes firmly shut in its great grey head. Inside this final mouth opens a blazing door, the innermost dwelling-space of hell from whence a

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<sup>31</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 83, 84, 109.

<sup>32</sup> The illumination can be found in Rob Dücker and Ruud Priem, *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves: Devotion, Demons and Daily Life in the Fifteenth Century* (New York, Abrams, 2009), 357, frontispiece.

conflagration sparks and scintillates. A wraithlike red figure haunts this flammable space, reminding the viewer that in this place of persecution, Satan reigns supreme.

The sheer complexity of this image is indicative of the ways in which mouth of hell imagery had developed since its initial representations, tucked at the bottom of sculptures or folio pages. While the mouth of hell spread geographically throughout Western Europe it also expanded conceptually, adopting new forms which better represented the profound terrors and abominations of hell. As theater became an integral part of ceremonial, spiritual and communal expression, it not only provided a new venue for mouth of hell imagery, but offered yet more alternative ways to imagine its snarling face.

The “golden age” that Schmidt defines for the mouth of hell does not last beyond the fifteenth century. He deploys a common organic metaphor in his argument of the iconography of the image, recounting its birth, zenith, and decay. Each of these stages is linked to attendant periods of privacy, popularization, and secularization, respectively, a pattern perpetuated by later scholars. Schmidt forges a relationship between the development of the mouth of hell and what he defines as its escalating publicization—that is its increasingly broad artistic application outside of traditional religious spaces and theological contexts into the quotidian realm of the laity through massive sculptural campaigns, private books of hours, and especially the medieval theater. For Schmidt, the representation of the mouth of hell in medieval theater was a catalyst for the iconography’s decline by providing a space for communal expression that was dissociated with religious or lay authority. This prioritized the dramatic potential of the mouth of hell over its theological meaning. As a result the mouth of hell, unable to regain its devotional and didactic efficacy, fell into disuse.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 14, 16, 83, 64, 109.

### **3. Theater and the Mouth of Hell**

#### **The Beginnings: Liturgical and Vernacular Theater**

Debates concerning the origins of religious vernacular theater continue to dominate the scholarship of theater historians. Early and persistent theories suggest that vernacular theater developed from liturgical plays, whereas more recent studies contend that liturgical and vernacular theater developed contemporaneously and thus separately. Regardless, vernacular religious medieval theater is often understood as both an incubator for and symptom of an increasingly powerful and culturally expressive lay society.<sup>34</sup>

Liturgical plays were performed in Latin, utilized ecclesiastical costumes and settings, and were incorporated into liturgical processes and ceremonies. By remaining embedded within religious observances and conventions, the plays emphasized the doctrinal importance of biblical events often associated with liturgical celebrations, such as the commemoration of Christ's resurrection during Easter mass. Through the use of official religious costume, setting, language and themes, liturgical drama reinforced theological principals, and was abstracted and separated from the quotidian realm of the lay audience.<sup>35</sup> By implementing the physical, visual and linguistic structures of established religion, liturgical drama better expressed esoteric theological doctrines and knowledge.

Religious vernacular theater, on the other hand, was removed from the conceptual qualities of liturgical drama and provided a unique opportunity to emphasize the humanness of

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<sup>34</sup> E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1903). Chambers champions the theory that liturgical theater prefigures vernacular theater. He does admit that at times it is difficult to distinguish between liturgical and vernacular theater (88, 148). Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1666*, 112-151; M.D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 33-35. Wickham, Anderson, and many others share this view. For an overview of the development of separate theatrical traditions: Grace Frank, *The Medieval French Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954); Jody Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 5-8.

<sup>35</sup> Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 100, 104, 118; Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 5.

the Christian story.<sup>36</sup> Not only were these productions performed in the common language, they sought to represent the vagaries of human nature and experiences as represented within biblical stories and parables. Contemporary clothing, familiar names for ancillary characters, and wry political, economic, and social undertones suggested an acquaintance with current feudal, clerical, or courtly conditions and emphasized the everyday—and miraculous—struggles of historical and biblical figures.<sup>37</sup> Theoretical and complex theological conceits were simplified through the use of prosaic materials. By the mid-fourteenth century, religious vernacular plays, such as mystery plays, miracles plays, and pageant cycles, were performed as civic events in public locations throughout Europe and often featured members of the local community.<sup>38</sup>

In religious vernacular theater, civic and church involvement varied between regions and productions. Although the laity did have greater control of dramatic performances, clerical intervention was regular and necessary, offering assistance in a multitude of ways, from financial support to actors. In some instances the clergy influenced scripts, set designs, days of performances, and the structure of the play. Clerical participation did not refute or forbid lay patronage, involvement and investment in vernacular theater. Instead, it revealed the vitality of religion within medieval culture and the unshakeable spiritual environment in which the laity lived, worked and died.<sup>39</sup>

Whether a production was overseen predominantly by a group of powerful laymen or the clergy, medieval religious vernacular theater remained embedded within Christian culture. Rather than flout the influence of religion and the Church, performances were symptomatic of

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<sup>36</sup> Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 100, 104, 118; Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 84-85. Wright provides more information on the use of common names in plays to bridge contemporary society with biblical history.

<sup>38</sup> Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb, *Living Theatre: A History* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 130.

<sup>39</sup> Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 11; George R. Thomas, *Ten Miracle Plays*, ed. Elizabeth Salter and Derek Pearsall (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 11; Aaron Gurevich, "Bakhtin and his Theory of Carnival," in *A Cultural history of humour: from antiquity to the present day*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 59; Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches*, 35.

Christian mores. Vernacular religious theater was thoroughly embedded in—and a product of—a “sacred culture” built upon the tenets of Christianity and propagating its most basic teachings: morality, punishment, devotion, forgiveness, repentance, community and charity within the context of biblical or saintly narratives.<sup>40</sup>

Productions provided a means of direct engagement with biblical stories, parables and legends in a manner that was congruous to the experience of contemporary life. All drama, but especially the large-scale religious plays of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, expressed a community’s religious, social, economic, and political infrastructure.<sup>41</sup> These massive productions were the “dominant mass medium” of the Middle Ages, and evidenced the successful organization of hundreds of actors, musicians, craftsmen, stage workers, and countless others, bringing vitality to medieval theater’s ability to entertain and educate.<sup>42</sup>

It remains difficult, of course, to summarize religious vernacular theater in a simple manner. As Enders points out, there is no “medieval theatre generalist” because of the factionary nature of theatrical traditions.<sup>43</sup> Even when certain theatrical *modalities*—such as processional or in-place—were predominant in a region, production specificities varied due to the nature of the individual plays and the available resources for the construction of the playing arena, sets, costumes, special effects, and props.<sup>44</sup> Broad theatrical themes, however, emphasize the ways in which the presentation of pertinent religious narratives, parables, characterizations, and moral codes became an acceptable way for the laity to express, explicate and edify Christian precepts. In this way, it is possible to look beyond modern distinctions, genres, and regional diversity and

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<sup>40</sup> Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 19, 42. Cox argues that mystery plays in particular “are the closest of early vernacular dramatic forms to ritual, and they therefore represent a perpetuation of traditional religious views.”

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 207. See also: Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 13 for a discussion on theater being an important *media* of the Middle Ages.

<sup>43</sup> Enders, “Medieval Stages,” 320.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon Kipling, “Theatre as Subject and Object in Fouquet’s ‘Martyrdom of St. Apollonia’,” in *Medieval English Theatre* 19, (1997): 31.

instead link the theatrical events with traditional religious beliefs and associated rituals which bind the productions together.<sup>45</sup>

Bearing this in mind, it will be helpful to provide an overview of various theatrical traditions in order to lay a foundation of knowledge upon which to build.<sup>46</sup> England, which has dominated the scholarship of theater historians, was renowned for its great processional cycle plays, especially those of York, Chester and Coventry. Other cities also produced processional plays, although some of these did not have speaking lines, but were composed of tableaux or mimetic performances. Scaffold productions were also popular, and more common than large-scale processional plays, but have not garnered as much attention from contemporary scholars.<sup>47</sup> Cycle plays commemorated Corpus Christi, a feast day celebrating the transubstantiation of the Eucharist.<sup>48</sup> These plays recounted the Christian history of the world—or *cursor mundi*<sup>49</sup>—by performing biblical stories from the Creation to the Last Judgment. Such a linear narrative of Christianity clarified religious doctrine and beliefs for lay audiences.<sup>50</sup>

Records of the Chester, Coventry and York processions reveal that the plays were divided into a series of separate pageants. During the performance wagons decorated as individual scenes stopped at various locations or stations throughout the city where a particular biblical story would be dramatized.<sup>51</sup> Craft guilds, especially in Coventry but also throughout England, were responsible for a majority of the organization, financing and logistics of the

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<sup>45</sup> Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 42.

<sup>46</sup> It seems most prudent to divide the plays linguistically. In this I am following the tradition of the editors of *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 2. As they point out, while this practice has its drawbacks, national boundaries fluctuate over the course of time, and in any case it's very difficult to accommodate for all of the regional vagaries.

<sup>47</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 4-5; Clifford Davidson, "The Middle English Saint Play and Its Iconography," in *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications: 1986), 31-122. Likewise, while stationary plays are better known in France, they also had processional plays. Frank, *The Medieval French Drama*, 165. See *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 5-6 for a discussion on the lack of evidence for large-scale fixed location, civic plays in England.

<sup>48</sup> Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 95. Chambers explains that cycles celebrating Corpus Christi can also be found in Spain, Germany and France.

<sup>49</sup> Fries, "The Evolution of Eve," 12.

<sup>50</sup> Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 170.

<sup>51</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 3-4; Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 149; Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 113, 134.



production. These guilds decorated, repaired, and stored pageants; paid actors and minstrels; provided costumes and properties; oversaw the procession of the pageant through the streets; and provided refreshments for participants during rehearsals and throughout the performance.<sup>52</sup> Guild members were also the primary actors. They proudly maintained their identity as craftsmen, however, as can be seen in the Chester banns where the men described themselves not as “players of price,” but as “Craftes men and meane men.”<sup>53</sup>

Unlike the sweeping, linear *cursor mundi* themes of English productions, much of the extant information about French theatrical productions detail large civic plays based on distinct, individual Old and New Testament stories and legends.<sup>54</sup> Some sources describe saint plays and smaller, episodic productions based on biblical stories.<sup>55</sup> French plays were rarely performed annually; instead they were isolated events, sometimes performed with the intention of thanking God or a saint for heavenly intercession during droughts, diseases, wars and other elemental circumstances.<sup>56</sup> Various production techniques were employed, depending on the play. Documentation exists for mobile carts, sets of stationary platforms and mansions, and large, single stages with multiple mansions.<sup>57</sup> Larger plays were not mobile, but were staged in

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<sup>52</sup> Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 116; *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 4, 189; Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, 295. In some instances, church funds were used in defraying the costs of the production.

<sup>53</sup> Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 139. The Lucerne Passion Play, for which there is extensive documentation, fits into this theatrical model. “Meane,” *Middle English Dictionary*, 2001 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED27318>. According to the entry in this dictionary, meane has multiple definitions, including, “Of people: (a) inferior in rank; of low rank or status, poor; menere estat, lower rank; (b) inferior in attainment or skill; ~ carpenter, not a master carpenter; (c) short in stature; (d) ordinary.”

<sup>54</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 5-6. Fries, “The Evolution of Eve,” 5; Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 109. Wright points out that the religio-historical plays about the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans, entitled *Vengeance of Our Lord*, were the second most commonly performed plays, after the Passion.

<sup>55</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 6-7; Graham A. Runnalls, “Towns and Plays: Social Aspects of Medieval Drama,” in *Études sur les mystères: un recueil de 22 études sur les mystères français, suivi d’un repertoire du theater religieux français du Moyen Age et d’une bibliographie*, ed. Graham A. Runnalls (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur: 1998), 63.

<sup>57</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 6. It should be noted that the descriptions of various sets and stages “are susceptible of various interpretations.”

temporary, single locations and preceded by a parade or *monstre* advertising the upcoming performance.<sup>58</sup>

Financing and organization came from multiple sources, and the responsibility of the production was diffuse throughout the community. Individual patrons, religious societies (*confréries*), city councils, actors, local churches and religious dignitaries all bequeathed money in support of a play. Furthermore, French theater was singular throughout Europe for consistently charging admission, which assisted in paying for productions. Timber from the sets and other properties of fixed-location productions was at times sold to reduce performance costs.<sup>59</sup>

A group of councilors managed the productions, and public, civic meetings of influential families and town councilors were held to determine whether a play should be produced and to discuss ancillary issues and details. The plays were supervised by a *conducteur* who was sometimes a hired professional, but equally as often a local man.<sup>60</sup> Sometimes, if necessary, the *conducteur* expounded upon the material of the play, providing a historical or political overview for the audience.<sup>61</sup> A smattering of unprofessional actors lent their histrionic talents to these productions. French plays were not limited to a particular class or occupation. Participation

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<sup>58</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 6, 72-73; Runnalls, "Towns and Plays: Social Aspects of Medieval Drama," 63. Runnalls provides a good documentation for the sheer involvement of a French town in a 1510 production.

<sup>59</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 6-7; Runnalls, "Towns and Plays: Social Aspects of Medieval Drama," 63, 79-80. Runnalls considers how, while the Church supported the performances and sometimes participated, it rarely initiated them. He also points out that the ticket prices would have been affordable for most people, supporting the communal nature of these performances.

<sup>60</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 7; Runnalls, "Towns and Plays: Social Aspects of Medieval Drama," 67, 77; Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 140; A.M. Nagler, *The Medieval Religious Stage: Shapes and Phantom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 5. This role has also been called *meneur de jeu*. A similar role seems to have existed in Cornwall, and likely throughout England. Accordingly, amateur actors relied on a prompter throughout the performance rather than learning their lines.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 161.

included artisan and guild members, as well as aristocrats, clergy, and even—though infrequently—women. Actors often provided their own costumes.<sup>62</sup>

Famed French and English productions can be seen to occupy two ends of a theatrical spectrum, although each theatrical tradition combines elements of processional and in-place productions. The rest of continental Europe, which has not been given nearly as much attention as the English and French traditions, modify these two poles in their own productions. Much of the extant information available for German-speaking theatrical performances comes from municipal accounts, and outlines a general pattern in which local citizens produced an annual Passion play the week after Easter. Civic subsidies were used to fund the construction of a temporary wooden stage in the marketplace and provide for staging implements. Scripts and props were frequently lent between communities in close proximity.<sup>63</sup>

Spanish performances were often associated with the Corpus Christi feast day, and were presented as processional tableaux, paraded through village streets. The various floats and wagons in the Corpus Christi processions were frequently overseen by groups of local churches. Outside of the Corpus Christi productions, civic dramas in celebration of an event were rare, although hagiographic dramas were popular productions associated with the liturgy and performed in churches. Interestingly, there are also accounts of familial dramas produced and performed in domestic locations.<sup>64</sup>

Many of the theatrical characteristics mentioned in this brief summary of western medieval performances can be located in Jean Fouquet's illumination, *The Martyrdom of St. Apollonia*. Unique because of its theatrical setting, *St. Apollonia* has played a vital role in the

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<sup>62</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 6; Runnalls, "Towns and Plays: Social Aspects of Medieval Drama," 63, 76, 143.

<sup>63</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

study of dramatic medieval productions, their structure and organization.<sup>65</sup> Created between 1452 and 1460, the image belonged to a Book of Hours patronized by Etienne Chevalier, the treasurer of France, perhaps in commemoration of his recently deceased wife Catherine Budé.<sup>66</sup> Not surprisingly for medieval depictions of saint's lives, but important to its evocation of religious vernacular plays, Fouquet's *St. Apollonia* does not accurately depict her torture as initially recorded by the early historian Eusebius in his chronicle *The History of the Church*.

Eusebius summarizes a third century letter from St. Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, to Fabius, the Bishop of Antioch, that recounts the persecution of the Christians in Alexandria under the Roman Emperor Decius. Anti-Christian sentiment was exacerbated by a pagan prophet, resulting in a pious blood bath; Apollonia's martyrdom came to exemplify the persecution. According to Eusebius, after the pagans had victimized a number of Christians they:

seized also that most admirable virgin, Apollonia, an old woman, and, smiting her on the jaws, broke out all her teeth. And they made a fire outside the city and threatened to burn her alive if she would not join with them in their impious cries. And she, supplicating a little, was released, when she leaped eagerly into the fire and was consumed.<sup>67</sup>

Fouquet's illumination, created some twelve hundred years after Eusebius' account, was influenced by literary and theatrical versions of the legend circulating during the Middle Ages.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Beck, "Sainte-Apolline: L'Image d'Un Spectacle, Le Spectacle d'Une Image," in *Selected Papers of the XXXIIInd Conference at the Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de la Renaissance de Tours*, ed. André Lascombes (New York: E.J. Brill, 1993): 232-243. Beck provides a general discussion on the problems inherent in using this image as a factual document for medieval theater. Gordon Kipling, "Theatre as Subject and Object," 26-80. Kipling insists that Fouquet's image does not depict a theatrical event, but was based on texts and constitutes a "theatre of the mind" with no intention to accurately represent contemporary performances (31). Instead, Fouquet's composition was influenced by travels through Italy (1445-48) and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. As a result, the semi-circular staging re-creates ancient Roman theaters (35). Also see Graham Runnalls, "Jean Fouquet's 'Martyrdom of St. Apollonia' and the Medieval French Stage," *Medieval English Theatre* 19 (1997): 81-100.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Sterling, "Preface," in *The Hours of Etienne Chevalier* by Jean Fouquet (New York: George Braziller, 1971), 8.

<sup>67</sup> Eusebius Pamphilus, *Eusebius Pamphilus: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1890, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xi.xli.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Gordon Kipling, "Theatre as Subject and Object," 47-49. Here Kipling argues that this image is not a representation of a dramatic text, but is based upon the narrative *Acta Sanctae Apolloniae virginis et martyris Romanae* of the fifteenth century.

In the thirteenth-century collection of hagiographic stories, *The Golden Legend*, Apollonia's martyrdom remains close to Eusebius' account. By the late-fourteenth-century, however, *Passios* recounting the death of martyred saints conflate St. Apollonia with St. Catherine of Alexandria. Apollonia is increasingly represented as a beautiful, young princess, and daughter of Ysopus, the pagan King of Alexandria. In this version, Apollonia refuses to renounce her Christian faith and Ysopus, angered by her flagrant disobedience, orders his daughter to be whipped and to have her teeth extracted one by one.<sup>69</sup> Fouquet's illumination was likely inspired by later literary editions, as well as theatrical productions, which replaced the venerable, old Apollonia with a nubile young woman about to suffer a relatively more surgical—and certainly more aesthetic—procedure.

Fouquet's representation follows theatrical trends which increasingly emphasized the martyrdom of vulnerable young women. Approximately twenty-three percent of extant medieval saint plays focus on female martyrs. This is an unusually high number considering the percentage of martyred female saints as recorded by the Church is a mere 3.8%. Such statistics reveal theater's unprecedented exposé of gruesome persecutions exerted upon physically susceptible but spiritually tenacious women.<sup>70</sup> If a saint play of Apollonia existed, it has not lasted into the present day.<sup>71</sup> Evidence does persist, however, for the staging of Apollonia's persona and story. For a 1424 Corpus Christi procession in Barcelona, a halo for St. Apollonia is listed among the play's properties and props.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, theater historian Graham Runnals

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<sup>69</sup> Leslie Abend Callahan, "The Torture of Saint Apollonia: Deconstructing Fouquet's Martyrdom Stage," *Studies in Iconography* 16 (1994): 120-122; Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1941), 164; Kipling, "Theatre as Subject and Object," 47-49. Kipling concludes that the man is the Roman Emperor Julian.

<sup>70</sup> Beck, "Sainte-Apolline: L'Image d'Un Spectacle," 240-242.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>72</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 127.

located a “mystere de Sainte Apolline” listed among the titles of other dramatic texts of a Tours bookseller from the late fifteenth-century.<sup>73</sup>

While not depicting a specific moment or exact play, Fouquet’s illumination certainly seems inspired by medieval theater. The separation between the fore-and middle-ground simulates a *platea* or acting place. The two-tiered array of structures represents mansions or scaffolds—theatrical sets which delineate heaven on the left, hell on the right, and an earthly, palatial location between, resembling the documentation of temporary, in-place theaters built in England, France and Germany.<sup>74</sup>

In the foreground of the illumination two wildmen and two wildwomen sit in verdant grass, bracing the heraldic shields and coats of arms of the patron.<sup>75</sup> The hairy countenance of the wildman was a fashionable visual motif that developed out of a tradition of angels and mythological animals guarding familial coats of arms from danger.<sup>76</sup> Importantly, wildmen costumes were frequently donned at noble masquerades and carnival fetes, establishing an association between them and theatrical, performative events.<sup>77</sup> These figures are separated from the middle-ground by shrubbery and a wicker fence, creating a transitional visual space elevated above the foreground and set at a further distance from the viewer.

Comprised of bright colors and vigorous activity, the middle-ground holds the viewer’s attention. Here Apollonia wears a dazzling, pure white frock and lies bound to a plank while a

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<sup>73</sup> Runnalls, “Jean Fouquet’s “Martyrdom of St. Apollonia,”” 82.

<sup>74</sup> Wilson and Goldfarb, *Living Theatre: A History*, 139. Also see Graham A. Runnalls, “Mansion and Lieu: Two Technical Terms in Medieval French Staging?,” in *Études sur les mystères: un recueil de 22 études sur les mystères français, suivi d’un repertoire du theater religieux français du Moyen Age et d’une bibliographie*, ed. Graham A. Runnalls (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur: 1998), 468-486 for the difficulty of these terms.

<sup>75</sup> Kipling, “Theatre as Subject and Object,” 52. Although such initials and coats of arms are found throughout the extant folios of the book of hours, Kipling points out that “B” is the first letter in the antiphonic prayer, *Beata Apollonia* and may have served as a mnemonic device.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 178. Bernheimer suggests that Fouquet’s illumination represents one of the first depictions of the wild woman holding the coat of arms (179).

<sup>77</sup> Beck, “Sainte-Apolline: L’Image d’Un Spectacle,” 237; Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, 49-84, 178.

male persecutor leans back with his feet firmly anchored and tugs on her hair.<sup>78</sup> A torturer with conspicuously elongated pliers twists his body, establishing the leverage necessary to pull the victim's teeth from her mouth. The two men binding her feet tug violently and excessively on ropes. Apollonia's distinguished "father," with a golden scepter and crown, and flowing white beard, nefariously oversees his daughter's persecution while a man wearing a blue robe, holding a book and wielding a baton resembles the *conducteur*, directing and narrating the play.<sup>79</sup>

Lurking at the right edge of the illumination, and rather surprising for a saint's martyrdom scene, a large, yawning mouth of hell rests upon the *platea* where Apollonia's torture unfolds. The features of the beast are distinctly canine; a long snout terminates in a dog-like nose adorned with whiskers. Black fur stretches around the gaping mouth, which reveals an even row of chipped, yellow teeth. The red-rimmed eye glowers up at the figure of God, who is seated on his heavenly throne directly opposite hell. Brown, furry demons armed with clubs, teem about the mouth of hell while their infamous leader, Satan, stands atop hell, wielding a meat hook and boasting two additional faces across his chest and one on his belly.

The background is composed of a series of wooden structures filled with spectators and actors, and revealing just a glimpse of blue sky at the top of the composition. The assemblages establish the location of the image and prevent the viewer's gaze from wandering from the action at the heart of the illumination. Despite its details, the dull red, green, blue and brown palette fades behind the brightness of the middle ground, causing the viewer to return Apollonia's torture.

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<sup>78</sup> In Latin such a plank was called an *eculeus*. See Kipling, "Theatre as Subject and Object," 47. Runnalls, "Jean Fouquet's 'Martyrdom of St. Apollonia'" 84. Runnalls provides the Middle French word: *chevalet*.

<sup>79</sup> Wilson and Goldfarb, *Living Theatre: A History*, 137. Phillip Butterworth, "Prompting in full view of the audience: a medieval staging convention," in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. Alan Hindley (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n.v., 1999), 231-247. Butterworth discusses this and other instances of prompting. Kipling, "Theatre as Subject and Object," 40-41, 48, 53. Kipling argues that this man is yet another of Fouquet's interpretations of Roman theater: the poet who read the text while the *mimi* provided actions and gestures paralleling the narrative. Kipling also points out that he wears the robe and *pileus* of a cleric.

*St. Apollonia* highlights a continuum of spaces by representing a theatrical performance in a place—or *platea*—within a book of hours to be viewed by the patron Chevalier and his family. In its representation of a busy event full of exquisite detail and a plethora of both actors and spectators, *St. Apollonia* suggests the impact of the medieval theatrical *experience* in a manner different from textual descriptions. What's more, Fouquet's illumination provides insight into the expansion and dissemination of mouth of hell iconography, not only through private devotional texts, but also within religious vernacular theatrical productions, which were gaining momentum at this time and becoming more culturally established. The presence of the mouth of hell within Fouquet's illumination is indicative of the mouth of hell's increased prevalence within the lay community and suggests how this iconography may even have been understood as a standard indicator or sign for stage sets at this time.

### **Embodiment of the Mouth of Hell within the Community**

Religious vernacular productions invaded the physical space of the community in a manner more accessible, disruptive, and temporal than previous traditional forms of art. Processional plays moved throughout the streets and temporary, at times large, theaters were built in squares and marketplaces for fixed-location productions.<sup>80</sup> A pre-eminent element of these plays was the mouth of hell, the product of communal devotion, planning, organization, and artistry drawing upon the energies of carpenters, town clerks, clergymen, painters, amateur actors, technicians, and special effects experts to successfully depict the clamping jaws of this great head.

Although hell figured prominently in early religious vernacular plays, extant sources indicate that it was not featured as a specific setting until the fourteenth century, and indeed many of the records documenting the mouth of hell in theater date from the sixteenth century.

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<sup>80</sup> Runnalls, "Towns and Plays: Social Aspects of Medieval Drama," 71.



Perhaps the only generalization that can be extended with some certainty towards the theatrical depiction of hell is that, according to extant plans, it was typical in fixed-location staging for heaven to be located stage right and hell stage left, which ultimately placed heaven on the spectators' left and hell on the right, a perspective, as already mentioned, employed in the composition of *St. Apollonia* from the viewpoint of the reader.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, most traditional Last Judgment iconography employed just such a cosmic arrangement in mosaics, tympana and frescoes. Theater utilized this iconographic precedence, clarifying and reinforcing the visual and physical perception of spiritual and earthly locations for viewers.

Beyond this, the specific theatrical representation of hell varied to fit the production's plot, organization, resources, space allotment, and local talent. Few plays refer to the mouth of hell within the plot, and much of the extant evidence comes from civic records documenting payments and reparations.<sup>82</sup> These accounts, however, are enough to give tantalizing glimpses of the theatrical mouth of hell. For example, city documents reveal that a town consul named Percheron paid 15d to a man by the name of Colas for a bundle of rings used to create the mouth of hell in a Passion play in Montferrand in 1477. For this same production a man by the name of Pierre Noel was paid 5 *sou* 3 *denier* for a cartload of thorns placed around the scaffolding of hell, ostensibly increasing its menacing appearance.<sup>83</sup> The ephemeral nature of theater makes it impossible to know exactly how the rings were used, or what the mouth of hell may have looked like. Fortunately, other extant sources are more detailed.

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<sup>81</sup> Frank, *The Medieval French Drama*, 164; Sheingorn, "“Who can open the doors of his face?,”" 5-6; Lima, "The Mouth of Hell," 37; Lima, *Stages of Evil: Occultism in Western Theater and Drama*, 29-37.

<sup>82</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 166, 167. Not all theatrical depictions of hell resembled the mouth of hell. Many were architectural, complete with the crenellations and ramparts of a fortified, formidable palace or prison. Some depictions of hell combined the mouth of hell with a prison, a motif also used in illuminations and frescoes. The illumination in *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* is a good example.

<sup>83</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 7, 27, 90. The currency demarcated was the *livre tournois*.

A late Passion play from Lucerne, held in 1583, provides historians with one of the most descriptive staging plans extant. Detailed measurements were executed by the carpenter and master of works, Master Uolrich Hardmeyer, under the direction of the Town Clerk Cysat:

Hell at the bottom end of the square toward the Muligasse, between the fountain and the Cobblers' Hall, two feet away uphill from the door of the said Hall. In front two posts are to be dug in, on which the mouth is hung, drawn up, and lowered, 9 1/2 feet wide. The first post is to be 3 1/2 feet from the Hall. The mouth shall be level with the scaffold (dem gerüst eben) beside the fountain on the side facing the square. The length of Hell up to 6 feet away from the door of the Tanners' Hall, towards the fountain. Beside the door (darneben) it has a separate closed passageway out. Hell closed in, walled in, also covered over and raised at the rear. The space between Hell and the fountain is to be covered over and also have a stand over it (verbrüenet sin) as far as the post on which the mouth hangs—likewise also on the other side, what is free as far the post of the entrance—and forwards it tapers (werts verloren) as far as the pillar of the fountain.<sup>84</sup>

Records indicate that the cooper Master Jost Biderman provided cloth, nails and hair for the construction of the mouth of hell.<sup>85</sup> Similar to Fouquet's miniature, the Lucerne mouth of hell was a large construction, able to facilitate the movement of actors in and out of the staging area. The document suggests that there was a second story above the mouth of hell, between it and the fountain; perhaps this was a place from which Satan could direct his evil deeds, as seen in *St. Apollonia*. Although lacking sufficient detail for a clear understanding of the staging area, the description reveals a tantalizing glimpse of how the mouth of hell was embedded within the physical landscape of the community and just how large it was.

Some theatrical mouths of hell were animated. Two lavish, large-scale religious vernacular performances, the *Passion* and *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, were performed in Metz in 1437.<sup>86</sup> One spectator, Phillipe de Vigneulles, recalled the representation of the mouth of hell:

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<sup>84</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 81.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>86</sup> Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 118. The plays were performed in July and September and lasted an impressive eight days in total. They were written by the famed Eustach Marcadé and financed largely by the bishop of Metz, Conrad de Bayer de Boppard.

The gateway and mouth of Hell in this play was very well made, for by a device (engine) it opened and closed of its own accord when the devils wanted to go in or come out of it. And this great head (hure) had two great steel eyes which glittered wonderfully.<sup>87</sup>

Likewise, the mouth of hell in the Lincoln production of a *Tobias* play in the 1560s opened and closed its fearsome jaw, referred to as a “neithere Chap.”<sup>88</sup> The jaws of mechanized mouths of hell opened to vomit devils into the acting space, or closed behind thrashing, condemned villains.

Looking again at Fouquet’s *St. Apollonia* in light of these textual descriptions, one can see that the mouth of hell here is also an elaborate construction. It is clear that the mouth of hell has been drawn with great interest and detail. In comparison, heaven at right and the earthly throne in the middle of the miniature are simple constructions. Heaven is occupied by God the Father, angels and musicians, making it difficult to discern the details of the set. For the purposes of the illumination, heaven is identified by its denizens and no more. The kingdom of Apollonia’s father—and the overseer of her torture—Ysopus, is demarcated by swags of fabric, a throne and pillows. The details in Fouquet’s illumination are indicative of the lavish attention exerted on theatrical mouths of hell. It was not merely another location or prop, but a sophisticated, technical set, constructed and manipulated with great care.

Medieval special effects further enhanced the mouth of hell. For a 1474 Rouen nativity play, records indicate that Hell was to be “made like a great mouth (guelle) opening and closing as is needful.”<sup>89</sup> In addition, stage directions indicate that “flames of fire” issued from “the nostrils, the eyes, and the ears” of the mouth of hell, making it a lavish and technologically advanced element within the production. A host of swarming devils supplemented these visual elements; actors were instructed to “cry out together with the drums and other thundering made

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<sup>87</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 90; Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 130.

<sup>88</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 172; Philip Butterworth, “Hellfire: Flame as Special Effect,” in *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 71-72.

<sup>89</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 29, 90.

by machines (engins), and the cannon (couleuvrines).”<sup>90</sup> It is difficult to determine whether the mouth of hell belched actual flames in this production. Real hellfire was most certainly a titillating feature of other mouths of hell.

Thus it would appear such elaborate renditions of hell took much collaboration to construct and necessitated expert handlers during performances. Coventry’s extensive municipal records provide a glimpse into the maintenance and effort required behind the stage. Accounts written for the Drapers’ guild in 1566 record: “Itm [*sic*] pd [*sic*] for kepyng hell mothe & the fyre.”<sup>91</sup> This same year, payment was made “for cleynyng of the pagande & kepyng hell hede & the Wynd.”<sup>92</sup> In subsequent years workers were paid “for kepyng hell mowth and setting the worlds on ffyer.”<sup>93</sup> Paid helpers maintained the mouth of hell’s windlass and fires during productions, suggesting that the flames of hell truly did burn.

In many instances mouth of hell mechanisms were kept from year to year. Especially in England, where cycle plays were performed annually, the pageants of hell needed to be repaired, maintained and stored until the next production.<sup>94</sup> For the 1538 Coventry production payments were made “for payntyng & making newe hell hede”<sup>95</sup> and in 1565 records indicate an “Itm [*sic*] payde to John huyt for payntyng of hell mowthe.”<sup>96</sup> Typically these props were stored in pageant houses, constructed specifically to house unused sets. Occasionally they were stored elsewhere.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>91</sup> *Coventry: records of early English drama*, ed. R.W. Ingram (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 237. The amount paid was 10d.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 475. The amount paid was 4s 7d.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 242. The amount paid was 10d again. Records for this duty exist from 1562, 1567, 1568, 1569, 1570, 1571, (pps. 221, 242, 246, 250, 254, 257). Also see *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 150; Butterworth, “Hellfire: Flame as Special Effect,” 68-71.

<sup>94</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 169. Schmidt points out that special effects with fire and smoke would have been particularly damaging to the mouth of hell, and were a primary cause of reparations.

<sup>95</sup> *Coventry: records of early English drama*, 465. The amount paid was 12d. This occurred regularly. In 1566 records indicate that the cost had increased to 20d (472).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 230. He received 16d for his troubles.

For the Lincoln *Tobias* play, for example, a house owned by one William Smart and occupied by a Mr. Norton became the temporary storage of the mouth of hell and its lower jaw.<sup>97</sup>

The mouth of hell took on an unprecedented physicality within the community through theater. In manuscript illuminations, stained glass, and sculpture the mouth of hell was bound by its medium. Immobilized in stone, glass or pigment, it was held in suspension, never fully capable of fulfilling its swallowing potential. In theatrical productions the mouth of hell was freed from these restrictions, mobilized, animated, and present, lurking next to a fountain within the cityscape or boldly parading through the streets.<sup>98</sup> In either case, theater allowed the mouth of hell to become enfleshed within the living body of the community.

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<sup>97</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 188-189; Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 172. A set-piece prison and a room of the biblical figure Sarah was also stored at Mr. Smart's house.

<sup>98</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 6, 261-262.

#### **4. The Humor of Hell**

##### **Slipping from the Theological?**

The drama inherent within mouth of hell imagery was well-suited for the histrionics of medieval theater. Its stunning interpretation of damnation and explicit violence translated nicely onto the medieval stage, and created an opportunity for the implementation of new techniques and technology, resources and talent, to best captivate spectators.<sup>99</sup> These very characteristics, however, are criticized for the mouth of hell's eventual secularization and decline. By the end of the sixteenth century theatrical manifestations of the mouth of hell dwindled and the iconography never regained the visual status it once enjoyed.<sup>100</sup>

Schmidt suggests that the mouth of hell could not maintain its theological potency within the religious vernacular medieval theater. Lay theater and spiritual authority, it would seem, were mutually exclusive:

It would be easy to suggest that the theological meanings of the hell mouth so prized by the monastic reformers faded away with the coming of the Renaissance or at last by the time of the Enlightenment. Instead, these meanings faded because the very qualities that allowed the image to convey an abstract theological concept—its vividness, its accessibility, its dramatic impact—were mutually supportive and destructive. Tied to the theological concept of damnation, they served to popularize an image that decorated many a church wall and that became recognizable across western Europe. But those very qualities insured that the hell mouth would find other forums that were not so tied to the theological concept of damnation. This it did—on the stage. And here, where its dramatic power was probably more significant than its theological meaning, it lasted for two centuries before its dramatic potential exhausted, it slipped behind the curtain.<sup>101</sup>

According to Schmidt, the very characteristic that made the mouth of hell such a powerful devotional and proselytizing tool—its explicit and simple representation of damnation—was

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<sup>99</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 63, 64.

<sup>100</sup> Surprisingly, the mouth of hell has always persisted in a number of contexts through to the present day. In the popular TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the high school of the protagonist is located on a hell mouth. Also see Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 13, 179-188 for a smattering of other ways in which the mouth of hell is featured.

<sup>101</sup> Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 14, 16.

exploited by the theater for broad entertainment. The spectacle trumped the spiritual as elaborations and special effects captivated audiences more than the dire fate they represented.<sup>102</sup>

Certainly, under the auspices of religious vernacular theater, the laity had unprecedented control over the representation of the mouth of hell. In these circumstances, layers of meaning and innuendo could be placed upon the original iconographic image, making it a complex site of theological concepts abutting new forms of entertainment and visuality, or even appropriated for more mundane social and political jokes. Schmidt outlines a broad cause-and-effect timeline that progresses towards and terminates in the “secularized” Renaissance. As such, he professes that the theatrical mouth of hell was ultimately “a scene of terror turned into one of comedy[...]<sup>103</sup> The comedy to which he refers is directly associated with theatrical devils, famed for their base and bawdy nature.<sup>104</sup> Although the mouth of hell continued to represent the threshold of eternal damnation in theater, Schmidt proposes that it was a mere shadow of its former threat, and instead became the seat of comedy when surrounded by cavorting local actors.

### **Devils: The Crass Denizens of the Mouth of Hell**

It is difficult to separate the mouth of hell, and its theatrical manifestation, from the devils which inhabited its bowels, lurched from its maw, and dragged screaming sinners to its depths. Indeed the earliest illuminations of the mouth of hell depict the Fall of Lucifer, forging an unshakeable visual bond between hell and its maleficent inhabitants.<sup>105</sup> The fusion of devils and hell can be seen from extant theatrical accounts. Stage directions for a Prades assumption play written before 1420 specify that:

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Many share this view. For an overview see Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 175; Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 348; L.M. Spencer, *Corpus Christi Pageants in England* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1911), <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?view=image;size=50;id=uc1.b3290422;page=root;seq=242;num=224>.

<sup>105</sup> See Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 5-6. In England devils are written into plays by the fourteenth century, with the earliest documentation of devil costumes issuing from a 1433 production in York.

Lucifer and the other devils are to make a place which is to be a large Hell (un loch quey sía infern gran). And they are to take there an anvil (anclusa) and hammers (mayls) to make a loud noise when the time comes.<sup>106</sup>

Notes for a Last Judgment play from Majorca outline the basic features of hell:

On the lower scaffold there will be nothing. Below this scaffold, if possible, there is to be made a Hell-mouth (una boca de infern). If this cannot be done, a curtain (una Cortina) is to be hung there to cover the lower part of the scaffold. That space will be Hell.<sup>107</sup>

Majorca's Last Judgment directs the actors in the following manner:

Then three devils shall enter in no particular order, helter skelter, dressed in the usual manner except that Lucifer shall wear a crown and carry a scepter. They shall carry manacles in their hands, and in this way they shall enter from the Hell-mouth or from beneath the curtain.<sup>108</sup>

Such a description recalls the illumination of mouths of hell in *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, where an assortment of demons flit fitfully about the folio, gleefully rending, jabbing, eviscerating, and gnawing on the bodies of the damned. Perhaps the sense of devilish cavorting found within this illumination and others like it was influenced by the excesses of actors playing at evil. The devils certainly had their day in medieval theater.

Theatrical productions embellished scripture to lengthen scenes placed in or associated with the infernal location. For example, each of the cycle plays in England incorporate scenes of the apocryphal Harrowing of Hell. Not only did the action of such scenes take place at the very threshold of hell, but a host of devils was introduced to the audience.<sup>109</sup> Theatrical elaborations of diabolical scenes ensured that devils were given characterizations and personalities which concretized their nefarious purpose and

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<sup>106</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 28, 79.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 88. As was traditional in Spanish theater, this play was performed within a church. The dialogue would have been sung to liturgical melodies. The manuscript in which this play was found is a copy from the late sixteenth century, but the plays are believed to be written much earlier (25).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>109</sup> Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 126. As Chambers points out, these scenes also link New Testament proceedings, such as Christ's resurrection, with Old Testament characters, like Adam, Eve, and Elijah. This would help establish the sense of *corpus mundi* in the cycles.



emphasized the confrontation between Christ and Satan, good and evil.<sup>110</sup> Enhanced plots exploited the potential for conflict, violence, or humor between antagonists and protagonists within the plays, but also between antagonists and spectators.

Attesting to their broad appeal, theatrical depictions of hell found their way into many plays, including those biblical stories, parables and legends that were not conventionally associated with hell imagery or iconography. Even narratives traditionally exalting the establishment and triumph of good without intermediating interference from Satan, such as nativity and assumption stories, included hell props. In nativity plays, it is likely King Herod would be thrown into the jaws of hell after his evil exploits. Saint plays, too, incorporated hell, so that spectators could relish watching villainous tormentors, executioners and corrupt rulers, such as Apollonia's dastardly father, meet their damnable fate as cosmic justice was meted out to each.<sup>111</sup>

### **The Devil Among Them: Colloquial Relations Between Devils and Spectators**

A key component in the theatrical conceptualization of the mouth of hell was the behavior of its inhabitants, Satan and his minions. For example, as previously stated, the stage directions for Majorca's Last Judgment encourages the actors playing devils to engage in unorganized, "helter skelter" movements, providing them with the freedom to revel in impromptu, unscripted behavior. This was not entirely unusual, and played an important role in Schmidt's perceived "comedy" of the mouth of hell.

The "helter skelter" behavior of the Majorca devils was indicative of a particular colloquial relationship that existed between the devils, participants and spectators of religious

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<sup>110</sup> Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 46. Evidence of the earliest Harrowing of Hell "production" is from the Anglo-Saxon *Book of Cerne* dating from the eighth century (61).

<sup>111</sup> Runnalls, "Jean Fouquet's "Martyrdom of St. Apollonia,"" 87-88; Kipling, "Theatre as Subject and Object," 87-109 for the formulaic nature of saint plays. Pamela Sheingorn, "'Who can open the doors of his face?,'" 4. Sheingorn discusses how the tormentors of the saints were the ones who likely, at the end of the play, were dragged to the mouth of hell for their just desserts.

vernacular drama since its earliest productions. In the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman play, *Jeu d'Adam* this informality manifested itself physically. In between attempts to persuade Adam to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge, stage notes direct: "Then let the Devil depart; and he shall go to the other demons, and he shall make an excursion through the square; and after some little interval, cheerful and rejoicing, he shall return to his tempting..."<sup>112</sup> This set a precedent for future productions, where the interaction between devilish characters and the viewing public became more and more familiar.

In the Chester cycle's fifteenth-century *Slaughter of the Innocents* the relationship between devils and audience is established verbally. The heretical, murderous King Herod dies and a demon enters to haul the king's soul off to eternal damnation. Shortly after his appearance, the devil menacingly addresses the audience, "with this crooked crambocke your backes shall I clowe / and all talse [*sic*] beleevers I burne" (ll. 438-439).<sup>113</sup> Right before his exit to hell, with Herod's soul in tow, the devil admonishes the audience against trespassing and petty thievery—contemporary transgressions that had little to do with the sins derived from the moral of Herod's play—lest he "come agayne and fetch moe / as fast as I maye goe. / Farewell, and have good-daye" (ll. 455-457).<sup>114</sup> The closing salutation of the Chester devil might not have been cautionary, but rather a polite familiarity. At any rate, the devil's final words seem incongruous with the earlier threats of torment and perdition and as a result the scene is credited with being satirical, self-aware, comical.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Adam: A Religious Play of the Twelfth Century*, trans. Edward Noble Stone (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1926), 165; *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 166-167; Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 116. Similar directions are given several times throughout the play.

<sup>113</sup> Gerard NeCastro, "The Chester Cycle Play X (10)—The Slaying of the Innocents," *From Stage to Page – Medieval and Renaissance Drama*. 2011, [http://www.umm.maine.edu/faculty/necastro/drama/chester/play\\_10.html](http://www.umm.maine.edu/faculty/necastro/drama/chester/play_10.html). The devil threatens to claw the audience members' backs with a meat hook and drag false believers to hell. Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 182. This play was performed by the goldsmiths.

<sup>114</sup> NeCastro, "The Chester Cycle Play."

<sup>115</sup> Irena Janicka, *The Comic Elements In The English Mystery Plays Against the Cultural Background (Particularly Art)* (University of Warsaw, 1962), 83. Janicka suggests that at this moment the actor removed his disguise to reveal his human identity. She codes this moment as undoubtedly comic because the true identity of the

Of course it is impossible to know exactly how the actor playing the Chester devil delivered his lines. What becomes evident, however, is that a special relationship existed between theatrical devils and the audience in many medieval productions. Theater historians suggest that crude humor and gesticulations may have supplemented the dialogue of devils and antagonists. Clownish antics, blasphemous oaths, and vulgar humor, language, and pantomime lent these figures a laughable countenance.<sup>116</sup> Such characteristics broke the bounds of decorum even further, helping make the irreverent devilish hordes, Satan, and Beelzebub beloved characters, just as hell was a favorite location.<sup>117</sup> The devils' direct address, action and freedom to stalk about through the audience broke through the "fourth wall" of the performance space, bringing the audience directly into the realm of the theater and, conversely, bringing the theater to the realm of the spectators.

The devils' abusive gestures, combative behavior, taunting of spectators and performance of dramatic action in the space of the audience were traits associated with informal, lay festivals, games and rituals performed outside of organized theater.<sup>118</sup> Theatrical scenes of beating, flagellation, murder, massacre and cruelty paralleled physical, often violent, medieval activities such as Hoodman's Blind, Blind Man's Bluff and Frog in the Middle.<sup>119</sup> As Richard Axton

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actor exposes the fictional nature of drama, creating a sudden rift between theater and reality that provokes laughter. Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 182. Axton argues that this scene, including the massacre overseen by Herod, is "folkish." Overt physical violence and tongue-in-cheek dialogue recall folk festivals and celebrations. Neither scholar considers that false politeness is an inherent characteristic of dramatized evil; in *Jeu d'Adam* the serpent addresses Eve with the genial smile and courtesy of an honorable gentleman.

<sup>116</sup> Much has been written on this topic. *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 193; Janicka, *The Comic Elements In The English Mystery Plays*, 51; Lynette R. Muir, "The Saint Play in Medieval France," in *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications: 1986), 157.

<sup>117</sup> Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 91. See the discussion on p. 56 for the development of Herod's explosive theatrical character in the middle ages.

<sup>118</sup> Janicka, *The Comic Elements In The English Mystery Plays*, 65; Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 46, 167-68; Spencer, *Corpus Christi Pageants in England*.

<sup>119</sup> Janicka, *The Comic Elements In The English Mystery Plays*, 90; Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 19. Janicka suggests Hoodman's Blind and Hot Cockles are associated with scenes of Christ's flagellation where tormentors ask a blindfolded Jesus to prophesy who has hit him. For more on medieval games see Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and pastimes of the people of England....* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1876), <http://www.victorianpopularculture.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/contents/document-details-search.aspx?documentid=428566>. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol I (London: Oxford University Press, 1903), 130-131, 152-159; Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7. Chambers and Bakhtin discuss how pagan sacrificial rituals influenced the May

points out, “the constant motifs of folk-play are combat and ‘death’, and its characteristic manner of acting aggressive and comic.”<sup>120</sup> As a result, the physical brutality of the medieval stage has been interpreted as a popular, sensational addition, providing a familiar spectacle to attract and engage the attention of the people.<sup>121</sup> The riotous, fierce physicality and the freedom to roam through expectant viewers was a recognizable feature borrowed from commonplace games and festivals, strengthening the ties between comedy and violence within medieval theater.

Not unlike earlier visual art, the rough, comedic antics of devils and antagonists juxtaposed the seriousness of heaven and its idealized, goodly figures. Heavenly characters were grave, contemplative, numinous, spiritual and obedient to God’s will. Their antithesis was expressed in the sensate, coarse, vulgar and evil characters of bible and legend who reject God’s love and command.<sup>122</sup> To emphasize this distinction, situations in which the body’s irrefutable physicality confronted the virtuous, refined spiritual aspirations of the soul were mined for their comic potential.

The perceived split between body and soul denigrated physical bodies and beings as inherently more depraved and “secular”—or at least prone to secularization. Righteous spiritual fortitude was thwarted by the body time and again, creating instances of tension ripe for comedy.<sup>123</sup> Critical to this humor was the noble attempt at spiritual purity and the inevitable lapse back into the sentient, sinful world.<sup>124</sup> Not only did this humor capitalize on humankind’s

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celebrations of France and the Hocktide days of England. Chambers argues that these comedic elements are not just secular, but vestiges of paganism.

<sup>120</sup> Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 176; Spencer, *Corpus Christi Pageants in England*.

<sup>121</sup> Davidson, “The Middle English Saint Play,” 38, 60. The violent histrionics of stage devils is often conflated with burgeoning forms of comedic entertainment, especially the French farce. Both devils and farce relied on physicality and violence; obscenities, beatings, disguises, and equivocations were shared by the devils of vernacular religious theater and farcical comedy. Although vernacular religious theater was a vastly different genre, these characteristics have been ascribed with the same comedic appeal. Frank, *The Medieval French Drama*, 246; Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 1; Janicka, “The Comic Elements In The English Mystery Plays,” 87.

<sup>122</sup> Janicka, “The Comic Elements In The English Mystery Plays,” 87, 107; Thomas, *Ten Miracle Plays*, 13.

<sup>123</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, “Jacques Le Goff on Medieval Humor,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 5, 2 (1997): 9. According to Andersson, this particular type of humor developed in the twelfth century.

<sup>124</sup> Andersson, “Jacques Le Goff on Medieval Humor,” 10; Dyan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 2.

repeated ignoble fall from grace, but it was also fully familiar: most people were not saints, and despite their best intentions, fell victim to their carnal longings.<sup>125</sup> The body was an anchor to the physical world, bound to corporeality by its untoward needs, drives, and desires.

### **Grotesque Realism and the Mouth of Hell**

Although unearthly creatures, the devils' base gestures, comedic obscenities, brutal violence, and aggression accentuated the fleshliness of existence and the physicality of the infernal punishments awaiting those who indulged sensuous delights. Due to these traits, as well as their link to parochial games and festivals, stage devils and their domicile have been associated with Bakhtin's aesthetic concept of grotesque realism, which emphasized laughter, the body and the material world.<sup>126</sup> The theatrical mouth of hell, with its greedy, gaping jaws, became representative of grotesque realism and its attendant humor.

As Bakhtin has theorized, medieval peoples lived a "two-world condition" where a spiritual, sanctified realm abutted the more familiar, physical, and quotidian world. The first world was comprised of the solemn adherence to authorized religious and political ceremony, structure and conduct. The second world was the non-official, base and earthly world in which all people participated through life, death, and regeneration.<sup>127</sup> Indicative of this second world was grotesque realism, an expression of a carnivalesque culture through effusive physicality. According to Bakhtin, grotesque realism makes "no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body."<sup>128</sup> Instead, grotesque realism revels in corporal surplus, the spilling out of the body onto the world and a reciprocal envelopment of the world through the body. Because grotesque realism can be defined by the inseparable relationship between the

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<sup>125</sup> Thomas, *Ten Miracle Plays*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7, 18.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

body and its environment, Bakhtin argues that the physical nature of grotesque realism was utilized to oppose and subvert the serious and official ecclesiastic and feudal establishments.<sup>129</sup>

For Bakhtin the grotesque emphasizes and conflates inner and outer, birthing and dying, consuming and excreting. Each function participates in and embraces an earthy, cyclical life inherent to humanity. The grotesque body is exemplified by orifices, which expose interior spaces to the exterior world, facilitating a continual corporeal exchange. Particular emphasis is given to the fissures and perforations that allow the outside to permeate the inside and vice versa. Grotesque realism celebrates the body's porosity, especially the chasmal mouth, but any aperture that reveals the body as penetrable and open will suffice.<sup>130</sup> It is also defined by "shoots and branches... [and] all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside."<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, Bakhtin suggests that familiar gestures and abusive curses are grotesque constructions, as they often incorporate, elucidate, or proffer a panoply of physical activities.<sup>132</sup> The grotesque body—its distensions, functions, movements, foldings and unfoldings—opens unto, and is enveloped by, the outside world.

In opposition to grotesque protuberances and concavities, Bakhtin defines an official counterpoint: the wholly formed, closed, and classic body. Such a body is characterized in part by an impermeable, opaque surface with demarcations and borders that isolate the figure from more amoebic bodies and the receptive world. Classic bodies are best represented by the eyes, which segregate the figure from the tumorous growth and recession of the grotesque by

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 4. Such an assertion, of course, has been the topic of a lively and lengthy debate. At stake is whether such subversions of order were really effective forms of protest that weakened or overturned the status quo, or whether these activities were modalities of social control, releasing the pressures of a dogmatic society and effectively keeping people firmly in their place. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 199-204; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 1-26.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 318-319, 339, 355.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 316-317.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 319.

expressing independence and self-sufficiency. Such impervious, opaque and individuated entities maintain the order and integrity indicative of Bakhtin's official realm.<sup>133</sup>

Bakhtin proposes that the theatrical mouth of hell was the ideal manifestation of grotesque realism. The grimacing oral orifice both swallowed and regurgitated, exaggerating the very processes extolled in grotesque realism and experienced by—not to mention necessary to—all humans. According to Bakhtin, “the grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.”<sup>134</sup> Such an assertion definitively aligns the mouth of hell with Bakhtin's laughing, material world. Extant descriptions of theatrical mouths of hell certainly seem to follow this description, where the face, in a very practical manner, acted as nothing more than the decorative frame for a gawping maw.

Such a depiction also calls to mind the illumination of *St. Apollonia* in which a plethora of figures flaunting Bakhtin's grotesque attributes surround a discrete, holy martyr. Fouquet has represented the mouth of hell as a disembodied head. Its black hide stretches tautly, almost painfully, across its jowls and seems to pull the lower lid away from its staring eye in order to successfully encompass the wide expanse of the ever-open mouth. As if to emphasize the mouth's accessibility, a dog-faced demon brandishing a club trots from the orifice. The fool to the left of St. Apollonia, exposing his backside and participating in a particularly crass gesture, emphasizes yet another ubiquitous orifice. Moreover, in a series of rhythmic gesticulations, Apollonia's tormentors stretch their arms and legs away from their bodies, bend their torsos and wield pliers and ropes as elongated extensions of their limbs.<sup>135</sup> Their “shoots and branches” infiltrate the environment in a participatory manner, undulating around the saint's composed and conservative figure.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 316, 320.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>135</sup> Robert Mills, “Of Martyrs and Men,” in *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 160. Mills discusses the dance-like positions of persecutors in hagiographic illuminations.

Apollonia is represented quite differently from her persecutors. The binding ropes prevent her arms and legs from extending into the world; her limbs retract upon her own body, and neither penetrate into nor are penetrated by the outside world. Her solid white, subtly shaded garment and ivory skin provide little suggestion of depth. Furthermore, in contrast to what previous scholars have said,<sup>136</sup> Apollonia's eyes are in fact open, highlighting those features so important to the identity of the classic body. Importantly, Apollonia's mouth, which—according to the narrative—should be violated, gaped open and toothless, remains firmly shut. Her sealed lips accentuate her sealed body. Whole, closed, opaque and individuated, Apollonia embodies the order and integrity of Bakhtin's official realm.

The permeability of the mouth of hell and its endless ability to swallow and vomit accommodates the parameters of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque and its physical participation with the surrounding environment. The grotesque cannot be isolated from the physical world. It is embedded in the profane, common and base—attributes critical to the mouth of hell's perceived laicization in religious vernacular theater. Bakhtin suggested that the mouth of hell was never enveloped within the physical world so much as when it was represented on the medieval stage. This becomes evident when viewing *St. Apollonia*. In the illumination the mouth of hell is placed on the *platea* where a host of spectators are also seated or standing, placing it irrefutably in the common space of the gathered people. In fact one spectator, a girl in a green dress, peeps from between two bedeviled actors, so near to the mouth of hell that it looks as though it would catch her in its clasping mouth if the jaws were to snap shut. Envelopment indeed.

Placed very near audience members and sometimes glowering at eye-level with spectators, as seen in *St. Apollonia*, Bakhtin proposed that the embodiment of the mouth of hell

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<sup>136</sup> Marla Carlson, "Spectator Response to Images of Violence: Seeing Apollonia," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 27 (2001): 14; Brigitte Cazelles, "Bodies on Stage and the Production of Meaning," *Yale French Studies*, no. 86 (1994): 65.



in vernacular theater merged with medieval perceptions of the living world itself.<sup>137</sup> This familiarity, tangibility, earthiness, and—it might be added—controllability, is not only grotesque, but for Bakhtin ultimately deprives the mouth of hell of its ability to intimidate and frighten.<sup>138</sup>

According to this analysis, the laicization of the mouth of hell within vernacular religious theater attenuated its nefarious associations and dire spiritual consequences. Within the official tenets of medieval culture, as Bakhtin observes, the mouth of hell was the “ultimate concentration of gloom, fear, and intimidation.”<sup>139</sup> In response, theater provided a space in which the mouth of hell was embodied by and conflated with the material world. Violence became comedic and laughter dissolved terror. Bakhtin asserts that grotesque realism provided comic images which:

...presented in a droll and monstrous form, the symbols of power and violence turned inside out, the comic images of death and bodies gaily rent asunder. All that was terrifying becomes grotesque....This grotesque image cannot be understood without appreciating the defeat of fear. The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a “comic monster.”<sup>140</sup>

The mouth of hell and the demonic minions that issued from its fetid lips were ludic caricatures of their theological counterparts.

Humor could issue from the violent antics of demons and antagonists, or comic situations could arise in the juxtaposition between the material and spiritual worlds. Such humor was overtly physical, abusive, familiar, and corporeal. It seems this laughter was a prerogative of the

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<sup>137</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 348. Bakhtin believed all theatrical productions portrayed the world in three levels, hell naturally being at the bottom, closest to the audience. While documentation suggests otherwise, the fact remains that many mouths of hell would rest on the ground, as seen in Fouquet’s illumination and as suggested in textual documentation.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 91-92. Bakhtin boldly states, “there can be nothing terrifying on earth” (91).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>140</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 91. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 1-26. Such optimism is indicative of what Stallybrass and White identify as Bakhtin’s populist utopianism (7, 18-19). For all of carnival’s subversion, the hegemonic culture remained. This reveals the dependency that polarities such as high and low, grotesque and classic have on one another (16, 18-19). Perhaps the grotesque mouth of hell could never be something to laugh at if it never incited fear.

laity, best expressed in vernacular arts, literature and theater.<sup>141</sup> It became a weapon of sorts, a way to cope with, and perhaps even undermine, the spiritual beasts established and upheld by the strictures of religion.

By defining the mouth of hell as the epitome of grotesque realism, Bakhtin concretized its ludic role within theater and its attendant ability to defuse the fears and concerns promulgated through the established theology of official culture. Comedy emphasized the disjuncture between the corporeal and spiritual realms, weakening the spiritual impact of the theatrical, animated mouth of hell present within the very heart of the community. In summation, such an investigation suggests that, as the mouth of hell was more fully embodied in theatrical representations, it became inextricable from the material, bawdy qualities of the quotidian world and lost its force as spiritual warning.

A version of the comic battle between body and spirit is portrayed ironically in *St. Apollonia*. Violence and humor culminates in the struggles of the tormentors in their attempt to subdue Apollonia's already prostrate figure. The ridiculous, humorous fumbblings of the villains emphasize the unsullied spiritual fortitude of Apollonia. Their violent efforts are laughable, excessive, foolish, human and inadequate against her holy strength. Viewers familiar with hagiographic tales of horror and redemption understood that physical torture was never enough to dissuade a future saint from his or her spiritual resolution. The tormentors are ignorant of such spiritual depths, and are convinced that their beleaguered physical attempts will garner the desired renunciation of faith. But for all their comedic, impotent flailing, the villains do not necessarily make the mouth of hell laughable. With or without these buffoons, the devils still lurk and mouth of hell still swallows.

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<sup>141</sup> Jacques Le Goff, "Laughter in the Middle Ages," in *A Cultural history of humour: from antiquity to the present day*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 42, 50. Le Goff goes so far as to claim that "people laughed better in the vernacular than in Latin" (42).

It is critical that, concurrent to its appearance and extended use in theatrical productions, mouth of hell iconography persisted and proliferated in devotional manuscripts, especially books of hours, such as those belonging to Chevalier and Catherine of Cleves. The persistence of mouth of hell imagery in sober, pious settings suggests that its affiliation with the terrors of spiritual damnation remained a palpable and pertinent concern for the laity. It would seem that these particular definitions of ludic, grotesque, and comedic, therefore, may be too narrow for mouth of hell iconography, and must be given the freedom to simultaneously exert religious import. While the mouth of hell certainly may have shared Bakhtin's grotesque characteristics, it also functioned beyond them, engaging the community in other ways that were perhaps less laughable and more dynamic, fluid, interpenetrable and overlapping. Increased physicality, violence, and humor became part of the visual, dramatic, and cultural landscape, existing within and augmenting the numinous climate of ritualized performance.

The ambiguous nature of the theatrical mouth of hell issues from the efficacious qualities of medieval religious vernacular plays, which remained saturated in Christian culture and shared many traits with ritual performances, despite lay organization and management. Vital to religious vernacular theater was its ability to transcend and exceed the familiar, to express something beyond Bakhtin's earthy, pedestrian, grotesque realm. Instead, through theater the mouth of hell was able to adopt an increasingly flexible role, vacillating between ludic and serious, entertaining and efficacious, while being shaped by the efforts and beliefs of the community.

## **5. Ritual, Theater and the Mouth of Hell**

### **The Ritual of Religious Vernacular Theater**

The mouth of hell participated in events which themselves exceeded modern conceptions of theater. The special relationship between spectators and performers, the unique use of space and time, and the purposeful nature of medieval productions informed the role of the mouth of hell, which fulfilled and exceeded its grotesque visage. Loosed from the bounds of previous representations, the performance of the mouth of hell activated essential characteristics which could be as horrifying as they were humorous.

Theatrical events are imbued with a flexibility which allows them to fulfill various roles according to a culture's economic, religious, political, and social needs and desires. In order to navigate these motivations, Schechner outlines a spectrum between efficacy and entertainment upon which all performances are placed. On the one hand, efficacious events are generally undertaken to exact a transformation or change. They require the participation of the community, elicit the belief of the audience, and employ symbolic time. Such performances, Schechner argues, are rituals. In contrast, entertaining events foster an environment of fun or frivolity, distinguish between performers and spectators, invite individual creativity, tolerate criticism, and remain within the structure of regularized time. Such dramatizations fall under Schechner's definition of theater, although he emphasizes that every performance combines elements of efficacy and entertainment, ritual and theater. Medieval theater's unique expression and communal production, while certainly dramatic and entertaining, bore many ritualistic qualities as well.<sup>142</sup>

One of the most important elements of ritualistic performances is audience involvement, to the extent that participants and spectators become difficult to delineate. Rituals necessitate the

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<sup>142</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 130, 134, 136-138.

inclusion of the audience, and in turn the people depend upon the execution of the ritual to express and affirm shared values.<sup>143</sup> Critical to the success of religious vernacular theater, and fundamental to the break-down between participants and spectators, was the communal nature of medieval productions. Religious vernacular plays were dutifully undertaken by the community, reducing the separation between those involved and those who remained mere audience members.

Indeed, in the very physical performance of religious vernacular theater, the illusion of a contained theatrical world was regularly shattered. For both pageants and fixed-location productions, actors—many of whom the audience would recognize or know—caroused and prowled about nervous viewers, addressed them with knowing asides, and directly threatened their souls with eternal damnation.<sup>144</sup> Such spatial intimacy reduced the demarcation between the performer and the public, and created a forum in which spectators became active players.<sup>145</sup> Actors were often drawn directly from the community, and it is likely that they would have been recognizable, if not related, to many people in the audience. Such a familial, communal environment was exacerbated in French productions, where non-professional actors may have sat with family and friends in the scaffolds while awaiting their roles on stage.<sup>146</sup> The social and spatial proximity between performers and spectators increased the immediacy of the dramatic event for those who were not explicitly involved during the performance.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 137-138. See also Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 112; Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7. Bakhtin contends that folk festivals and carnivalesque celebrations likewise did not distinguish between spectators and performers. For him folk celebrations were rooted in grotesque realism, which by definition must be all-encompassing, universal, and shared.

<sup>144</sup> Frank, *The Medieval French Drama*, 164; Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 193; *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 259.

<sup>145</sup> Alan Hindley, introduction to *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. Alan Hindley (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n.v., 1999), ii.

<sup>146</sup> Frank, *The Medieval French Drama*, 164; Runnalls, "Towns and Plays: Social Aspects of Medieval Drama," 81.

The intermingling of actors and spectators resulting in vaguely defined boundaries between the two groups is illustrated nicely in *St. Apollonia*. The right side of the upper level of scaffolding features a smattering of well dressed spectators. A man and woman share an intimate kiss, while another couple whispers together and points towards the action of Apollonia's torture. Are these spectators mere audience members or might they not be part of the cast?<sup>147</sup> The upper register of scaffolding nearest these painted viewers, after all, also contains the throne of the earthly king directing Apollonia's gruesome ordeal. It is not hard to imagine that at least some of these well-dressed people may have been characters in his court or had other ancillary roles within the play. The important point for the purposes of this paper is simply that it is difficult to tell for certain: a situation as true today as it may have been while attending a similar theatrical event centuries ago.

Community participation was vital for the religious vernacular plays, and it was likely that many spectators were solicited to assist in multiple ways, emphasizing the extent to which such productions employed local talent and resources. There was an expectation throughout the populace that one would contribute one's time, efforts, money, talent or even livelihood to the production. As the sociologist Joffre Dumazedier suggests, these events often taxed the resources and energies of medieval communities, making them less a free-wheeling, subversive romp than a serious undertaking representative of the material and spiritual constitution of a community.<sup>148</sup> Unlike contemporary theatrical productions that remained recreational, the compulsory nature of religious vernacular theater made it difficult to maintain a clear division between "work and play."<sup>149</sup> In the sheer effort exacted to produce the plays and the ways in which participation was

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<sup>147</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Bronwen Wilson for asking me a similar question during a conference presentation on this image.

<sup>148</sup> Joffre Dumazedier, "Leisure: International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1968," *Encyclopedia .com*, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Leisure.aspx>; Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 35; Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 27.

<sup>149</sup> Dumazedier, "Leisure: International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences," 35; Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 27.

built into the rhythms of daily life, religious vernacular theater was more akin to religious ceremonies than to the disinterested diversion associated with modern casual leisure.

Extant documentation reveals the requirements placed on the community for the production of vernacular plays. For example, although the pageant plays in England were organized by the city, it was the responsibility of the guilds to finance them. To cover costs, guilds levied a fixed charge on members.<sup>150</sup> Guilds unable to support their own pageant often contributed financially to a craft that could. Such support is recorded for a 1507 pageant at Coventry:

Memorandum that it is ordained at this council meeting (Lete) that the craft and fellowship of Bakers shall be contributory and charged henceforth with the craft and fellowship of Smiths, and to pay yearly to them towards their pageant at the time of Corpus Christi 13s 4 d, and so to continue from henceforth yearly.<sup>151</sup>

Guilds not wealthy enough to create their own pageants were nonetheless obligated to contribute funds to *other* guilds, ostensibly in order to create more visually stunning productions through the combination of resources.

As much as it was an honor and privilege to perform and produce a vernacular religious play, it was also a task difficult to refuse. Municipalities, civic councils and governing bodies controlled, directed, censored and organized the plays.<sup>152</sup> In the Valenciennes Passion play of 1547, a group of supervisors oversaw the production and “could punish and fine” appointed actors “for any misdemeanor without recourse to the magistrates.”<sup>153</sup> The consequence of not following orders is revealed clearly in civic records:

7. Item. All actors are forbidden to meddle with or be so bold as to murmur against the supervisors ordained and deputed to manage matters so that everything may be achieved by fair agreement and unity to the

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<sup>150</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 46.

<sup>151</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 46-47; Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 117. Chambers discusses the maintenance of order and allocation of payments (110, 114).

<sup>152</sup> Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2: 114; Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 30.

<sup>153</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 43.

honor of God and the town, on pain of such fine as the said supervisors shall exact.<sup>154</sup>

Furthermore, the actors for this particular play were required to pay-in as participants and accept part of the financial risk with the hopes of seeing the money returned from ticket sales.<sup>155</sup> Clearly productions required the commitment and sacrifice of the community's time, belongings, financial resources and energies.

The unique treatment of space and time in religious vernacular theater also shared similarities with ritualized productions. Space became an important and malleable component of the event. Unlike contemporary commercial dramatic performances, where theater houses are purposefully built to be neutral spaces adaptable to the vagaries of singular productions—or even the space of a church, built exclusively for religious ceremony—ritual space is determined, constructed and shaped through events, actions, behaviors and dramas.<sup>156</sup> While a specific space was established for fixed-location productions, it remained a multivocal space, made “theatrical” by the dramatic event unfolding within it. Such spatial flexibility was even more pronounced in transient pageant performances, where a particulate ritual space flowed into, out of, and around everyday village space.

Performative space and living space interpenetrated one another throughout vernacular religious productions. Marketplaces, town squares, cityscapes and streets retained their original identities while functioning as platforms for famed historic and biblical locales. The streets remained streets, but also represented heaven and hell, Eden and Jerusalem. Vestiges of such interwoven space become evident in the construction plans for the mouth of hell during the 1583 Lucerne Passion play. For the purpose of the play, hell took up residency in the town square. The mouth of hell, it will be remembered, was nestled “between the fountain and the Cobblers’ Hall,

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. Actors had to pay one gold écu if they wanted “to participate in the profits or losses.” Their monetary contribution would be returned to them after the production if monetary gains had been made.

<sup>156</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 57-58, 136-137.



two feet away uphill from the door of the said Hall.”<sup>157</sup> It is only logical that the planning rubrics would be specific about particular buildings in order to establish exact parameters for stages and sets. The document, however, also reveals that the Cobblers’ Hall, town fountain and neighboring Tanners’ Hall maintained their presence, identities, and most likely their functions, during the production. Nor did the mouth of hell change *its* identity or function. Rather, these spaces, as incongruous as it may seem, were unified through the general and generous use of ritualized space. Each responded to and was influenced by the other, while maintaining their respective roles.

The synthesis of space within these productions was indicative of an altered treatment of time. The freedom of diabolic characters to address the spectators directly with threats of torture, damnation and physical proximity, dissolved the historicity of representation and brought the action nearer to the contemporary reality of the audience. By conflating historic and biblical stories with contemporary fashions, themes, behaviors, and events, the lineage between the Truth of the Resurrection and the plodding persistence of daily life leading to the Last Judgment was reinforced.<sup>158</sup> The present became merely a starting point, like the drop of a pebble into a pond, from which the story of the unbroken Christian community could expand in concentric rings, from the very beginning of time until the sounding of the last trumpets.<sup>159</sup> The result was increased spectator involvement that invited onlookers, according to Wright, to “react as men and women who feel themselves personally touched by the great events taking place on the familiar stone floor of their marketplace.”<sup>160</sup> Biblical stories and themes that had seemed impossibly distant before were rendered present through vernacular productions.

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<sup>157</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 81.

<sup>158</sup> Muir, “The Saint Play in Medieval France,” 123-124; Thomas, *Ten Miracle Plays*, 11, 14.

<sup>159</sup> Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, 153-154.

<sup>160</sup> Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, 85-86. Also see Janicka, *The Comic Elements In The English Mystery Plays*, 65; Spencer, *Corpus Christi Pageants in England*.

## Locating Efficacy

Attending a religious vernacular play was a social and collective performance that spilled outside the bounds of the stage to implicate the lives of people uniting as a community in their production of biblical and historic events. The nearly obligatory nature of religious vernacular performances is symptomatic of their efficacious intent, a critical element of any ritual performance. Efficacious performances are purposeful and encompassing, meaning that they are imbricated within a larger social infrastructure which substantiates and is simultaneously reinforced by the dramatic event.<sup>161</sup> The entire community was involved in the planning and execution of these plays because participation guaranteed the peoples' rank within the local and universal Christian community, reified their belief system, and stabilized—or perpetuated—their social, economic and spiritual status.

Of course it is difficult to determine the exact motivations that drove medieval communities to produce religious vernacular plays. Certainly the repercussions of these performances influenced the social, economic, artistic, political, and religious features of life, and any number of these factors can be cited as a causal influence. Among these, it seems that religion and community were two major priorities. As a city council tract outlining the 1583 Lucerne play explains, these productions were a manifestation of “the glory of God” meant to contribute to “the edification of the common people,” and “the consolidation and the good of their souls.”<sup>162</sup> The efficacy of this production, then, was bound to the way in which it successfully displayed the community's love of and commitment to God, while working to reinforce these very qualities within the people.

Religious vernacular theater reiterated and expressed the spiritual temperament of the community. Spectators transcended passive looking and became personally involved as stories of

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<sup>161</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 129, 134, 152.

<sup>162</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 54-55.

their faith, their town, their patron saint, were relived on a stage constructed in their market square.<sup>163</sup> As George R. Thomas suggests:

...the pageants were a confirmation—through the media of speech, action, song and spectacle—of the living faith and powerful assumptions of an entire community which believed itself to be an integral part of a wider community (or *ecclesia*) which encompassed all space and all time, and of which all spectators had some experience through the acts of worship, confession, and communion which were as natural as breathing to the experience of medieval men.<sup>164</sup>

Participating in a religious vernacular production was a way of confirming the spiritual motivations, needs, desires, and beliefs of the local and regional society as well as stitching together and engaging in a greater Christian community that transcended time.

People experienced and lived the events, parables, stories, and legends of the bible and hagiographic accounts in a way that was educational, social, symbolic, and embodied. Theater transposed religious concepts into a new medium embedded within the community.<sup>165</sup> Of course, theater was not the ritual of the liturgy; bread did not transubstantiate into the body and flesh of the resurrected Christ.<sup>166</sup> Rather, religious vernacular theater unhitched faith from the theories of theology and the strictures of dogma and allowed it to be enacted on the stage of the common world.<sup>167</sup> As Cox states:

In the mystery plays, the events of salvation history were not literally repeated as they were in the liturgy, the sacraments, or sacred processions, yet the force of that history for the community was scarcely less than if the events had literally been re-enacted, because everything the story meant to the community was fully present in it to those who watched and to some extent participated—as when they

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<sup>163</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 112; Schechner, “From ritual to theater and back,” 130; Frank, *The Medieval French Drama*, 164; Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, 193; Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, 121-122, 128; *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 259 for a detailed description on the appointment of roles for the 1496 Seurre saint play “Mystery of Saint Martin.”

<sup>164</sup> Thomas, *Ten Miracle Plays*, 12; Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, 121-122, 128. Among other reasons, Wickham ascertains that theater was a way “to inject the relevance of Christian worship into secular life” (122-123).

<sup>165</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 12.

<sup>166</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 134, 136-137. Schechner describes the ritualism of medieval Mass.

<sup>167</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 86. Turner points out that, “Religion, like art, *lives* in so far as it is performed .... For religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas, alone, it is meaningful experience and experience meaning.” Also see Peter Meredith, “The Iconography of Hell in the English Cycles: A Practical Perspective,” in *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 180-181.

were directly addressed, pushed aside, pursued, or merely invited to respond with approbation or disapprobation to what they witnessed.<sup>168</sup>

To a certain extent, even if not explicitly involved, the presence of each spectator implicitly participated in the belief system and theological foundation motivating the performance.<sup>169</sup>

Important to medieval vernacular religious theater and the embodiment of the mouth of hell was the manner in which efficacious performances permeated into, and conversely were saturated by, the living world of the community. Schechner points out that ritual participants often desire to “control, arrange, or manipulate the whole world of the performance,” which, during ritualized events, becomes the whole of the living world.<sup>170</sup> Ritual performances engage in an exchange with the societal environment that produces them, and religious vernacular theater represented the spiritual ethos of the people by re-enacting the fundamental truths of the religious tales essential to Christianity. The community was given a type of organic, creative authority over the material to better articulate the peoples’ needs, beliefs and concepts of their world.<sup>171</sup> The productions borrowed scriptural, liturgical and exegetic parables, legends and myths, but their participatory, communal, and requisite nature provided the laity with an opportunity to express sacral concepts physically and artistically.

### **Ritual and the Mouth of Hell: The Unease of Ambivalence**

Performance, and especially the world-encompassing, fluid nature of ritual, brings events into the living world of actors, spectators and participants. Such performances facilitate an overlap and exchange between the living world and the theatrical world.<sup>172</sup> As Enders points out, one must keep in mind that “theater is always real, even when it delivers a fantasy. It is always *happening*, always of the moment, always present as it unfolds before spectators in real space

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<sup>168</sup> Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 22.

<sup>169</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 112.

<sup>170</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 154.

<sup>171</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 23, 30-32; Thomas, *Ten Miracle Plays*, 13.

<sup>172</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 43-44.

and real time.”<sup>173</sup> Or, as Victor Turner so succinctly states, “the play is in earnest.”<sup>174</sup> This was no less for the medieval community who labored ardently to make static images of the mouth of hell materialize on their stages and in their streets.

In part, religious vernacular theater aimed to edify the people and give glory to God. To be effective, the mouth of hell retained its necessary and ordained role within Christian doctrine as the site of punishment for the spiritually weak, those who resisted and opposed Christ, God, goodness, and virtue.<sup>175</sup> In order to express this, the mouth of hell was the visual and physical inverse of heaven—as abominable, monstrous and loathsome as heaven was paradisiacal, peaceful and wondrous.

In vernacular religious theater the mouth of hell was released from more confined media so that it could finally enact what it had always been intended to do—it could more completely swallow sinners, vomit demons, and belch fire. For the first time since its inception the mouth of hell *performed*, and through greater organization and technological skill, its presence increased so that it was looming, animated, and incendiary. On the stage the diabolic action of the mouth of hell was processional, unfurling over time; jaws champed shut and reopened, smoke billowed and dissipated, the cacophony of screams or drums grew loud then quieted again.

The pyrotechnics, special mechanisms, trap doors, and sound effects made hell a visceral presence, and, what is more, an actual threat to stagehands and actors. Death was not only portrayed figuratively, but was a real possibility for those intimately involved in the production. In a 1477 performance in Montferrand, “danger money” was paid to the men working in Hell from the profits incurred by the production:

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<sup>173</sup> Enders, *The Farce of the Fart*, 12-13.

<sup>174</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 32. Turner points out that the distinction between “work” and “leisure” is a social construct developed during the Industrial Revolution. Prior to this there was no distinction between leisure-time and work-time. Thus, medieval theater bridged, or was “intercalibrated,” by both work and leisure, as it was free to introduce playful elements, but in doing so promoted the very serious religious and spiritual environment in which medieval people lived, worked, played, and died.

<sup>175</sup> Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 12.

Further, the said Mercier asks of the said consuls, both for himself and his servant, for having worked for the said Passion in Hell as long as the said Passion and Mystery lasted, and having put himself thereby in great danger to his person and of being killed by the culverins [a prototype of the musket and canon], in which he has given and worked much time and thought to have damaged his face and worked as much as the carpenters, the sum of £4T (paid 31s).<sup>176</sup>

During the Paris Passion play of 1380, canons from hell were meant to be set off during Christ's crucifixion in order to heighten the dramatic moment. One of the canons misfired and fatally injured a member of the stage crew.<sup>177</sup> The intentional violence of theater bled into the unintentional violence of the living world, increasing the participation and anticipation of the audience, and potentially expediting an unsuspecting soul's journey to its eternal fate.

Through this performativity the mouth of hell expressed more than a concept. It became an event that fully revealed—as best as the medieval community could summon—the horrors and fears of damnation. The open, liminal characteristics of the mouth of hell, which made it such a commanding site of spiritual transition, also made it a multivalent location capable of moving from menacing to ludic, and even flourishing under such an imbalance of meaning and perception. The continuum between efficacy and entertainment, ritual and theater, constitutes all performance so that every act navigates between these extremes as a combination of purpose and play, meaning and frivolity.<sup>178</sup> The performativity of the mouth of hell placed it in a state of flux between efficacy and entertainment, causing an active and continuous navigation between the ludic and the serious, the abrogation of fear and its threatening reinstatement. Indeed, it seems

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<sup>176</sup> *The Staging of Religious Drama*, 191.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-192. Jehan Hemon died of his wounds, and a fellow crew-member, Guillaume, was also “burned and scorched.” Guillaume sought a royal exoneration of any responsibility in Jehan's death. French civic productions especially used many special effects, or *feintes* which required the skills of trained men. Because the large productions were not mobilized, as they were in England, the large, timber stages facilitated the use of machinery and trapdoors. In a 1496 Seurre production of the “Mystery of St. Martin” a man playing Satan was preparing to enter through his trapdoor into Hell when his costume caught on fire “round his buttocks.” He was “succored, stripped, and reclothed” in time to not suffer too many serious injuries, and was able to act the remainder of his lines. He retired to his house to recuperate, and bravely returned the next day to reprise his role for the end of the play (261-262). Clearly it was hazardous to perform in and about the open flames and fireworks used to make the mouth of hell such a terrifying inferno.

<sup>178</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 28, 156-157.

likely that part of its entertainment issued from its very efficacy, and its titillating ability to commingle laughter and fear.

Rather than perpetuating the polarity between the ominous and the comic, these conditions can be complementary. English scholar Michael Steig proposes that the grotesque implementation of excessive and extreme humor actually generated fear and anxiety as often as it relieved these trepidations. The exaggerated application of the comic or provocation of laughter harbored apprehension and dread, complicating the notion that the ludic was a social salve used to defend against fear. This provides a space in which viewers and participants can move beyond the simple binary of funny or frightful, subversive or obedient, entertaining or efficacious.<sup>179</sup>

The mouth of hell certainly may have been the site of ludic laughter in theater, as Bakhtin and many others allege. Despite this, there is no reason to suppose, as Schmidt does, that laughter voided the mouth of hell of greater and graver meanings which facilitated its spiritual and theological import. The mouth of hell's continued use in devotional manuscripts, and its ominous stage presence as a counterpoint to God's kingdom, suggests that the comic may have been difficult to locate at times, and even when that humor was obvious, it was manifold, complex, negotiable, undulating.

Unlike the fractured, individualized and compartmentalized actions, expressions and meanings prevalent in industrialized societies, communal societies better combine functions, significations and roles, providing an environment that fosters multivalency. As a product of collective creativity, ritual performance allowed the mouth of hell to take on a discursive simultaneity, expressing many nuanced meanings at once.<sup>180</sup> The *Ad Herennium*, a vital classic rhetorical document from the first century BCE, provides important insight into the ways in

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<sup>179</sup> Michael Steig, "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29, no. 2 (1970): 256.

<sup>180</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 36, 154-155.

which religious vernacular theater may have utilized the integration of fear and laughter to provide meaning to its subjects.

The *Ad Herennium* was well known in the Middle Ages and its theories on memory were influential to medieval thinkers and their conceptualization of theater.<sup>181</sup> The treatise states that if spectators encounter “something exceptionally base, dishonourable, extraordinary, great, unbelievable, or laughable,” it will make a greater impact on their hearts and as a result the object or event’s memory, meaning and message would be more easily retrievable.<sup>182</sup> The admixture of violence and comedy, anxiety and humor, in religious vernacular theater impressed biblical stories and legends unto the minds of viewers. Laughter, derision, tumult, terror and duress rarefied the performance, enhancing its influence and effect.<sup>183</sup> As a result the community became directly involved in the religious experience rather than allowing it to be mediated through clerics and priests.

The embodiment of the mouth of hell within such a changeable, responsive and variable medium initiated a reciprocal physical encounter, interaction, and reaction from participants. Laughter, after all, is a corporeal event, as Jacques Le Goff points out, one that is “expressed in and through the body.”<sup>184</sup> Gamboling about the mouth of hell’s teeth, being dragged into the depths of its jaws, experiencing an increased heart rate from fear, laughter or exhilaration, or feeling the flush of adrenaline from flames a little-too-close were ways in which the embodied mouth of hell was encountered through the lived-environment *and* body of medieval peoples. These dramatic events provided a conduit between the intangible and visceral; what was codified as spiritual became not simply ludic, but haptic, palpable, experiential.

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<sup>181</sup> Nicholas M. Davis, “The English Mystery Plays and ‘Ciceronian’ Mnemonics,” in *Atti del IV Colloquio della Società Internazionale per l’Etude du Théâtre Médiéval*, ed. M. Chiabò, F. Doglio, and M. Maymone (Viterbo: Centro Studi sul Teatro Medioevale e Rinascimentale, 1983), 78-79.

<sup>182</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 219; Davis, “The English Mystery Plays,” 79-83.

<sup>183</sup> Davidson, introduction to *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1986),” 31.

<sup>184</sup> Le Goff, “Laughter in the Middle Ages,” 45.



## **6. Conclusion**

Whether compelled to laugh or to shrink away in fear, the physical manifestation of the mouth of hell within the medieval community enabled viewers to confront the iconography as never before. The equivocation of this encounter was enhanced by the simple notion that, whether comedic or serious, the mouth of hell continued to represent the entrance to eternal damnation. As religious vernacular theater developed into a prominent and fixed feature within medieval communities, an increased interest in death, fueled by outbreaks of the plague, newly amassed wealth, and the doctrinal establishment of purgatory, increased the prominence—visually, socially, spiritually, and theologically—of hell and its demonic hordes.<sup>185</sup> A fear of damnation was seeded within the soil of the medieval community, fertilized by the belief that a majority of the common people could—and would—be cast into the depths of hell after their death.<sup>186</sup> Such a grim outlook became much more difficult to ignore or deny when damnation's very visage was built within the confines of the community, the living and throbbing center of daily life. Within such a rich visual environment, the real and palpable fear of damnation could flourish into a more complex set of ideas and expressions.

The mouth of hell was always a liminal site, a place of transition that synthesized conceptions of spirit and body, exits and entrances, endings, beginnings and eternities. Given the interactive nature of religious vernacular performances, it should come as no surprise that the mouth of hell was featured in biblical narratives and religious contexts that exceeded other representations within more traditional forms of visual art. The mouth of hell “embodied” theater's striking potential for physical interactivity in a way that becomes difficult when imaging the stoic, immutable, unmovable, seated figure of Christ as Judge. To return once more to *St. Apollonia*, God's throne is tucked behind two angels. Neither of these figures, nor God

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<sup>185</sup> Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 12.

<sup>186</sup> Gurevich, “Bakhtin and his Theory of Carnival,” 57.

himself with his hand calmly raised in holy blessing, gives any inclination of descending down into the chaos taking place below. In contrast, the mouth of hell is a conduit that facilitates movement: its devilish inhabitants scamper through its yawning mouth to freely wheel about the stage. The *Last Judgment* tympanum at Ste-Foy employs similar techniques. Christ remains isolated and immobile in his mandorla. Satan is also seated, but his horde of demons interacts with him directly: snakes intertwine around his legs and a devil fairly perches on his shoulder. Importantly, the mouth of hell actually gives the impression of mobility: its wrinkled lips snarl back from its teeth, its licking tongue caresses a sinner, a tenacious paw creeps from the doorway. Even this relatively early representation suggests that the mouth of hell catered to a mobility that could find full expression in theater.

The mouth of hell's presence in medieval theater fused immaterial, spiritual conditions with the base material substrate of the community: timber from nearby woods, fabric woven and painted from local materials, the provincial labor of "meane men," the sweat, and sometimes blood, of stagehands and actors. Of course, indigenous materials and skills were employed even in more traditional artistic representations of the mouth of hell. But there is a way in which physical activation through the movement of bodies in, around, and through the prop, as well as the special mechanizations animating its features, conflated the abstract conception of damnation with the object—and vice versa—in a process of continual vacillation.<sup>187</sup>

Encountering the mouth of hell's embodiment within the streets of the community was an ambivalent experience, not only merging the abstract and the object, but also the fearsome and the humorous, the threatening and the impotent, the spiritual and the physical, the otherworldly and the worldly. The play between these oppositions emphasizes the notion that binaries need not be mutually exclusive, but rather may often depend upon each other to reinforce definitions

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<sup>187</sup> Aaron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans., Janos M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 194.

and identities through mediation and the transgression of borders.<sup>188</sup> Spectral and earthly, even good and evil, were amalgamated and then distilled in a process that medieval historian Aaron Gurevich states, “simultaneously profanes the sacred and confirms it.”<sup>189</sup> Expressed through the less confined and frustratingly ephemeral medium of theater, the liminal mouth of hell was not only subjected to this reciprocity but *constituted* the exchange.

By disgorging devils into the town square or onto the stage, the mouth of hell introduced chaos, dissent, war and violence into the figurative world of medieval religious vernacular theater. The rapacious maw then duly reversed this process by consuming the fruits of such evil labor—Herod, Judas, and their ilk—in order to reaffirm the hegemony of God. All of this must have been very entertaining, embellished, as it were, by coarse bawdiness. And yet, in the intervening space of ritualized performance, these very concepts were projected upon the greater lived-experiences of the medieval community, implicating the laity in the navigation of profanity and sanctity to more intimately represent, understand, and fulfill the nuanced and contradictory environment that constituted medieval life.

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<sup>188</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 21-26.

<sup>189</sup> Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, 206-207.

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